

# Chicago's most significant cultural export

Amanda Williams, an artist who is transforming the way we think about blighted neighborhoods, is taking her vision to the Venice

Architecture Biennale in May | By Chris LaMorte

If you were anywhere near a Chicago art museum in 2017, you've probably seen Amanda Williams' work.

She created an installation for the Arts Club and had her first solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photos from her breakthrough piece "Color(ed) Theory" were featured alongside works from the likes of Mies van der Rohe and Studio Gang at the Art Institute's eclectic "Past Forward: Architecture & Design at the Art Institute."

In her spare time, she served as a consultant on the Obama Presidential Center.

But if 2017 was a whirlwind, this year she's going global. The acclaimed 43-year-old architect turned artist, along with collaborator Andres Hernandez, an associate professor of art education at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has been commissioned to take over the courtyard at the U.S. Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale in May. The two are collaborating with Shani Crowe, whose intricate braided hair sculptures have been worn by celebrities such as Solange for a piece called "Thrival Geographies (In My Mind I See a Line)," a meditation on "how race shapes notions of identity, shelter, and public space in historically African-American communities."

Williams' work gets people talking. It's often head-scratchingly conceptual—she's taken dilapidated Englewood homes slated for demolition and painted them vibrant colors inspired by urban life; she's gold-leafed a pallet of bricks; she's lodged a full jar of Ultra Sheen into a wall.

But her art has a higher purpose. It traverses the personal, the political and the fraught landscapes of race and class. Often simultaneously.

"Amanda Williams has developed a uniquely powerful way of dramatizing the politics and poetics of built space, and disclosing the proximity of despair and hope," says Niall Atkinson, associate professor at the University of Chicago and co-curator of the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. "Her work is conceptually challenging but

visually compelling, often mesmerizing."

The daughter of an insurance executive mother and accountant father, Williams grew up in Auburn Gresham in the late 1970s and '80s and attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School before heading to Cornell University to study architecture.

As a kid, she noticed neighborhood disparities on the South Side and imagined architecture as a way to address them: "I thought, 'Oh, I'll fill in all these blank spaces, and (then) I'm rich!'"

After graduating from Cornell, she spent 11 years in San Francisco, working as an architect during the dot-com boom. On the side, she dabbled in painting. It became a passion. Eventually, she left the firm where she was working to become a full-time artist, setting up a San Francisco studio before eventually resettling in Chicago, working out of the Bridgeport Arts Center.

Today, she lives in Bronzeville with her husband, Jason Burns, a former running back for the Cincinnati Bengals and now a performance coach and gym owner, and two daughters.

As she prepares to present her art to international crowds in Venice, we asked her to talk us through some of her pieces here.



## "Pink Oil Moisturizer (Winter; Overall)" from "Color(ed) Theory," 2015

"Color(ed) Theory" involved painting eight abandoned homes in Englewood, each one a different color. Williams created color names she felt were evocative of the black urban consumer experience: Harold's Chicken Shack red, Safe Passage yellow, Ultra Sheen teal. While some homes were demolished, others lingered, giving her the opportunity to explore them via photography throughout the seasons.

Pink Oil Moisturizer, a nearly ubiquitous hair care product in African-American homes when Williams was growing up, is produced by Luster Products, a pioneering black hair care company on the South Side. Its products are produced and distributed there, and in its heyday it employed thousands of people. "There's a myth that the South Side is not an economic generator, we're not major consumers," Williams says. "So what does that mean in a conversation about value, and what does it mean for me to project the history of that color onto this other piece of architecture that has now been deemed valueless because it has not been maintained?"

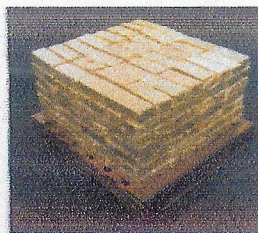


## "Be the Girl With the Turned On Hair," 2017

Williams says this wall assembly—a jar of Ultra Sheen stuck in a wall that's painted gold on the opposite side—speaks to the power of black consumers, while also "elevating Ultra Sheen to preciousness," she says. "In my wildest dreams I couldn't imagine what an impact it's made on the security staff and the docents and the guards at (Museum of Contemporary Art), most of whom are primarily black and primarily of a certain age. Every time I come there they're hugging me. They feel I'm representing them. They're in the museum in a way they're usually not represented. They're like, 'This is our show. She's talking to us.'"

## "It's a Goldmine/Is the Gold Mine?" 2016

"From a building industry standpoint, Chicago common brick is hard to get. But it's in abundance in the foundation of lots all over the South Side. I was talking to a friend of mine who is a community organizer. I was like, 'Can you imagine? This could be a cottage industry.' And he said to me, 'It's a goldmine... but is the gold mine?' and we started laughing. The idea is you could actually calculate the monetary value of the bricks that are left in these parcels. From a symbolic standpoint, these neighborhoods are seen as wastelands or not valuable, but actually they're very valuable. There is that whimsy of, there's your Fort Knox right there, your neighborhood."



## "Ease on Down the Road," 2017

In a still-under-construction piece, Williams has created a brick path that has been painstakingly gold-leafed, running through an empty corner lot between a high school and a liquor store at Adams Street and Western Avenue. "Desire paths" are when people wear these shortcuts though vacant lots. It acknowledges that we individually but collectively have all decided that this is the shortcut. I wanted to use the metaphor of the yellow brick road to make the correlation that we as a community have decided this little piece of this larger territory is valuable because it gets us there faster."

