

Robert Williams Artist Statement

Growing up, I had little exposure to art. It was only through an interest in jewelry and a chance meeting with an old high school friend who suggested I apply to art school, that I wound up attending the California College of Arts and Crafts, majoring in metalsmithing. I graduated with distinction in 1979 and began working as a bench goldsmith for a small jewelry design firm in San Francisco. This experience was invaluable in sharpening my skills, and grounded me in the importance of my relationship to craft and materials. But the longer I worked in the business the more I realized that my interest lay in the direction of fine art—and politics. I reached a point where I could not do a jewelry repair without considering the source of the materials I was handling (gold from South Africa, for example), and the political implications of that (workers who were underpaid and worked under dangerous conditions).



The Good Citizens Pin, 1986. Laminated Xerox with collage elements, 1½" x 2".

"Citizenship without commitment is empty, commitment without understanding is blind." The first packaged *Good Citizens* prototype, 1985. Mixed Media, 3" x 4" each.



ABOVE AND BELOW Details from the installation *Join a Movement*. 1986.



I began graduate school in 1983 at San Diego State and graduated with an MFA from Kent State University in Ohio in 1986. During this period it became obvious that it was not jewelry itself that held my interest so much as a fascination with the small intimate scale of it. My work became much less about permanence and traditional craftsmanship as my materials changed from soldered metals to laminated xeroxes, sheet styrene, and cardboard held together with hot glue, among many other things. At Kent State I was fortunate enough to study under Professor Bruce Metcalf, whose work was on the cutting edge of what was being done with academic metal work at the time. His work, for the most part, was not wearable, often painted, and largely narrative and figurative, and his students were basically free to do anything they chose as long as they were productive—and we were.

My thesis project consisted of a series of artifacts: satirical by-products of an imaginary contemporary fascist movement. These were culled from a variety of sources, ranging from Aretha Franklin singing "Respect" to Adolph Hitler addressing the 1934 Nazi Party convention at Nuremberg. The project included film loops, an audio sound track, and various graphic assemblages and sculptural elements, all put together in an installation called "Join a Movement."

After graduate school my work continued along the line of mixed media assemblages. I executed a number of works as part of a project called the "Good Citizens Product System." In this work done in the late 1980s-early 1990s, I explored my interest in issues of consumerism, propaganda and the creation of meaning. There was never really any "product" to speak of, but rather a carefully-chosen combination of text and image intended to create a certain dissonance when joined together as a unit. The idea that we can heavily influence the perception of what an object is by what we say about it through packaging was an important element of this project. During this period I also created a number of audio collage pieces. The home 4-track recorder was a new technology at the time and I had discovered it while putting together the sound track for my thesis show. I received two Ohio Arts Council grants for the work done during this time—one for mixed media sculptural work and the other for a series of audio collages.

In 1987 I moved from the Midwest to the East Coast. Two years after arriving in Jersey City from Ohio I took a 1300-square-foot studio in an old factory building on the banks of the Hudson River. Much of the work done during this period was an exploration of scale and materials. I executed many of the

Posing at the entrance to my *Packaged Goods* show in 1993.



Opening reception for *Packaged Goods*.



ABOVE Two quick figure studies done at the Art Students League of New York circa 2002. Charcoal on vellum, 24" x 36".



ABOVE Detail/back *Ethnic Identity Mask* label. Fifty sets of four masks along with a point of purchase display were produced for the exhibit "Racisms," organized by the collective Progressive Culture Works of Jersey City, New Jersey in 1994.



ABOVE Front and back views of the *Good Citizens Ethnic Identity Mask* 1994. Mixed Media, 11"x16". ABOVE RIGHT Detail, back of mask. The text reads: "I want you, for the next five minutes, to live as if you were _____. After all others in your city are and it could very well have been you...why not? In the next five minutes while you're _____ try and see yourself as others see you.—What clothes would you wear? What food would you eat?—What is the sound of your name?—As you go about your daily business what arrangements will have to be made?—Who will look you in the eye and speak, who will not?—Who will touch you? Who seems to be uncomfortable in your presence?—When you die who will weep, and how does this image differ from scenes you may have imagined before you were _____?"

smaller graphic works as mixed media paintings. I used xeroxes on tracing paper to capture images which were then applied to the painted canvas background using acrylic media. Also during my time in Jersey City I was a member of a loosely-knit confederation of artists called "Progressive Culture Works." We put together a series of exhibits, most organized around a theme, with reading lists and discussion groups as an important part of the process.

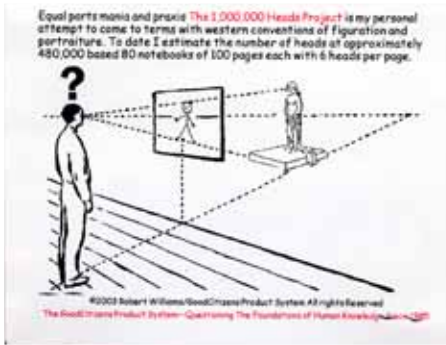
In 1993 I organized an exhibit called "Packaged Goods" and invited about 20 other artists to produce works which were low-tech, done in multiples and which emulated the kind of presentation that one would see in low-end retail outlets. This project was the last exhibit I was to do out of this Jersey City space, and important to me for a number of reasons. It gave me the opportunity to work with other artists and to discuss our ideas, as well as to utilize the graphic skills I had developed working as a production designer in New York. But the most important consequence of the "Packaged Goods" exhibit was the fact that it was visited by a young curator, Andrea Portes, who ran an alternative space in Cagliari, Sardinia. He invited me, as well as four other artists who were also doing work dealing with aspects of advertising, media and consumer culture, to create an exhibition in Italy. It was the first time I had ever left the country, and I was being flown over as an *artist*—the experience was life-altering.

Over the next year and a half I made several extended trips to Europe, only returning to the States long enough to earn enough money to travel again. I traveled Italy from Milan to Cagliari, Sardinia. In addition I spent time in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Seeing so many Old Master works, many of them in their original context, allowed me to experience

their craft and physicality in a manner dramatically different from viewing them as four-color images reproduced in a book. I came away from this experience with a desire to hone my drawing and painting skills. Upon returning to New York I began to draw from the figure. I spent a number of years drawing at both Spring Street Studio under Minerva Durham and The Art Students League, where I studied with Terence Coyle and Nicki Orbach. In the fall of 2001 I received the distinction "Best of Group" for a charcoal study of a standing male nude exhibited in the Art Students League Concours Exhibition.

Over the last several years

I have continued my exploration of drawing. I work out of my home. My studio currently occupies about a third of my total living space. For a living, I do magazine production. Although I work freelance, it is economically necessary that I work forty hours a week. I mention these things because available time and space have been key elements in shaping how I pursue



ABOVE Detail/back 1,000,000 Heads Project label. The text reads in part: “Equal parts mania and praxis *The 1,000,000 Heads Project* is my personal attempt to come to terms with western conventions of figuration and portraiture.”



ABOVE Packaged drawing from notebook. “You do what you do repeatedly.”



ABOVE Poster for a studio sale, 2003



ABOVE Digital Ink jet print, *View of the George Washington Bridge*, one of approximately 1,200 photos taken for reference over a two and a half year period

my commitment to doing art work every day. The simple notebook has proven to be an excellent tool, and has allowed me to work whenever and wherever I want. A number of projects have grown out of my notebook work.

In 1998 I was xeroxing pages from a series of notebooks, selecting the images I found to be most compelling. I placed the open books face-down on the copy machine. The resulting print-outs became a series of diptychs—the two facing pages split by the gutter, with the graphic source material on one side and the drawn image on the other. These photocopies ultimately became an edition of silk-screened prints. They were produced with the help of Robert Beckman and Artist Image Resource, a not-for-profit organization in Pittsburgh which works with artists who are not printmakers to realize print projects. My prints have been shown as “From the 1,000,000 Heads Project: sixty-four notebook pages of dubious political content” both in the United States and abroad.

As I worked to improve my drawing, I found the human head to be particularly intriguing. It occurred to me that if I drew a million of them, by the end of the process I would have to know how.

The 1,000,000 Heads Project is an ongoing activity for me and has been executed as screen prints, large format digital C-prints from files created directly on the computer using a stylus—as well as drawings using various media on paper. In one permutation, individual drawings are removed from the notebook, packaged and labeled with a brief description, then stamped with a number certifying them as genuine art objects. This work grows out of the idea that mastery comes through repetition, and it is particularly satisfying to make because it is easily affordable, still “real” art. Moreover, selling the packaged heads gives me an opportunity to speak with the people who buy them about my interests and ideas.

I am currently working on a series of drawings called “Dystopia.” These drawings are charcoal and colored chalk on paper, and approximately 36 by 24 inches. They draw heavily from a series of digital photographs that I took during a period when I was working well more than forty hours a week. During this period, spare time was at a premium, but the old aphorism about “artists doing work about what they know” came to mind. I knew my commute to work, and I knew my neighborhood of Washington Heights, so I set about documenting my immediate environment as I went through my day. Although these photos were intended purely as reference material, I was pleasantly surprised at people’s positive and interested responses at a studio sale.

This led to a relationship with a local realtor who not only sponsored me during the New York Uptown Art Stroll in 2004 by allowing me to hang work in his establishment, but who also purchased a number of prints to give to clients, as well as a set to hang in his new office. I tell this story because it changed my relationship to a community to which I was a relative newcomer. My work can often be general or conceptual but I am learning the importance of a willingness to look at what is immediate and personal.

My methods and materials are diverse. My interest in media and popular culture is consistent throughout my work. I believe that the ability to remove images from their original context through photography or other mechanical means has enormous consequences for our ability to know what is true and what is false.

I also value hand skills. Coming from a crafts background I have always derived great satisfaction from my relationship with materials. Much of the mixed media work that I have done has relied on appropriation. I stand by that approach, but did come to miss the feeling of being “skilled.” As I continue to work I look forward to greater integration of these concerns. My goal is to produce solidly evolving bodies of work and to have that work consistently be seen.