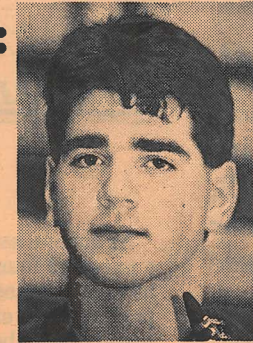




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The Altamont Enterprise

The Domestic Art Of Marjorie White Williams

By **BRYCE BUTLER**

"Take a picture of that," Marge Williams said, pointing to a stack of white dinner plates in her cupboard.

I am touring Mrs. Williams Altamont home on Maple Avenue. It's clean and neat, everything in its place, but so many places, so many things! Paintings — hers, her sons', her students' — make bright patches on the walls. Large, sculpturesque cacti fill the large window in the kitchen.

A table holds candles. Not one candle or a chaste pair in silver sticks, but a crowd, a movement, a herd of a dozen or more. A board full of shells hangs from the wall of a small room. A huge painting dominates the room with reds so vibrantly organic they seem to reach out like a uterine lining to nourish anyone within.

But mostly it's the sculptures. Round wooden forms hang from the walls. They tumble out of corners, stand along the walls, catch the light from windows. The coffee table is a carved willow stump filled with carefully split billets of firewood carved into rough figures. A brown ceramic doll's head holds a philodendron in the window over the sink.

Dolls of different races confer in groups. Lucite figures face each other on a rocking base. Identified with insignia of the US and USSR

a healthy three- or four-year old. Most of the plywood-stack carvings (Williams' signature) reach at least waist high. Some approach the high ceiling of the old house. Lifting the lid off one of Williams' sculptures to reveal the contents (many of her sculptures have contents) is work to plant your feet for.

"Lady Albany," a matriarchal figure Williams exhibited during the Albany tri-centennial, is so large only her head fits in the house.

And the sculptures are alive. Rounded, organic, full of life and meaning, they are so alive it seems impossible that they sit quietly all night. None of them is explicitly erotic, but a proper Victorian would probably have blushed at them on general principles, blushed at the sheer vitality, the sheer roundedness.

So we're not looking at dusty Dresden figurines on doily-lined shelves.

In fact there's no dust, even on a visit with no notice. It's not just that Marge Williams is a good housekeeper. These rounded figures don't invite dust. One would as soon expect to see dust on a fresh egg or the breast of a nursing mother.

Or on this stack of everyday plates that Mrs. Williams insists I photograph.

nightmare, that I'm not prepared."

"Creating all these figures," I ask. "What does that mean?"

"You can go through a kind of acceptance," she says. "You accept it on the storybook level because you know they are people, and you look at them as a kind of cerebral thing. You accept these people and you are not so intimidated by them all. You are manipulating them and it is also again a purely aesthetic thing — spaces, and relationships between these things and maybe it is easier for me to see it, experience it essentially through people than through — I wonder what a painter would?"

Williams has painted, painted well and interestingly, but she still looks at painters with something of the wonder we non-artists feel for them. She says with pride that some pictures by her children are more "painterly" than hers. She varnishes her plywood works or paints them simply.

"A painter would figure the different colors, planes, and those relationships, rather than the pure space," she imagines out loud. "It's like looking at a field of daisies and thinking — I mean if I were a painter — I could see painting a field of daisies and being very excited by how nature's just thrown these things out, and look at



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"Puzzled People" (foreground) and other Williams sculptures envelop a piano. The dark, vertical figure (right of center) is a model for "Mohegan Mother," a 10-foot sculpture Williams exhibited last summer at Chesterwood.

with faces and stories. Almost none of the sculptures is purely abstract. Almost all have at least one face; many present multiple faces. A self-portrait has angry, happy and studious faces, for different occasions. It opens to reveal over a score of wooden figures, each with its face

where I was a teacher, going in all different ways. Here I am breaking out of the teaching, doing my own thing again, and reaching middle age and having this weight problem. And the confusion inside, and then looking forward to old age, getting things squared away." The last figure, at a corner, is in

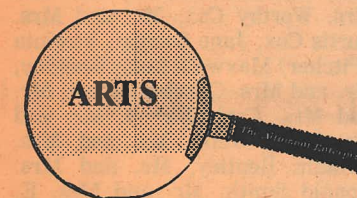
incorrigibly domestic. "(This) is just the way Victorians (the most domestic of generations) would have filled this house," she said.

These plywood pieces are people at home. They belong in homes. They cry out, not for the large spaces of a gallery, but for domestic framing in a house.

And the plywood shapes allow Williams to explore the inside and outside. Most of them open, somehow, like houses. Many of them have hollow abdomens, filled with human figures. Like woman. Also like prisons.

"If you want to distill something into the most basic essence of my work it is — the desire to break out, to totally abandon tradition."

Describing an early self-portrait, Williams says: "It's like so much of the sculpture — enclosed, secure, safe, as opposed to breaking out and really living, living dangerously, taking chances."



The painting shows a pretty Skidmore student with light brown hair in a ponytail. She stands beside an easel — the back of the easel is toward us — looking at us through plastic-framed glasses.

"I think hands are very expressive," Williams says, "so I wanted to show one." The figure's right hand lies in the foreground, on the left shoulder. The pose brings the artist's arm across her chest in the classic gesture of a woman covering her body. A high-necked sweater and a skirt also cover her.

Her eyes are wide open and direct. Wry dimples frame the corners of her barely-smiling lips. The colors are clear and light. The drawing is firm and hard edged.

The face is intelligent and attractive. But it's a face you would want to prepare yourself to meet. It is a painting, and a face, that doesn't give anything away.

"This is the way I would develop my painting if I painted," Williams says. Pride in the achievement mixes with a rueful recognition that her art has developed further in the more giving, literally open sculptures.

Another student painting, down the hall from the artist, shows a

cellist. The player grasps the female form of her instrument between her wide-spread legs. The low top of her dress falls forward as she bends over to ply her bow. Both eyes are closed in the ecstasy of her art.

Compared with the self-portrait, Williams' picture of the cellist is soft-edged and impressionistic. Her long skirt falls around her legs in rich, dark folds. Her bow-hand curves impossibly, flows like music.

Marge Williams' journey is marked out down that hall. From the tight portrait of her wary self to her picture of the other; the open, unconscious giver of beauty.

Moving On

Mrs. Williams says she will not stay with plywood forever. She already plays restless games with the medium; in a recent sculpture of a Mohegan mother she left the glue in sight, left the discs unsmoothed, piled one on another with shelves between.

"What are you going to do with all these things when you die?" someone once asked her. "What am I going to do with them! I've thought since then, I'll take them out in the backyard and put them in a fire or something.

"I frequently wake up and there's nothing illusory about it, I just think: 'What am I doing, making these enormous things, filling up the house? I know it's difficult for my husband, and he would like a nice, open, beautifully decorated house. And I think he's pleased about my being an artist, but would prefer (something more manageable)."

"When I have fears that I may cease to be," Shakespeare frets, "before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain . . ."

Williams, the mother artist, would glean the teeming womb every imaginative woman must contemplate. The 300-odd possible offspring that course obtrusively through her body during her reproductive years. Each possible separately, all together mutually exclusive.

She will have them, make them, see them, give them a home, over and over, each by each, individual by individual, all in their terrifying multiplicity and wonderful uniqueness together.

"But I do just literally break out in those cold sweats. 'What am I doing? I've got to stop this, where is it going to end?' And yet I'm enough of an egotist that I don't just want to put them away someplace. I wish I could have Lady Albany here," she says.

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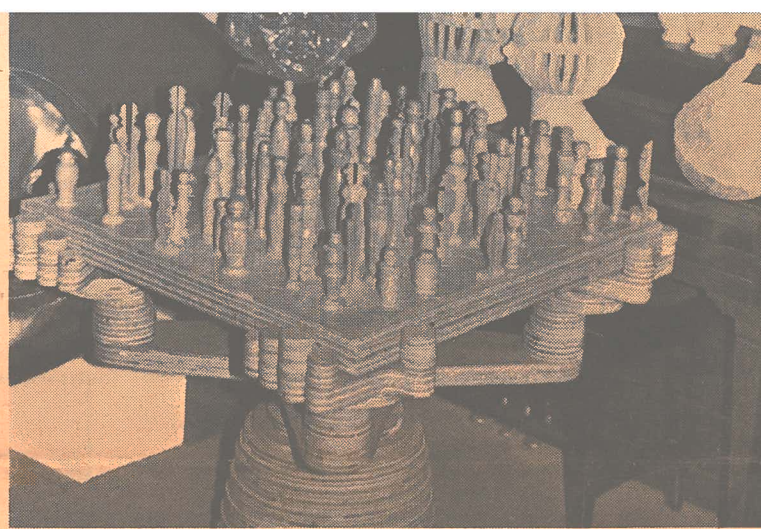
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"Why am I so obsessed with these dolls. They are getting bigger and bigger, and completely unplayable . . ."

they bang heads together whenever the base is rocked — one of several comments on the arms race. In an upstairs bedroom a joyless, emaciated wooden woman, the only color on her face the obscenely purple rings under her eyes, passively supports on her knees an obscenely bloated Lucite baby ("My comment on 'right to life,'" Williams says).

"What is crammed in here is not Victorian," the sculptor says, "but it is just the way Victorians would have filled this house."

Maybe, but these things aren't knickknacks. They are large, for one thing. The dolls are life-size for

"You mean what a woman has to stack up in the course of her life?" I ask.

"I really thought this out very thoroughly," she says. "I don't know how anyone else feels about it — if I could have created an environment with Lady Albany in pieces and stacked things around her, I thought: 'Where would I put the kind of diapers I used to fold?' I bet they don't even make them anymore."

"As a matter of fact I dream about. Every once in a while I dream that one of the kids is a baby. Oh, I don't have any diapers! and I go frantic! it's a kind of

the relationships among them."

"I'm not following you," I said.

"Well, here we are very bored (indicating me, herself and my friend Marilyn; we stand in an open triangle) and confronting ourselves with the same space. And if I just move over (moves toward Marilyn) there is suddenly not only a human communication relationship there, but it's much more exciting visually."

Story Telling

"I looked at that stump and of course I saw a face in it. I always do — a face, a figure . . ."

Indeed she does. Dozens of large sculptures and dolls fill the house

with faces and stories. Almost none of the sculptures is purely abstract. Almost all have at least one face; many present multiple faces. A self-portrait has angry, happy and studious faces, for different occasions. It opens to reveal over a score of wooden figures, each with its face.

"Lunar Self-Portrait" has 13 faces, cleverly carved around the head. Pictures of the Williams family hang from test tubes and beakers from the waist.

A biographical sculpture looks like a cross between a crib and the Acropolis. A rectangular frame about a yard long, it has figures carved around the four sides.

"It starts over here, with a young, a real young child and protective parents and siblings and going through adolescent fat — "Pudge" (an early nickname) — with a thin figure inside (Ha)." One cut-away quarter of the figure shows a much thinner figure within.

The real young child was born on Halloween 1927, in Albany. She graduated in 1945 from Albany Academy for Girls, where she later taught. A bachelor's degree in fine arts from Skidmore College followed in 1949.

"And progressing, moving to the point where I was married (to attorney Frank Williams, in 1950) and had children myself. (I was involved then in house affairs, decorative things."

"The house was the end of real creative things," she says later. "It was in terrible shape."

"This is the third child," she says, continuing the trip around the biographical piece, "moving on or breaking out. Twice there are symbols of moon here, totally irrational. Then going kind of out of the frying pan into the fire, where I was teaching again. This figure

where I was a teacher, going in all different ways. Here I am breaking out of the teaching, doing my own thing again, and reaching middle age and having this weight problem. And the confusion inside, and then looking forward to old age, getting things squared away." The last figure, at a corner, is in fact squared.

Marge Williams taught at Girls' Academy from 1952 to '54 and again from 1965 to '79. Then in 1978 she grew tired of teaching and entered a SUNYA-St. Rose master's program. St. Rose supplied the education courses she had never had. SUNY at Albany offered sculpture study with the late Richard Stankiewicz, an artist of international reputation.

With Stankiewicz she began carving the glued stacks of plywood that she has exhibited at the Albany Bicentennial Park, at Chesterwood and other prestigious venues. She had discovered her medium.

It was a matter of focus, she says now. Ordinary rough plywood, stacked, glued, finished rough or smooth and more or less hollowed gave her a medium she could be at home in. Williams speaks of painting with envy. She speaks of her plywood with mastery.

Plywood has resonances for Williams. "I have wondered why I am so fascinated by layers, at the building up of layers, the gathering of vertical forms. Now I think as a housewife and mother not only have I been involved with layering, building up piles of things, but I have been surrounded by it, with the (Helderberg) escarpment up there."

Maybe it's also the scale. Williams speaks of her anger as a woman; of the burdens of being a housewife, the stacks of dishes and diapers. But in fact the work is

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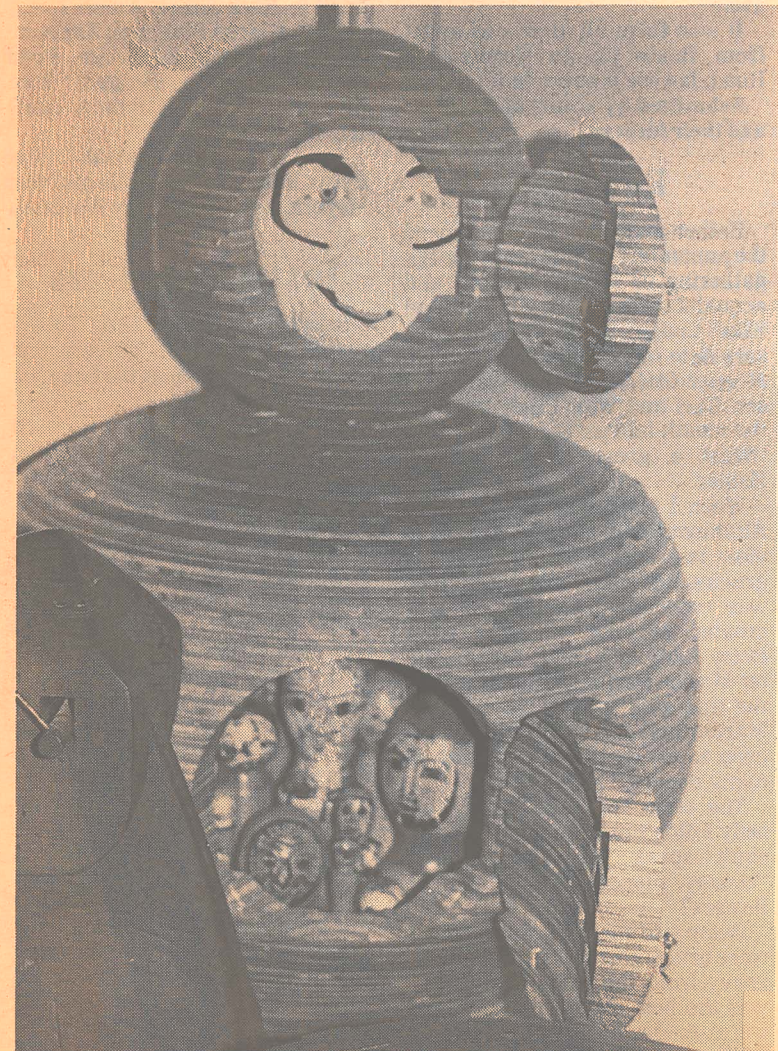
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Self-portrait showing an angry face.