

On discovering materials that mean something to you

August 7, 2020 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2789 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Focus](#).

Your current body of work involves precise velour paper cutouts over acrylic paintings. How did you come up with this approach?

I had a figure drawing background in school and I also took printmaking. I made a lot of stencils that I liked better than the paintings I made with them. I always liked the way printmaking took the hand out of the equation. I liked the experience of a messy, smeary drawing, but not always the cathartic look of the result. I loved drawing and line drawing, and it came to me one day that I could draw however I wanted to draw and then come back and cut and have this clean line.

It was that, and it was also the material. I found this velour paper and I was playing around a lot with velvet fabric at the time. I was thinking about it as a kind of space. The space of the page or space as a metaphor, and that it was a really rich, black space. For me, drawing is really about pulling out or carving out that space, to reveal the image.



WILLIAM VILLALONGO, *Corner Office*, 2017, Acrylic, paper collage and velvet flocking on wood panel, 60 x 46 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy of ©Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Is it time consuming?

It's tedious and time consuming. It's a lot of cutting and masking things out. It has test stages to it. I'll make the pencil drawing that I rework and push until I get the image I want. It allows me to think through texture and color before putting those things on, though it's never what I think it's going to be in the end.

Then I'm able to transfer that drawing to the panel and paint things. I can cover things up that are already painted, and I can transfer the drawing back to the panel anytime. So, in a way, it allows me the flexibility of layering what I want to paint.

Everything that isn't going to be flocked gets masked or covered up with tape and the flocked fibers comes last. After parts are masked the whole thing gets covered with flock adhesive and then loose fibers are sprayed on. The tape is pulled out after the adhesive is dry. It's this tedious thing where I wipe up all the still loose fibers, and peel out all that tape to reveal the painted area underneath.

It takes a while. But it's kind of like peeling a scab and there's something kind of annoying but also pleasurable about it at the same time.

How does this process relate to the subject matter?

Like a lot of people, I studied oil painting in school. Eventually, I moved to acrylics. But I was always searching for something else because, although I liked painting with oils, but it didn't connect to me as a material that made sense for any of my concerns. I was looking for something that made more sense to me personally, not historically. Acrylic has a faster drying time, but that's not always good. There's an interesting alchemy to it, and all kinds of things you can do with it.

I stumbled on the velvet and velour just thinking about what were the things around me that I looked at as a kid. My mom still had these velvet paintings from the late 70s and 80s, and that made me think, "This is a material that's a lot closer to my visual memory." It was the first visual art that I saw as a kid. I knew that it was kind of cheesy, or whatever, but I asked myself: "Can I turn it into a material that I can use?"

At the heart of that, I had this idea of it as a really rich black space where I'm enacting in or pulling out of or contending with. Black space as existential as a metaphor for Blackness. The velvet is a material that felt very near to me, and it was more personal than oil painting as definitive of the medium or the art historical canon. That eventually, sounded like a pretty empty pursuit to me.



WILLIAM VILLALONGO, *Free, Black and All American no. 3*, 2017, Acrylic, paper collage and cut velour paper, 40 x 39 7/16 in. Sheet 44 1/8 x 43 1/2 in. Framed. Courtesy of ©Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

When you teach, do you say, "Hey, this is what works for me, but you should start with oil and find your own process"?

Usually it's a first year class and I'll introduce both oil and acrylic. Oil is a sort of base and it's a way to talk about the history of painting. It's a way into the history of paint. Even when I'm painting in acrylics, or trying to do certain things, they're an estimation of a lot of things that I learned in oil painting. Like painting the wood grain, for example. They're an estimation of the kind of glazing and things that have always been done in painting. Acrylics have gotten really good at being able to do a lot of those things. I try to introduce both as a way to learn, but allow the student to choose otherwise because I don't know how I would have responded to a professor making the whole class paint with velvet. Likely, I would have loved it.

I think materials are really personal and I think one has to find a relationship to material. I think a lot of students are totally fine with the art historical canon. For them, art feels very comfortable within those terms.

In advanced courses, I do question it. I question the material. I'll question if it's the right material for what they're doing or how it relates to subject, content and form. As we do in art school, students go through a gauntlet of questioning about what they're doing and some people move out of traditional art materials and try to find other things while some people really feel very square and comfortable within this area. As a teacher I should be the one that has to move with what they do and find.

One of your newer pieces, 'No Conviction,' feels like a historical piece—labor intensive, and complex—and then you notice a cellphone on the bottom of the painting. Seeing that it's like, "Oh, wait a second, this is contemporary."

I definitely have a soft spot for looking at Romantic-period painting or even Renaissance painting, just in terms of the complexity of image construction that those paintings would take on, and how they tell a narrative with the figure. The idea of what is positioning or posing or lighting to tell a story. I think it's complicated. It's really abstract.

I'm aware of how entering the picture can be a set up as something traditional yet the viewer can find themselves in some other place. That there is a critical lens that I'm trying to get at; which is that one comes to the painting thinking about a very Western context, but having to question what a Western context is or can be. Hopefully, staying in the painting fiction and leaving it finding that they have sort of gone to other places besides Europe and America. Encountering a different set of issues that are beyond Eurocentric concerns.

So it is purposeful. I want that to happen, to pull the viewer to the familiar and then to place them somewhere else.



WILLIAM VILLALONGO, *No Conviction*, 2017, Acrylic, silkscreen, paper collage and velvet flocking on wood panel 70 x 52 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy of ©Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

How important are politics to your work?

On one hand, when I hear a question like that, I feel like I'm kind of trapped. That I'm using art as some sort of propaganda for a political agenda of some sort. But it's really not that for me at all. I don't think art is really great for that either. For me, it's my personal concerns. It's the demons that are around me that keep me up at night and have influence over how I see the world around me, its existential.

Art becomes a way for me to reflect and understand humanness. It's a way to reach beyond the personal into the political and find my way back. It is my perspective on life. For me, living is always a negotiation between the political and the personal. It's as fluid as walking out the door every morning.

I'm aware that I'm making work that's going to be in the middle of a public space... and I have a chance to be expressed in some way or pose questions. So the artist in me is always asking, "Well, what do I do with that construct as if it were a type of material?" I do feel in some ways responsible to be thoughtful about what I'm doing or to address things that I understand to be problematic. It's all supposed to be in the work and I'm hoping that what happens is the work is an extension of a person. There's a personal aspect to the work and not just a soapbox.

It feels like it's coming from an actual human being versus just someone posting vague political slogans online, or something like that.

That's why in the one painting there's a painting of a phone and the phone is opened up to a Facebook post, which was asking people to repost a list of all the unarmed African-Americans who've been murdered by police in which there was no conviction for those crimes. They're unsolved murders. I didn't even repost it or anything. It was just seeing the volume in that list ... I was looking at my phone and almost dropped it.

I really started that painting going back to that moment where it was just the feeling of like, "What the fuck?" And that started me thinking about the notion of conviction in all aspects. "Not having conviction" and how that rings so true in terms of this country's promises or higher ideas in relationship to Black folk. It really does start from those kind of banal personal things in a lot of ways. It's also just me being anxiety ridden thinking about these things all the time.

Considering how personal it is, is it hard to abandon a piece that isn't working?

Before I start painting, I'll sit and do sketches in my sketchbook that look like chicken scratch. They don't resemble much more than notations. Sometimes they get developed a bit more. But usually in that process I can mull over an idea and say, "Oh my god, that's super cheesy." And I definitely will lean towards cheesiness sometimes in trying to have a sense of humor or trying to think through a tough idea that might not be representable in the end. The failure of that is usually productive somehow. At some point, I go, "Okay, well this could be a good idea. This could work." And it turns out that a lot of times the reason why those things work after that initial purge of ideas has a lot to do with basic art things—like composition. Those become the things that I can have more of a handle on, or feel like I have more control over.

If it's still not working after all that, given my process, I don't show the painting. It gets put in the corner or it gets thrown out or whatever. But usually I can smell that something's gone bad at some point in the process, whether it's doing this long drawing or the sketches before. So I'm pretty decided by the time I start putting paint on the panel.





WILLIAM VILLALONGO, *Flex*, 2017, Acrylic, paper collage and cut velour paper 80 1/4 x 39 1/2 in. (2 Sheets, 40 1/8 x 39 1/2 in. each) 85 1/4 x 44 5/8 in. Framed. Courtesy of ©Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Are you able to find successful pathways through failures?

Yeah, but it all goes into making something new. I never try to take something that isn't working and then repaint over it and turn it into something that works. The way that I paint just doesn't work like that. It really is a one-way street. There are a lot of ways in which I can be flexible within the process and rethink this or that; it moves from stage to stage and things can shift, but when it's done, it pretty much is what it is. If the patient is dead, I'm not making a Frankenstein. I just start over again. It needs to feel fresh to me.

Do you get creative blocks?

I don't. The process of trying to get to something is part of it. Sometimes I don't have much of an idea initially. For me, studio time is also about reading and looking at things. I might spend a couple weeks just reading something or looking through images or doing image searches or going to museums and thinking in front of great paintings. And then at some point I start to get back to my own ideas and how they can form into something that has meaning for me.

I did pretty much all of my most recent show in six months, but I also did other things. I can't imagine being locked up for six months straight. It's like I teach and then I get to the studio. So my time has to be pretty efficient. I would much rather make a decision and start moving and then decide, "Okay, that doesn't work. I'm just going to throw that out" and have an editing situation than to sit in indecision for too long.

Does teaching offer a useful way to divide your time?

Artists always want to be in their studio, but I find that teaching really is this kind of sustained conversation or dialogue outside of your own head. I think that, for me, sometimes that's really great. Sometimes just the thing you need is to be outside your own repetitions. But then you really need to get back into that space in order to make work.

I imagine that if I weren't teaching and I was just in my studio all the time, I would end up trying to find some distraction of some sort that would be in the world, so to speak, and engaging with other people and other artists. I just think of it as being involved in a different community of artists than the professional community of exhibiting artists.

What's an ideal studio situation for the work you do?

I don't have comfortable furniture in the studio. I feel like that's the nail in the coffin right there. Having some really nice cushy sofa is not productive. I have WiFi but it's terrible. It's like using somebody's open account or setting up a hotspot with my phone. It's just frustrating enough to not be worth the distraction. I can't have comfortable furniture and I need books. Books are important to have. I've been looking at some of them for a long time.

In terms of my painting, there are stages to my process, so the studio feels more like a workplace to me. I don't know how other people feel when they make work. For me, it's a relief

to know that I can go to the studio and I have to transfer that drawing or I have to do this other task. There's this tedious and time-consuming work I'm going there to do. I'm going to work and there's always something to do—as opposed to a more immediate practice where I'd have to come in and be charged like a rocket and then explode.

William Villalongo recommends:

Book: *The Cut Outs of Matisse* by John Elderfield

Essay: "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" by Audre Lorde

Artist: Robert Colescott

Painting: "Carnival Evening" by Rousseau

Album: *Fear of a Black Planet* by Public Enemy

disclaimer: could easily be five other things

Name

William Villalongo

Vocation

Artist

