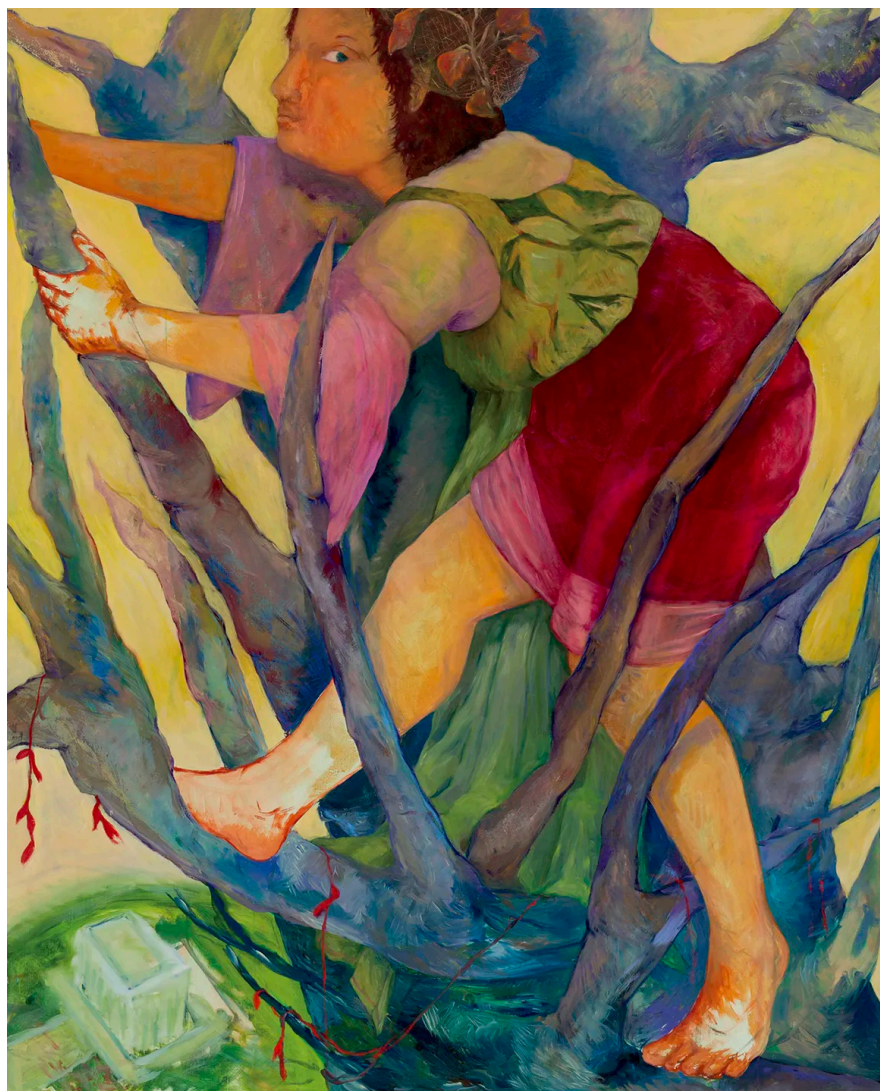



REVIEWS PARIS

## Philemona Williamson

Semiose

By Mara Hoberman 

Philemona Williamson, *A Contemplative Perch*, 2017, oil on linen, 60 × 48".

“The Borders of Innocence,” Philemona Williamson’s first solo show in Europe, featured ten oil paintings made by the New York–based artist

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between 2015 and 2023. Populated by large, often awkward bodies in mysterious, colorful settings, Williamson's compositions weave together

references to personal experiences, world events (historic and current), and diverse mythologies. In this exhibition, childhood—in particular the fluidity and anxiety around identity associated with adolescence—was a common theme. From one painting to the next, figures of indeterminate age, race, and gender appeared in equivocal contexts: plausibly but ambiguously loving, violent, frightening, and empowering.

In *A Contemplative Perch*, 2017, a chubby-cheeked figure ensconced in the uppermost branches of a leafless tree looms impossibly high above a tiny White House far below. Painted the year Donald Trump assumed the presidency, the scene evokes an uncomfortably familiar feeling of panic and disbelief. Embodying a mix of power and precarity, the figure glances (furtively? knowingly?) at the viewer out of the corner of one eye. Seemingly ill-equipped, the tree climber is barefoot and wearing a fancy old-fashioned dress. A hand and feet marked by patches of raw canvas and a nearby red vine curling around the tree branches like dripping blood further underscore the climber's vulnerability. Using symbolism and fairy-tale whimsy, Williamson describes a desperate situation: Like Jack's fabled beanstalk, the towering tree is an escape fantasy destined to come crashing down.

A similarly uneasy mix of impotence and purpose pervades the self-portrait *Here I Hold Becoming*, 2020, which shows the artist carrying a supine, seemingly unconscious female figure on her back. The strangely acrobatic pose recalls ancient Greek sculptures depicting *epheдрismos*, a game in which players carried one another on their backs while blindfolded. Williamson's eyes, however, are wide open. And rather than seeming playful, she appears resigned—even as she cradles a small doll in her one free hand. Toys frequently root Williamson's paintings in child's play and make-believe games. This particular doll, dressed in a black-and-white maid's uniform, relates specifically to the artist's experience growing up in the home of a wealthy Greek family who employed both of her parents as live-in domestic workers. Even while drawing on a highly personal narrative, Williamson's paintings raise universal questions about how interpersonal relationships affect social constructs and vice versa.

Ambivalence about the nature of relationships plays out in other paintings as well. In *Embroidered Dream*, 2021, a woman curls her toes (in disgust or ecstasy?) while receiving a hug from a shadowy figure. In *Bold Crush*

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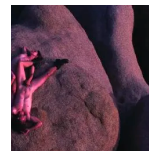
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dramatic paintings on view, *A Pause Requested*, 2021, depicts an androgynous figure wearing a too-small yellow smock standing with outstretched arms in front of four other figures. It is unclear whether the main figure's disproportionately large arms and hands are soliciting a hug or meant to block the viewer. Perhaps both. Pausing on this painting, as its title requests, allows for seemingly opposite perspectives and possibilities to coalesce. Candidly confirming the complex fabric of humanity, Williamson's paintings are patchworks of conflicting emotions, identities, and narratives.


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