

Sue Williams

303 Gallery, New York 28 February – 14 April

The arc of Sue Williams's work is often characterised as a shift from feminism to formalism. The machismo-laden history of modern painting that has been handed down to us has largely failed to account for feminists with formal concerns, but Williams has continuously short-circuited our reliance on such categories to understand what we're looking at.

In this show of new paintings and a series of collages, Williams further elucidates a careerlong thesis: formalism doesn't erase feminism. She deals with the male-dominated history of American modernist painting not by positioning herself in opposition to it, but by giving it the finger, not playing on its terms.

These seven paintings employ much of the same formal vocabulary as the artist's last show at 303, three years ago, but in many places they are sparser, with more empty stretches of unprimed canvas. In these works, Williams's parodic and truncated bodies are sometimes

front-and-centre – like the fussily dressed little girls in *Chicken Leg in Yellow* (2017) – but also often cloaked. In *All Roads Lead to Langley* (2016) a wide stroke of blue paint becomes a belly and butt when Williams paints on a little crotch and navel. With *Horizon Line* (2017) it took several viewings before I realised that the arch of lines at the top of the painting congealed into a spread-legged torso. Strokes and lines themselves become anthropomorphised.

If the whole Ab-Ex shtick is to proffer painting's supposed universality, Williams is directly linking abstraction to the body and all of its specificities and seepage. In the space of her canvases, things are unravelled and revealed; legs are spread and butts are bare.

The exhibition's largest and most prominent work, *Memory and Paint* (2017), contains a repeated motif of houses coming apart at the seams amidst swirling lines and patches

of paint. I couldn't see these painted houses without thinking of Williams's 1995 *Flesh House* sculpture, in which a simplistic triangle-on-top-of-a-square home is constructed from what appears to be mottled fat: a meditation on the actual bodily violence that exists behind structuring categories and conventions.

In its refusal to adhere to sanctioned categorisation, this work feels like an immense relief. It is working through something without completely naming or qualifying it. I feel Williams's exhaustion with the oppressive trappings of gender, with formal and political binaries, and with the goonish weight of masculinist art history. She is showing us that these restrictive categories do not hold. The work is a messy space where things don't have to get cleaned up; all of it can hang in suspension. She is showing us the rebelliousness of being a feminist and a formalist. *Ashton Cooper*



Horizon Line, 2017, oil on canvas, 178 × 203 cm. © the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York