Dennis Paul Williams

There's no sign in front of his studio. "To know if faith works, you have to practice it," artist Dennis Paul Williams insists. A number of recent successes are signs that his practice is paying off.

His work is finding its way into galleries around the country, and a show of his paintings and drawings will open at the University Art Museum Jan. 22. That show will be Williams' second at U.S.L., and it will run through April 24 so that Festival International audiences will be able to see the work of the man selected to create the festival's 1995 poster image.

In addition to his work as a visual artist, Dennis is also a guitarist and musical collaborator with his brother, producer Nathan Williams. His two main pursuits share an interesting common origin: He began playing the guitar after he was kicked out of his high school art program.

As a young man, he was untrained but that setback only added to his personal placement in a class for slow learners. "They didn't know where to put me," he says. "Thank God I knew where I belonged." 1989 was undoubtedly his best year yet. His paintings were the subject of a cover story in the literary journal Callaloo and were included in the catalogue accompanying Nathan's latest CD. Though he himself did not learn to read until the sixth grade (he was taught by his brother), Williams is not bitter about his early teachers giving up on him. He believes that "some people have very small eyes" and that "people don't value tribulation."

The young artist's work is infused with his spiritual views. Herman Mihire, director of the University Art Museum, thinks his art is in his way of communicating both his alienation and his universal concerts.

While a student at U.S.L., Williams began making contacts with newspapers from around the world. "I'm trying to establish a universal voice," he says, and what's even more important is that I have a positive need for people to get up and do their thing and see that it's OK to struggle."

His work once brought the world to him; now, it is bringing him to the world. On a recent tour with Nathan and The Zydors Chac, he witnessed a performance by Istanbul's whirling dervishes in a temple of the Sufi sect of Islam. While there, he visited the graves of saints. He hopes his work with the staff of Festival International will result in a residency in Africa.

Williams doesn't wish to be thought of as a spiritual extremist or a fundamentalist. His multimedia works often feature a human figure surrounded by a vaporous, ambiguous space. According to Mihire: "It's as if the figures are in a state of spiritual transcendence."

Mihire considers Williams one of the most dedicated and eclectic young artists working in Louisiana today. "Art is a living part of his being. There's no separation between his thought and his images."

His canvases are often painted over by others. The artist truly believes that "we'll be judged by our works and the fruit we bring forth."

Williams has plans for works in a variety of sizes and mediums. Whatever the case, he will continue to govern himself by CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

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