

Gary Willis
Identification Specific



'Matador Bullshit' - oil on cotton rag 70 cms x 50 cms - Gary WILLIS (London) 1991

La Galeria Pacifico
Amsterdam NL





'The Tin Drum' - oil on cotton rag - 70 cms x 50 cms - Gary WILLIS 1991

Voicing the Other

A Gary Willis painting can be as subtle as it is shocking. He deceptively manipulates a contravention of the modernist canon - the painterly and the kitsch - reflecting the inner thoughts we might recognise but rarely enact. Willis began his career as a painter at the Canberra School of Art, but completed his studies at Melbourne's conceptual art school, Preston Institute of Technology in 1972. He spent the next ten years doing event work, conceptual installations, performances, and making videotapes. He has exhibited widely within Australia and as far afield as Amsterdam, Munich, Paris, London, New York and Tokyo. His work is represented in many public collections within Australia.

Willis has always been something of a tearaway, prepared to lose blood in the name of art. Following a period spent in post-punk New York in the late 1970s (CB-GB's, Mudd Club, Chelsea Hotel, and Warhol associations) Willis returned to Australia to enact a 12-movement performance piece 'The Leopard', which echoed Joseph Beuys' 1972 performance piece 'Coyote'. 'The Leopard' was a reconstruction of a luminous psychedelic dream which captured the psychological impact of his time in New York 1978-79. 'The Leopard', co-performer Richard Boulez, quickly turns the tables on 'The Ringmaster'. In one scene we catch a glimpse of the Leopard whipping the Ringmaster into a frenzied running on the spot, through a venetian blind. This sequence ends with Willis, collapsing to the floor, but fast develops toward a live and bloody fight scene. Boulez is armed with a knife - Willis a chair. Blood pumps as the two tangle.

Another series which attempts to capture the spirit of that post-punk period is 'The Five Senses'; a suite of five 2D plastic pieces made of coloured electrical tape laminated into heavy plastic strips. They are; 'Feel Like Target', 'Tastes Like Goodbye', 'Sounds Like - YU DU', 'Smells Like Success', 'Looks Like It Is'. 'Feel Like Target' (Collection - National Gallery of Victoria) presents an image of his partner, Eva Schramm, appropriating the classic image of Marilyn Monroe with her dress blown up over a subway grate. Willis' model is bending over, but 'between the hairs and holes you come to recognise you are looking straight down the barrel of a gun,' explains Willis. This semiotic image ends in text 'Cream Baby Dream' marked out in yellow electrical tape. All five are dramatic however, despite the innovative use of plastics, the medium is not the message in Willis' work.

By the early eighties Willis was working exclusively in oils. In 1984 he was awarded the Australia Council 'London Studio' during which time his work was exhibited at the Air Gallery, London, and the Portsmouth City Museum.

Since his return to London, in 1990, he has been concerned with the interplay of surface and subject: the varying thickness' of oil paint, the quality of linen, the use of palette knives, the brushes but again, the medium is not the message in Willis' work. The subject of this London work remains the base material; the inner, vulnerable, protected self. In this regard Willis' work builds on a long tradition of figurative painting; Goya, German Expressionism, 'The Cobra Group', 'The Angry Penguins', 'The Antipodeans', 'Neo-Expressionism', 'Neo-Pop', although Willis's current work specifically references the painterly project of his patron - Arthur Boyd. Boyd, one of Australia's most significant modernist painters, is noted for working thick oil paint up into compelling images with his fingers and hands. Boyd has been a major influence since 1971 when, as a promising art student, Willis was first introduced to Australia's leading expressionist painter. However, despite his modernist influences, Willis maintains the post-modern perspective he forged in the heady days of the late 60s and early 70s, and resists the temptations of pure formalism.

'I don't intend to disturb' says Willis, reflecting on the unframed pieces strewn across the floor of his basement flat in the Boyd family's Highgate house. 'I push the image to a point of clarity, I keep pushing it until - aha - now I'm getting it - oh yes - ahh - and I keep pushing at it until I find that edge'. 'The process of painting doesn't interest me unless I can maintain an unconscious level of connection with the image. They are paintings which attempt to pinpoint the nexus of an individual artist's human experience - notions of good taste are irrelevant to this project.' As the oil paint is applied, the images evolve, repeatedly shifting levels, sifting thoughts, reconfiguring composition to hone the poignancy of the iconography. Eventually they begin to resolve themselves, rarely ending where they started. His finished works are frequently, but not exclusively, thick... and unframed can often be deceptively heavy.

While initially they take some time to decode, they can be compelling. 'Take 'A final glimpse of Eden' as an example; a glance - a smear of white paint - from a woman he had barely met, is interpreted as having 'enormous potential for the downfall of Eden'. A moment we all know and recognise in our own lives when love steps onto a departing train, requiring an instant, but momentous decision. 'I'm painting the real, cataloguing my own experience of the human condition, I figure this is the best that I have to offer and yes - it is deeply subjective. The model is flawed and not necessarily a good sample, but I'm the only model I've got.' If he could bore into someone else's heart, mind and soul to find that critical insight he would, but that can be difficult to arrange. 'They often take a long time to construct. A good painting is like a good poem, it is fluent in both its subject and its tongue. In the end a painting is not an image, but an object.' The paintings are as fluid as they are poetic, they are alive and volatile. 'I'm trying to make paintings which picture those experiences which are difficult to articulate, but are often more vivid than what we might be seeing at any time. I believe this is all I have to offer as an artist.'

Willis' work offers the intuitive voice of a passionate other. 'The human condition is rifled through with intuitions, but within the context of social protocols, it is often difficult to give voice to such feelings. My paintings offer an iconography of intuition, through their capacity to evoke a collective cultural unconscious they link us to a mytho-poetic experience and provoke a more vital sense of self. I believe this is the artist's job, it is a classical position.'

Although Willis has been an artist for more than 20 years, and painting for the last 10, the energy and intensity in both his own persona and the works he creates make it hard not to think of him as anything other than a 'young artist', albeit a very accomplished one. Many of these paintings are alive with a conceptual potency and capture the excitement of a lucid moment in oil. They 'stop' in the photographic sense, preserving the 'punctum' of an intuitive inner 'other'. It's as if the pathway from Willis' thought to the surface of paint was a camera with a very fast shutter speed, capturing in oil paint that critical intellectual action-shot.

David Langsam - London 1992



'While my Guitar Gently Weeps' - oil on cotton rag - Gary WILLIS (London) 1990



'Lettuce' - Oil on cotton rag - 70 cms x 50 cms - Gary Willis (London) 1992

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