

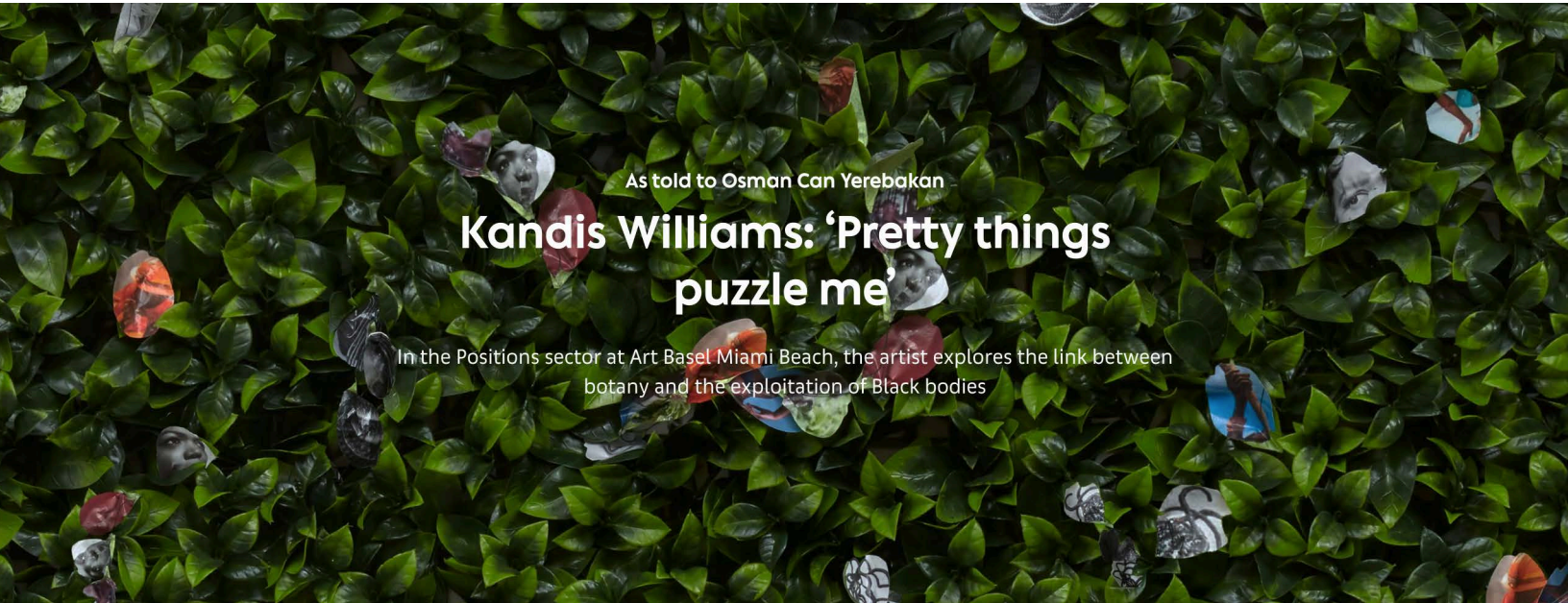
NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca

Kandis Williams as told to Osman Can Yerebakan, "Kandis Williams: 'Pretty things puzzle me,'" *Art Basel Stories*, December 1, 2021.

Art|Basel



As told to Osman Can Yerebakan

Kandis Williams: 'Pretty things puzzle me'

In the Positions sector at Art Basel Miami Beach, the artist explores the link between botany and the exploitation of Black bodies

Kandis Williams's sculptural collages of faux flora bloom in their own cosmos. At Art Basel in Miami Beach, Williams, whose work spans archival collage, sculpture, performance, and publishing, weaves photography and sculpture into arrangements of plants that carry archives of trauma on their cotton-paper leaves. Shades of green foliage carry sublimated images in which labor is imposed onto the Black experience, from tango – a whitewashed dance with sub-Saharan roots – to sex work and slavery.

Titled 'A Garden', Williams's solo presentation with **Night Gallery** (Los Angeles) includes eight floral sculptures and a titular slideshow that pairs archival imagery with Color-aid paper. The juxtapositions invite the viewer to witness the traces of physical exertion on the Black body, tattooed onto leaves. Here, Williams discusses her process, plants' connection to forced migration, and what it means to be alive.

'Speculating on what plants feel, instead of simply allowing them to live in relation to our bodies, is a form of hubris. At least, that's the position from my practice, which begs the question for humans to answer on the comprehension of the degree to which agricultural and sexual labor have been systematically reorganized as slave labor in the modern era, as well as how often plants bear the marks of that fetishism, or unintentionally act as a replacement to human response. I'm interested in how plants act as signifiers of our desires and as we lay the groundwork of our penal and corporeal systems, and for the genocidal conquests of lands and peoples.'

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca



Left: Kandis Williams, Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* - October 28th 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* - May 17th 1954, 2020. Bouquet, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

‘The history of botanics is completely fused with the history of colonial exploitation, labor, and extraction. I would even add that the history of botanics is very important to our understandings of genocide – especially genocidal slavery – and the consequences of land claiming, manifest destiny, and white supremacist ideology and its expansion. The havoc wreaked on our world and on our Earth is the same.

‘In terms of my work’s potential to unlearn or restructure or grow anew, I think (the potentiality) is not necessarily in the artwork, but in the research that has preceded the work. After seeing how much folkloric and anthropological writings – from Zora Neale Hurston to Maria Sibylla Merian’s slave – have informed the exploration of Suriname that has given us so much of what we understand to be botanical drawings, I think unlearning, restructuring, and growing anew are all strange ways of thinking through how we can collapse the barriers and distinctions between the disciplines of pseudoscience that are all underscored by white supremacist colonial-settler ideology.

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca



Kandis Williams, Candombe Africano via Jitterbug to Virginia Georgia Mississippi Bouquet, 2020. Kandis Williams, After birth all diligence is transferred to the calves; then the farmers brand them with their mark and the name of their breed And set aside those to rear to perpetuate their kind, to keep as sacred for the altar, or to cultivate earth and turn over the uneven field breaking it's clods. the rest of the cattle pasture on green grasses, but train those that you'll prepare for work and service on the farm when they are still calves and set them on the path to dociling while their youthful spirits are willing, while their lives are tractable. some few women are born free, and some amid insult and scarlet letter achieve freedom [sic] with that freedom they are buying an untrammelled independence and dear as is the price they pay for it, it will in the end be worth every taunt and groan., 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

'The works of sculpture, once finished, act on their own. Once they're in action, on pedestals, on view, then it's clear how certain cuts, tears, and assemblages relate to the violences I see in the gaps between cognition and the failure to perceive other humans that is quintessential to white Western ontology throughout visual culture. If there is a performative aspect throughout the work, it is the audience's performance of proximity to, or use of, the paradigmatic white male gaze to structure what one is seeing, that all take character in and from the poetic revelations of people oppressed. To be brief, it's on the audience to act, not me.

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca

'There is a relationship to nature morte painting and Ikebana compositions. I use a lot of the Ikebana principles pertaining to the distribution of point, line, and plane within the flower to leaf ratio in order to create harmonies and then interrupt those compositional harmonics. Thought is at the center of your source of imagery, regardless what their context is. And Josef Albers's interactions of color have always been intriguing, as has the field of color theory, where it intersects with racial ideation.

'I don't really see the body of the plant as a completely different life form. I'm not thinking about the body, but instead about life, and how life is categorized into living and nonliving, sentient and non-sentient. To return to the questions of "can we suffer?" and "can plants suffer?": I think there's a way in which Black bodies are constantly or completely objectified and categorically related to other living beings that are not human. In that dehumanization, I don't think we've been rendered as living objects, but as nonliving organisms, a death-based collective. I actually think we've been rendered, even in death, as hyperalive, and as representatives of hyperlife, of life force, if you will, and that those are genocidal poetics.

So in thinking about all forms of life, of living, of livingness, and especially Atlantic livingness (a term from academic Katherine McKittrick), I don't see the movement into plants as a shift. I think the body of the flower semiotically opens up access to the horrors of the reality of the Columbian Exchange, a global systemization of slave labor and stolen resources – it does so specifically with the irony that it advances at first as neutral, then pretty to the eye – until it dies. Then we buy new flowers.'



Kandis Williams. Photo by Lelanie Foster.

Osman Can Yerebakan is a curator and art writer based in New York.

Kandis Williams is represented by **Night Gallery**, Los Angeles.