Galleries: Williams captures war history in black and white

By Edith Newhall, For The Inquirer

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In many ways, the current exhibition at Haverford College's Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, "A Stirring Song Sung Heroic," comprising black-and-white photographs by William Earle Williams and related ephemera from his personal collection, began life nearly three decades ago.

That was when Williams, a noted photographer and Haverford professor, took up the Gettysburg battlefield as a photographic subject, and, while working, there noticed the scarcity of references to black soldiers who fought in that battle.

Curious to learn if African Americans had been erased from the records, Williams became a detective of sorts. Searching through archives, he discovered Civil War documents showing that black soldiers had fought against slavery in numerous battles and skirmishes, but that their participation was frequently unsung and forgotten.

Soon, Williams was traveling across the United States and the Caribbean photographing sites where blacks fought alongside whites, but also black burial grounds, and places well-known and obscure that played roles in the Underground Railroad. He was also collecting prints of battles depicting black soldiers fighting the Confederates, record books of plantation owners showing the purchases of slaves, and other ephemera documenting slavery and black participation in the Civil War.

In the Cantor Fitzgerald exhibition (which will travel to the Lehigh University Art Galleries in January), the pairing of Williams' contemporary photographs with his 19th-century printed matter has the effect of a history book or an exhibition in a history museum, clearly what Williams, an educator and scholar as well as an artist, wanted. The ephemera are fascinating, and one assumes they serve a talismanic function for Williams in his photographic work. But his haunting black-and-white photographs of empty landscapes, houses, and domestic interiors - which, by the way, are the only works reproduced in the show's handsome catalogue - are the obvious stars of his show, silent testaments to the invisible.

Beats and Beach Boys
Do not miss two terrific group shows that have little more than a week to go.

Yes, Rowan University is a hike from the usual urban art enclaves, but "Dialogic," an engrossing and thoroughly entertaining show of 17 artists who explore language and its hidden, implicit, and contradictory meanings, is well worth your time and the bridge toll. There are more than a few internationally known artists here - Lesley Dill, Erik Den Breejen, Barbara Hashimoto, Jenny Holzer, Glenn Ligon, and Jaume Plensa among them - and some local talent as well (Keith Brand, Buy Shaver, Chris Vecchio, Susan White).

There is even the work of a veritable cult figure, John Giorno, the poet and performance artist who starred in Andy Warhol's film Sleep (1963). His "Dial-A-Poem" piece is minimalism-meets-romanticism. Two black push-button phones from the 1970s sit atop white pedestals a few feet apart. You pick up one or the other receiver, push a button, and are treated to a poem recited by Giorno, Vito Acconci, Bob Holman, and other esteemed poets/artists of Giorno's vintage.

Other works that stood out to me were Den Breejen's colorful paintings of words from popular songs (the Beach Boys are a favorite of his), Meg Hitchcock's exquisite cut-paper constructions from the Bible and other sacred texts, and Barbara Hashimoto's balls assembled from shredded art reviews, telephone bills, and architectural plans, bound with Scotch tape.
"Camp Paradox Days," at UArts' Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, its title culled from a phrase in a biography of Nathanael West and also named after a boys' camp, Camp Paradox, in a town called Paradox in the Adirondacks, gathers artists who incorporate a nostalgia for the past in their works, among them Lucas Blalock, Alex Da Corte, Andrew Gbur, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Tyler Rowland. I was especially taken by Da Corte's "Triumph" (2012), a sweet, modest riff on Jeff Koons' humongous sculptures, and Ross-Ho's cast urethane and acrylic oversized rendition of a gold pin.

Rowan University Art Gallery, Westby Hall, 201 Mullica Hill Rd., Glassboro, N.J., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays (Wednesdays to 7 p.m.), 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Through Oct. 8. Information: 856-256-4521, www.rowan.edu/artgallery.

UArts' Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, 320 S. Broad St., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Through Oct. 8. Information: 215-717-6480, www.uarts.edu/about/rosenwald-wolf-gallery.

"Galleries" by Edith Newhall and "Art" by Edward J. Sozanski appear in alternating weeks.