



*Margaux Williamson*

# I Could See Everything

I Could See Everything: *Margaux Williamson*











WITH TEXTS FROM

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Ann Marie Peña  
Leanne Shapton  
Mark Greif  
Chris Kraus  
David Balzer

*Margaux Williamson*

# I Could See Everything





**THE ROAD AT  
THE TOP OF  
THE WORLD  
MUSEUM**

The Road at the Top  
of the World Museum  
124 Top of the World Hwy,  
Dawson, Yukon, Y0B 1G0



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INTRODUCTION

# Ann Marie Peña

Curator, The Road at the Top of the World Museum

When you are in a place so vastly affected by the tilt of the earth, you become profoundly aware of your own physical presence in the world. This is true particularly when you come for the first time to Dawson City, a place at times steeped in overwhelming darkness and at others bathed in a seemingly endless light. From our position on this hill, just under the tree line at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers, the Road at the Top of the World Museum has a unique view; our outlook over the last of the spruce trees and below the brightest stars on the longest nights can have a profound effect on our perspective and how we conduct our daily existence. The paintings of Margaux Williamson are born of a similar acute relationship to the movements of the earth, to the vulnerability of the individual, the great potential of darkness and the puzzle of how it co-exists with light. This kinship ties her work to the far north, to this place of ours at the top edge of the Americas, just below the Arctic Circle, and to our museum, which, because of our solitude and our unique location, has become a beacon for programming and research that focuses on considerations of time and darkness.



FIG. 1

These are times of intense change as we continue breaking through into the core of the twenty-first century. We have learned that speed is power, water will form the battleground of the future, and nature, like people, can fight back. Through Williamson's works we see a philosophical investigation of the sped-up landscape around her, as well as a dedicated rigour and formal exploration into the development and possibilities of painting as a medium. Her work manifests as a laboratory where she is also a subject, seeing what could be real, what cannot, what common human conditions can be unravelled, put back

together, restarted; she explores our curiosity, our biology, our shared understanding of science and our collective burden of history, our ability to relate to one another and, importantly, our failures.

It is with these thoughts in mind, these reflections on darkness as both a geographic condition and a conceptual idea, that the Road at the Top of the World Museum approached Williamson to mount an exhibition that would mark our ten-year anniversary. Presenting a comprehensive exhibition of her recent work, we are exploring not only our own growth as an institution but also the trajectory of an artist who, like us, has learned to venerate our respective positions on the geographic and contextual outer edges, benefiting from the panoramic views they grant us. For the exhibition *I Could See Everything*, Williamson's works are divided across five galleries in the museum, and are presented not as a sequential or linear retrospective, but as groupings of common ideas that have emerged, retracted and repeated in her practice over time.

As we enter Gallery One, we are presented with key works that have come to function as blueprints for the evolution of Williamson's highly personal visual language. Developed through filtering references as varied as pages torn from popular magazines and the fruit Williamson has lying around the studio, we see the emergence of a language in which objects as commonplace as bananas are transformed into signifiers for our own morbid decay. One work in particular, *I thought I saw the whole universe (Scarlett Johansson in Versace)* (p. 22), has come to describe a new methodology for painting the deepest possible night sky. In this close-to-life-sized view of the actress's torso cropped tightly within the canvas, we are presented with a detailed painting from an image of the heavily sequined dress worn by Johansson for an editorial fashion shoot in the *New York Times Magazine*. Williamson's manner of painting the textured dress, the gloss and sheen of the individual sequins, returns in later paintings like *study (Universe)* (p. 69, Gallery Four), *Lunar eclipse (I was the worst one)* (p. 82, Gallery Five), or particularly in *I got lost in the woods* (p. 37, Gallery Two). In this work, Johansson's sequins have become penetrating astral formations popping out from between the branches of trees, a clear night sky set over a typical suburban garage.

Similarly, objects like the aforementioned fruit can be found as recurring characters and symbols in Williamson's works. We start in Gallery One with *study (at night I painted in the kitchen)* (p. 32), where a solitary banana not only functions as a readymade or even a metaphor for everyday life but also draws on such varied references as the history of pop culture (think Andy Warhol's cover for *The Velvet Underground and Nico*), sexuality in contemporary practice (Sarah Lucas's provocative *Eating a Banana*, 1990, where fruit becomes phallus), and even our own mortality as a species (a crop increasingly facing permanent extinction with fierce strands of bacterial, fungal and other diseases threatening to take over). The banana reappears in Gallery Four in a work again entitled *At night I painted in the kitchen* (p. 78). Here, in bunches, the pieces of fruit sit atop a wooden table as part of a skewed still-life composed from the debris of daily living: an open newspaper, heads of cabbage, a glossy magazine and two bottles of beer.



FIG. 2

Moving beyond the building blocks of Williamson's visual language, we see in Gallery Two an increased focus on the artist's exploration of storytelling, and the creation of melodrama. Here titles of Williamson's works begin to hold great significance as they offer clues to broken histories and plotlines, to situations not easily determined. Particularly interesting is again the play with time, often through a recurring use of the simple past tense in the artist's choice of wording; with statement-like titles such as *I healed the little animals* (p. 50) and *We got lost on the way home* (p. 54), Williamson brings forth a sense of the viewer being located in a situation of aftermath, or of the action having already taken place, perhaps even passing us by. Here the implication becomes that we as onlookers have survived a particular set of circumstances for which these paintings bear witness, circumstances that affect not only our present day, but also our future.

The gentle hands as they cup a small rabbit feel like they are there to protect us too, as vulnerability is shielded by the large hands, while the fragment of a swimming pool in *We died young* (p. 39) becomes a piece of memory that draws us back to childhoods reminiscent of Douglas Coupland's *Life After God*.

The storytelling evolves further as we move through Galleries Three and Four, where aging and tension seem to have penetrated the artist's practice. We see a nod to Williamson's painting forebears in *We painted the women and children first (Gerhard Richter's painting Dead)* (p. 76), a chaotic and insistent canvas laden with thick layers of white and grey that reconstruct the German artist's close-cropped portrait of a dead woman, Ulrike Meinhof, a founding member of the Red Army Faction. These two galleries also include a series of upper torsos, possible references to *I thought I saw the whole universe (Scarlett Johansson in Versace)* (p. 22) or even Williamson's restaged painting *Mary Cassatt's Woman with a Red Zinnia* (p. 47) from Gallery Two. A chest juts out defiantly, posed for some kind of action in *study* as the figure stands with chin up and right arm flexed, while in *Nike of Samothrace (Ryan with a feather boa)* (p. 61) there radiates a weathered sense of experience. These torso works pull us into Williamson's concerted attempt to reveal, through painting, some kind of formula for understanding our common struggles in this life. The strain of the brushstrokes as they compose the tension in the bodies seems to also bring forth the knowledge that these knots binding us form part of the condition of contemporary existence, the anxiety involved in just trying to get by. These works portray a stress that is then counter-balanced by paintings like *The dreamer* (p. 59) and *I could only see the light under your chin* (p. 73). Here, terse muscles are replaced by a figure lying in a fetal position on a couch, and a contorted hand from which a glowing light like that of a cellphone is emanating between two figures. In these we feel a sense of release and respite. Altogether, the groupings of paintings across these two galleries manage to convey the dichotomy of our collective boldness and helplessness as we face evolving physical and spiritual climates. They reconcile humans' susceptibility to weakness with our capacity for boundless endurance.

At once both naive and heroic, the artist herself, in conversations leading up to *I Could See Everything*,



joked of her nearly pathological need to believe that our world can get better. From this position, we can see how that struggle becomes a force for growth. The effort involved in this pursuit hits a crescendo with the work *Love made us weak (tree on fire)* (p. 41). Here, from darkness we hit an intense blazing light; exquisite shades of red, orange and fuchsia form a beacon pulsing flashes of warning, beauty, blindness, death, life, hope and time. We see a tree so bright with colour it appears to burn, standing violent with life against the gloaming of the future. The Road at the Top of the World Museum is an institution that, alongside respected colleagues and sister organizations, struggles in interpreting the burden history places on the present day—a present day fraught with ongoing social and political divisions. Simplistic it may seem, but for this reason *Love made us weak* in particular encapsulates our idea that from this vast, difficult environment emerges a sense of possibility and change; that from here we can draw an acceptance of, and reverence for, our own imperfection. With this piece, and through *I Could See Everything* as a whole, we see in our own darkness a notion of time folding in on itself, a notion that repeats and dances back through the past as it propels itself into the promise of the future.

#### NOTES

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FIG. 1 Archival photo, The Road at the Top of the World Museum, 2004  
Courtesy of the museum

FIG. 2 Sarah Lucas (born 1962)  
*Eating a Banana*, from Self-Portraits 1990–1998  
1990  
Digital print on paper  
539 x 596 mm  
Courtesy the artist and the Tate Gallery

#### BIOGRAPHY

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Ann Marie Peña is a producer, curator and Associate Director of Frith Street Gallery in London, U.K. She has taught Visual Studies at the University of the Arts London, and in 2011 initiated the Artist in Residence program at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, where she curated an ambitious program of international artists that included Margaux Williamson.