



QUIXOTIC

GARY WILLIS

COURBALLY-STOURTON - CONTEMPORARY ART - LONDON



Gary Willis

Front cover - **'Romancing the Necromancers'** - (detail) oil on canvas - Gary WILLIS 1993



'WHO?' (detail) - oil on linen - Gary Willis 1994



The Impossible Dream

I first met Gary Willis soon after we both moved to Sydney in 1982. I was writing freelance reviews and journalism for newspapers and magazines at the time. I was immediately enthused and began placing articles in various publications. These included a review of the 'Central Journals' - based on his experiences in Central Australia - for 'The Australian' newspaper, as well as pieces for 'Australian Vogue' and other glossy magazines.

What impressed me about his work was the passion and energy with which he captured, froze into a moment, a metaphysical conceit. Within the spirals and gyres of the whirling worlds he conjured up, the viewer was commended to a re-evaluation of his/her own existential assumptions (to me, what happens when art is "working"). Elwyn Lynn, the leading Australian art critic noted "Willis is a metaphysician in a frenzy" ('The Weekend Australian', February 2-3 1985). In the same piece Lynn went searching for antecedents - and drew a virtual blank. One might suggest Goya, Bacon perhaps Boyd, but this would be misleading - Gary Willis is an original.

Gary began his career in the early 1970s as a conceptual artist, by the late 1970s he'd moved onto video, reaching wide audiences. 'Strategies for Goodbye' (with Eva Eden, nee Schramm) for example, has been shown in Paris, Tokyo, Berlin, Toronto, Los Angeles, as well as MOMA in New York.

Gary's inner journey has always been mirrored in his work. Post-New York, he shifted to two-dimensional work, laminating electrical tape onto plastic sheeting etc. By the mid-1980s he had moved solidly into oil on canvas. These early paintings attracted a lot of attention in Sydney. In a review of the National Gallery of Australia's recent acquisitions, for POL magazine, Grazia Gunn referred to Willis as a "bankable commodity". Unfortunately for his bank manager but fortunately for Gary's soul, the 1980s came and went with his overdraft and integrity well intact.

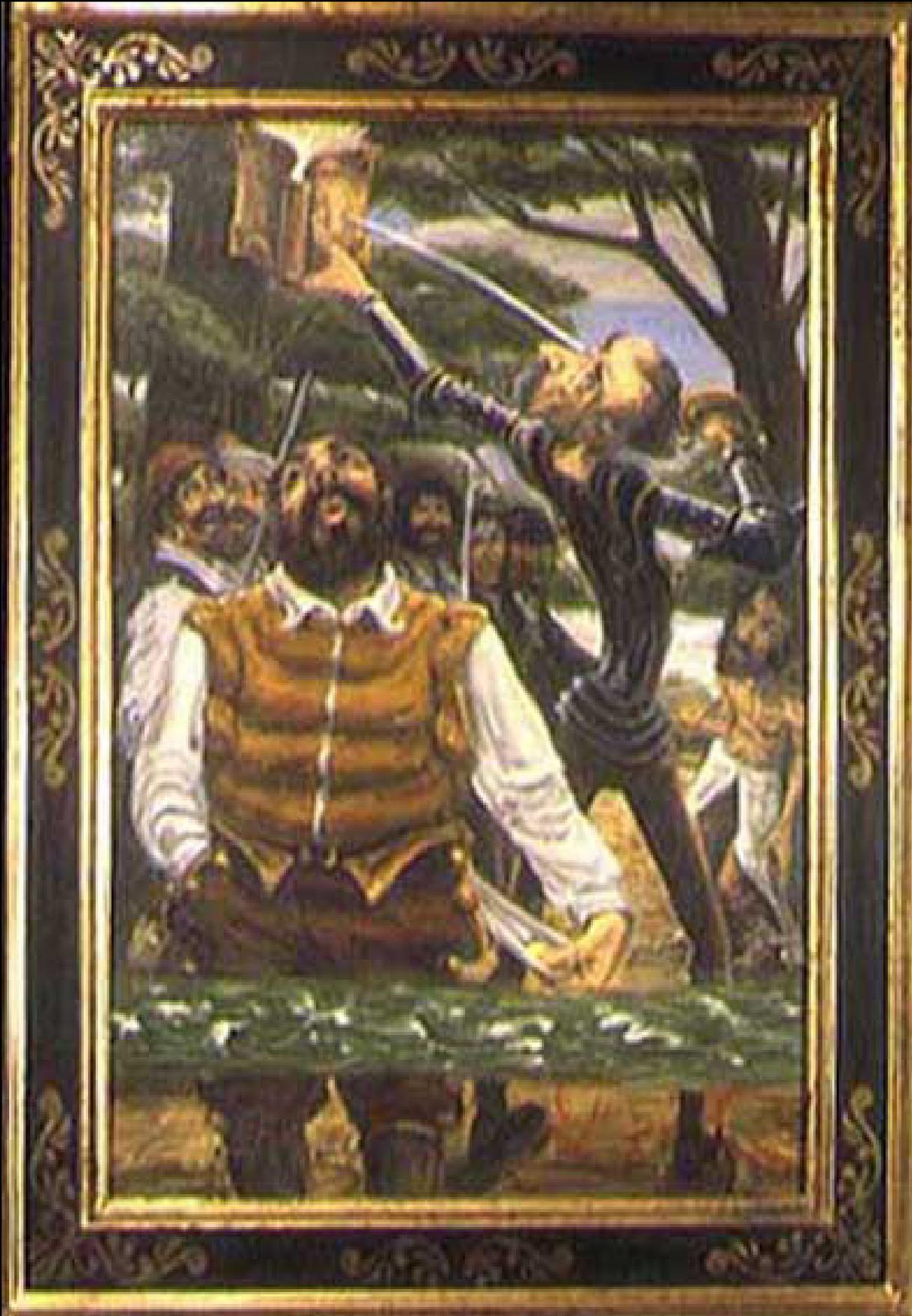
In 1984 he went to London, on a joint British-Australia Council Fellowship at Air & Space Studio. Exhibiting at the Air Gallery in London, the Portsmouth City Museum, and Performance Space in Sydney. He returned to Sydney for the rest of the 1980s, mainly showing with the Painters Gallery, before relocating back in London in 1990 where he stayed until 1998. Gary has enjoyed a number of exhibitions of his work in Europe and private collectors of his work include the British writer Jeanette Winterson, Hollywood designer Barbara Drake, and Arthur Boyd.

Late in 1982, Gary took up an artist-in-residency with Delfina Studios in southern Spain, where he embarked upon a series of paintings, etchings and drawings inspired by Cervantes' 'Don Quixote'. 'Don Quixote' has exerted an extraordinary influence over a wide range of artists ever since it appeared in the early Seventeenth Century. Cervantes struggled all his life with his Muse and failure, but towards his end, the masterwork emerged. It was instantly popular. Don Quixote and his faithful squire Sancho corresponding to the two archetypal male norms: the wizened acetic dreamer and the down-to-earth potbellied gourmand. Mark Twain acknowledged a debt to Don Quixote in his own classic Huckleberry Finn, while William Faulkner is reputed to have read Don Quixote once each year. Lionel Trilling claimed that "all prose fiction is a variation on the theme of Don Quixote".

The tale is written with such a light touch that the reader scarcely notices as it leaves the ground, sailing off into the uncharted heaven, in pursuit of Don Quixote's impossible dream and holy grail - the love of his ever more mythical Muse, the Dulcinea del Toboso. The strength of his obsession, verging as it must on madness, warps the reality around. And although he fails to reach his goal, his dream is fulfilled in spite of his defeat. Despite his lack of comprehension of the world and his refusal to acknowledge its conventions, the Don managed to enact a passage through it that defined him exactly as he imagined himself to be. Not the simple Senor Quesada he was born, but the noble 'Don Quixote de la Mancha', that high exemplar of knight errantry he had dreamed up for himself.

For Gary, Don Quixote has been a natural progression, although a journey through demanding terrain both physical and metaphysical. It is his energy and insight which lifts his Don Quixote far above the realm of simple illustration, taking both artist and viewer up up and away with the Don on his journey. His meditations upon this 'greatest of tales' have produced a lexicon of some of his finest work, all of which shows that Gary's own vocation is far from an impossible dream.

Larry Buttrose - London 1996



'Sancho Panza and the Bandits' oil on linen - Gary Willis 1995

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2 CORK STREET WX1 1PA

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