



The Fabric Workshop
and Museum

MUSEUM STATEMENT

The Fabric Workshop and Museum Mourns the Passing of Artist Will Stokes, Jr. (1955–2024)

This extraordinary artist was the Workshop’s first Apprentice and was designated a “permanent Artist-in-Residence” by FWM founder Marion “Kippy” Boulton Stroud.



Will Stokes, Jr., in the FWM Print Studio with his repeat yardage, *Alligators* (1979), 2023. Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño.

Philadelphia, PA, January 9, 2025—The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) mourns the passing of **Willie James Stokes, Jr.**, an artist whose connection to the Workshop goes back its very founding. He passed away at his home in West Philadelphia on December 27, 2024. He was 69 years of age.

Kelly Shindler, Executive Director of FWM, said in a statement: “With profound sadness, we join the Stokes family and FWM’s community in mourning the passing of a deeply creative and kind soul. A singular artist, Will Stokes, Jr. is part of the very DNA of the Fabric Workshop and Museum, which would not have been the same without his warm presence over forty-seven years. His longtime studio

at FWM is a joyful space that embodies Willie’s playful spirit. We grieve with his family and will honor his life and artistic legacy everyday as we carry our mission forward.”

Willie, who lived with severe dyslexia, had a long artistic career that started when he was a high school student involved in Prints in Progress—an after-school art program in Philadelphia. There, FWM founder Marion “Kippy” Boulton Stroud (1939–2015) first encountered Will, as he preferred to be called, and his remarkable imagination. She loved Will’s lively drawings of people and animals and, when she founded FWM in 1977, she asked Will to be its first apprentice along with another young artist, Homer Jackson (FWM’s Apprenticeship Training Program remains the foundation of its educational program today). He assisted with workshop activities and kept a little studio area where he worked on his paintings, which he retained at all four of FWM’s locations over four decades of operation.

Stokes and the FWM Master Printers developed many prints that have become beloved over the years including *Hidden* (1979), *Nude Figures* (1979), *Alligators* (1979), and *Animals and Butterflies* (1990), each design showcasing his distinctive vision and creativity. A prolific painter, Stokes created hundreds of paintings on paper featuring celebrities, people he knew, and an array of creatures—often gathered together in a single composition. In 2007, The Fabric Workshop and Museum presented a survey exhibition with an accompanying publication.



Will Stokes, Jr. in the FWM Print Studio with his repeat yardage, *Prehistoric Birds*, 1977. FWM Visual Archives.



Will Stokes, Jr. with his *Nude Figures (dress)* (1979), *Soft/Cover* installation view, 2024. Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño.



Will Stokes, Jr., in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. *Animals and Butterflies*, 1990. Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño.



Will Stokes, Jr., in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. *Hidden*, 1979. Photo credit: Carlos Avendaño.

Will Stokes, Jr. brought joy and inspiration to those around him. His love for plants and animals, including his beloved pet turtle, Michael Jackson, reflected his gentle and caring nature. His daily walks often led to serendipitous discoveries—lost toys, colorful objects, and discarded items—which he creatively incorporated into his environment, transforming the mundane into something extraordinary. His artwork and studio at FWM, where he worked and displayed these keepsakes, remain a testament to his talent and the vibrant imagination that defined his life and career.

Christina Roberts, FWM’s Director of Education, who has known and worked with Stokes for thirty-seven years, said, “Will’s quiet, kind spirit touched everyone who had the privilege of knowing him. His art and life will continue to inspire and remind us of the power of imagination and kindness.”

Tracey Blackman, FWM’s Director of Facilities and Museum Shop, who has worked with Stokes for thirty-five years, added, “Will was a sweetheart. He found a creative outlet through painting and playing R&B music. Over the years, we connected through the music he played in his studio, which always brought back the best memories and put us in a happy mood.”

A public Repast Celebration of Life will be held at The Fabric Workshop and Museum on Saturday, February 15, 11:00 am–1:00 pm. In lieu of flowers, the Stokes family asks that donations be sent to the American Heart Association.

About Will Stokes, Jr.

Philadelphia-born Will Stokes, Jr., a longtime collaborator and former Studio artist with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, is known for his distinct “outsider” style and colorful, rich compositions. His work draws heavily from popular culture and other iconic visual histories. The first apprentice of The Fabric Workshop from its founding in 1977, Stokes studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts before attending the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME. In addition to participating in residencies at the Mohammed Kahlil Studio, New York, NY, Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA, and Printmaking Workshop, New York, NY, Stokes has shown in major exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, Haynes Art Center Glass Gallery, Chapel Hill, NC, and in Philadelphia at Janet Fleisher Gallery, Painted Bride Art Center, as well as The Fabric Workshop and Museum. His work has been collected by many illustrious Philadelphians over the last four decades.

About The Fabric Workshop and Museum

The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art museum devoted to the creation, presentation, and preservation of innovative works of art. Its mission—*Collaborating with artists, revealing new possibilities*—embodies a 47-year commitment to helping artists experiment with the expressive possibilities of a broad spectrum of new materials and techniques. Through its renowned Artist-in-Residence Program, FWM provides artists at all stages of their careers with the opportunity to collaborate with its studio staff and take their work in fresh and often unexpected directions. FWM presents large-scale exhibitions, installations, and performative work, utilizing innovative fiber and other media including sculpture, installation, video, painting, photography, ceramics, and architecture. Founded in 1977, FWM brings this spirit of creative investigation and discovery to an eager audience, broadening access to art and advancing its role as a catalyst for innovation and social connection.

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