



Brilliant Black painter, Chaz Guest, captured late actor Michael K. Williams shortly before his death

by Randy Albright
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Chaz Guest, "Michael K. Soldier" (2021). The actor sat for the series two weeks before he died. (Credit: Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery)

Brilliant, Black, figurative painter, Chaz Guest, whose work is collected by the Obamas and Oprah Winfrey, is featuring deceased actor, Michael K. Williams, in his new solo exhibition, "Memories of Warriors," on view through March 19 at Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York.

Williams sat for Guest just two weeks before his death from an accidental drug overdose, making the stunning paintings even more impactful and meaningful.

When Williams showed up to be Guest's model, Guest recalls a particular moment in the session. "He started using the N-word," Guest told NY Times. "And I said, 'Michael, you can't use this word in my studio. You can look around and see how much I love our ancestors. It's insulting to me.'"

Guest said it brought tears to Williams' eyes, and the Hollywood star apologized. The two grew closer, with Guest even speaking to Williams's elderly mother via video call.

According to Guest, he was amazed at "the innocence, the pain, the beauty" of Williams's face, which he did his best to capture in the close-up portrait "Michael K. Soldier" (2021).



Chaz Guest's "The Planning" (2021), in oil and Japanese Sumi ink on linen, is part of his series depicting the all-Black U.S. Army regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers, which served on the frontier after the Civil War. (Credit: Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery)

The death of the Emmy-nominated actor from drug addiction (Guest said he did not know Williams struggled with addiction.) gave Guest's show title a double meaning. "I was shocked to learn that. That's the other reason the name of this exhibition is 'Memories of Warriors,' because he had a war with drugs."

CHAZ GUEST

Guest is impressively a self-taught painter whose exhibit, "The Planning" (2021), was created in oil and Japanese Sumi ink on linen. It is part of Guest's series depicting the all-Black U.S. Army regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers who served on the frontier after the Civil War.

Guest's paintings of Williams, best known for his role as Omar on "The Wire," are drawing major attention, as Williams's name floats around the news. Just last week Wednesday, authorities in Manhattan said they had arrested four men accused of selling fentanyl-laced heroin to Williams, resulting in his death.



"The Lonely Night" (2021), with Michael K. Williams modeling as a Buffalo Soldier. (Credit: Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery)

Aside from Guest's lovely paintings, he is also a published author who created a graphic novel about a superhero called the Buffalo Warrior. The rights to the character have already been acquired by Meridian Pictures, and a film is in the works.

Guest explained to NY Times that the series was birthed eight years ago, when one of his two sons, 10 years old, was frustrated with being unable to find one of his favorite action figures at the store. "He asked me, 'Why don't you create a superhero, Dad?'" said Guest.

"Now I have a mission not only for young African American boys but for all Americans to really understand a race of people, African Americans," he added.



Michael K. Williams was found dead on Sept. 6, 2021 after overdosing on heroin laced with fentanyl, according to the medical examiner. (Credit: Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times)

Memories of Warriors

Through March 19, Vito Schnabel Gallery, 43 Clarkson Street, Manhattan; 646-386-2246; vitoschnabel.com.