

# ARTLOT

## Can Opener

Elzie Williams III

May 17–June 18, 2025

The oblique language of *Can Opener* — an installation of variations on “roadside vernacular,” according to the Baltimore-born, New York-based artist, Elzie Williams III — allows materials to “speak” for themselves.

As the artist shifts between tangible and intangible registers — from mark-making to meaning-making and so on — the anti-White Cube of this row house-shaped lot becomes the site where materials do not only speak, but “signify” themselves.

This blatant anthropocentrism — the idea that materials can only collaborate in beautiful and unexpected ways while under human supervision or using human language — seems (or at least *should seem*) at odds with Williams’s work. AND YET! One barely questions the presence of his prefabricated, race-swapped inflatable, or the readymade-ish assemblages, interrupting the unweeded, gravelly landscape.

In *Who Went to The Market?* (all works 2025), for example, a rug-sized swatch of astroturf is pressed over uneven terrain. It insists on unattainable flatness. The verso side of the turf has been stuck by dozens of golf tees on top of which white, brown, and cream-colored plastic eggs, hand-painted by Williams himself, to whom the jagged green and red lines gave “Charlie Brown meets the stock market,” are perched.

From the golfing leisure to Mediterranean Catholic curbside shrines, *Glass House* features a miniature installation of “found pens and pencils;” a handful of “graduation cupcake figurines pick toppers;” a “lighter;” a “3-D scanned figurine of the artist;” and an “Avon Capitol Building perfume bottle;” among other items, piled high onto a “hardcover edition of *The Very Rich: A History of Wealth* (1976) by Joseph J. Thorndike Jr.,” doused in epoxy, and crammed into the titular terrarium.

*Can Opener* is ruled by overlaps and affective proximities. This is a barren yet exhibitable sliver of land. This “space” (as art people love to say) is directly juxtaposed by the verdant community gardens occupying the adjacent corner lots. The buckled mesh fence — with its wide, diamond-shaped gaps for grabbing and peering through, rather than keeping out or keeping in — is its own kind of cinema.

Popeye of The People is the natural climax of this presentation. Black Popeye wears a black jumpsuit emblazoned with the contemporary proverb which regularly goes viral among young Black people: “ACROSS CULTURES, DARKER PEOPLE SUFFER MOST. WHY?” The words on Popeye’s chest tend to ripple as he is vigorously pumped up with air, as if he is flogging a discount.

Notwithstanding the coincidence of the two Elzies — Elzie Williams the Third, and Elzie Crisler Segar, the American cartoonist who created Popeye in 1929 — Williams’s take on the ubiquitous, slingshot-totting musclehead tips the scales of “roadside vernacular” code-switching.

— Olamiju Fajemisin

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**Elzie Williams III** (American, b. 1993) holds an MFA in sculpture from Columbia University School of the Arts, New York (2022), and a BFA from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York (2015). They are the first recipient of the Solomon B. Hayden Fellowship, administered through Columbia University, NY. The award was founded to support diverse voices in art by Lisson Gallery, Clearing Gallery, and artist Hugh Hayden in honor of Hayden's late father, Solomon B. Hayden who was a math teacher. Williams' work was included in *Eponymous* with Dominic Palarachio and Bat-Ami Rivlin, M 2 3, New York (2021); and on view with Lyn Lui at François Ghebaly, New York (2021). Recent exhibitions include *Arrangements in Black* at Phillips, New York (2022); exhibitions at Clearing in Brooklyn and Los Angeles (2022); Half Gallery, New York (2022); Thierry Goldberg, New York (2023); as well as *MZ.25 (My Condolences)*, an exhibition by Monsieur Zohore at M+B, Los Angeles (2023); and The School of Visual Arts (SVA) Curatorial Thesis Exhibition *Transcending the Ideal: Reimagining Femininity and its Relationship to Power*, curated by Virginia Ingram (2023), Williams has also curated an exhibition titled *What A Fool Believes* at Subtitled in Greenpoint Brooklyn(2023).