

Gary Willis in SAARLAND



Gary WILLIS London - '97

'STAGE' Oil on Linen - (Private Collection)

stage - *n* **1.** platform on which plays are performed before an audience; **2.** surface on which an object is placed for inspection **3.**(figure of speech) the theatre, the dramatic artists profession **4.** scene of the action (*held the stage ~ quit the stage*): **hold the ~**, dominate the conversation **5.** point or period of development in process(*a critical stage; at this stage interruption occurred*) **6.** (regular) stopping place on a route, distance between two of these (*travelled by a series of stages*); **7. fare** ~, section of a journey) route for which a fixed fare is charged, stopping at the end of this ~. **8.** (Geol.) levels of strata, subdivision of series. **9.** (Electic) amplifying valve with associated equipment. **10.** section of rocket with separate engine, jettisoned when fuel is spent. **11.** ~ **coach**, (Historical) large closed vehicle running regularly between two places. **12.** ~ **craft**, skill or experience in staging for the theatre. **13.** ~ **fright**, nervousness in facing audience; especially for the first time. **14.** ~ **door**, artists or workman's entrance behind the stage, between the theatre and the street.

...like a masked figure drifting through time...

Following Willis' residency with Delfina Studios in Andalucia, Spain and subsequent DON QUIXOTE exhibition (Corbally Stourton Contemporary Art, Cork Street, London, 1995) Willis took up another theme loosely based on the European traditions of *the fool, le cirque, la carnivale, les saltimbanques, la commedia dell'arte*. Willis' choice of this theme was a self-conscious appropriation of a subject in European art. Furthermore, it is a fitting mask to Willis' current philosophic considerations. Willis is a vertical raider, claiming no language as native tongue and no culture as indigenous. He is a contextualist appropriating visual language and themes relevant to his own personal concerns, as well as his current environment, such that each body of work bears little resemblance to the previous. Willis has no one style. And this is the only reliable trait throughout all his work. Each of Willis' exhibitions have functioned ambiguously as installations. The laminated electrical tape on plastic sheeting pieces in DIAGRAMS 4 CLONES (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1981) reflect his post-punk experiences in down town New York. The aboriginal-esque markings with computer graphics on vast photographic landscape pieces, THE CENTRAL JOURNALS (Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne, 1982) are transcriptions of Willis' dreaming whilst in central Australia. THE FOUR SEASONS (Painter's Gallery, Sydney, 1986) was a declarative stand against an artists' dependency upon a singular pictorial device. Each of the large canvases are painted as if by different artists, employing a unique vocabulary of markings appropriate to the psychological intensity of each season.

'The death of the author', 'the third degree' and 'the simulacrum' are all catch phrases of post-modernism dismissing the notion of empirical cultural truth. The chameleon nature of Willis' work remains true to these theories and echoes the post-colonial concerns of Australian art practice in the late twentieth century. However, rather than quoting individual pieces, Willis appropriates an entire genre and misplace himself within it, as its undiscovered contemporary. Whilst Willis' practice can clearly be seen within the context of late twentieth century cultural theory, each painting also stands for itself, illuminating the artist's concern with the human condition. Like a masked figure drifting through time, Willis' work appears in perfect costume, leaving behind him a trail of clues which refer not so much to his identity as to his condition.

The current disguise Willis chooses is one influenced by his present circumstance as a foreign painter in Europe, a performer disempowered by his marginality. It is the masque of *les saltimbanques*, the misfits and the gypsies who have drifted through Europe over the centuries, the clowns, the fools, the tumblers, the jugglers, the fire eaters, the showmen, these quacks and charlatans who stay alive by their wits. Be they the Bips, Groks, Beppos and Bozzos of the circus or the Harlequins and Columbines, the Punchinellos and Pierrots of the *commedia dell'arte*. These figures are classic images in the arts from Pagliacci to Petrushka and artists including the Nain brothers, Jacques Callot, Domenico Tiepolo, Watteau, Goya, Daumier, Picasso, Beckman, Boyd and now Willis have all represented some aspect of this alluring subject.

Never was this subject so popular as it was during the *fin de siècle*. *Le Cirque Medrano* had attracted a large enough audience to take up permanent residence in Paris and its daring performances and its spectacular visuals thrilled many of the artists of the day including Lautrec, Degas, Derain, Bonnard, Rouault, Cezanne, Chagall and Picasso who attended regularly. They were not only attracted to the circus, but also to the performers themselves. This interaction of poets, performers, painters, writers and intellectuals created the exciting and famous bohemian cafe society of the left bank. Lautrec and Degas documented the world around them representing not only the circus, but also other popular entertainment of the day such as the cafes, the music halls and opera, the races, the brothel and the ballet. Whilst Picasso was also naturally influenced by the bohemian sub-culture of *le cirque*, the manner in which it manifested in his work was much more poetic. Picasso internalizes the theme, whilst doing so drawing upon the entire history of the subject, particularly appropriating Daumier's LES SALTIMBANQUES.

Almost one hundred years later, the *fin de siècle* comes around again. Willis' choice of the subject is not merely a celebration of this often sentimental subject. His CARNIVALE work is oddly misplaced in a very old fashioned and quite a kitsch way, the images self-consciously stand right outside the realms of painting as decoration. For Willis it is a question of taste. In the late twentieth century the canons of good taste have placed painting in the service of architecture and design, stripping painting of its complex vocabulary, reducing it to a sheer flat existential surface. "Destroy the living power of the image and you have humbled and humiliated the artist, made him a blind and powerless Samson fit only to grind corn for the philistines," as Bernard Smith predicted in the Antipodean Manifesto.

The kitsch aspects of some of Willis' Carnivale paintings certainly offend modernist pretensions and Willis takes great delight in this: 'I understand that sentimentality is a taboo and quite frankly I often use it as a self-conscious stab at the aesthetic high ground, the very grounds upon which painting died or at least lost its tongue. My work is driven by the human condition, sentimentality is certainly one aspect of it, not necessarily desirable but common enough.'

These paintings come loaded with a critique of art practice in the late twentieth century. *Les Saltimbanques* and the harlequinade of the Blue and Rose periods were the last major subjects Picasso painted before his revolutionary *Les Femmes d'Alger*. In taking on this theme, Willis deliberately quotes painting at its last point before its deconstruction, which began with *Les Femmes d'Alger* and gave rise to the end of the narrative, reducing painting to a single eloquent passage of painted surface and shifting its muse from poetry to music. In appropriating this era in the history of painting, Willis points painting back to that brief moment when painting swayed to the muse of poetry and in doing so maintained its full capacity as a language, dense and rich in both surface and imagery, thus opening up the language of painting again to enable a return a full vocabulary, in face of its current critique and collapse of credibility.

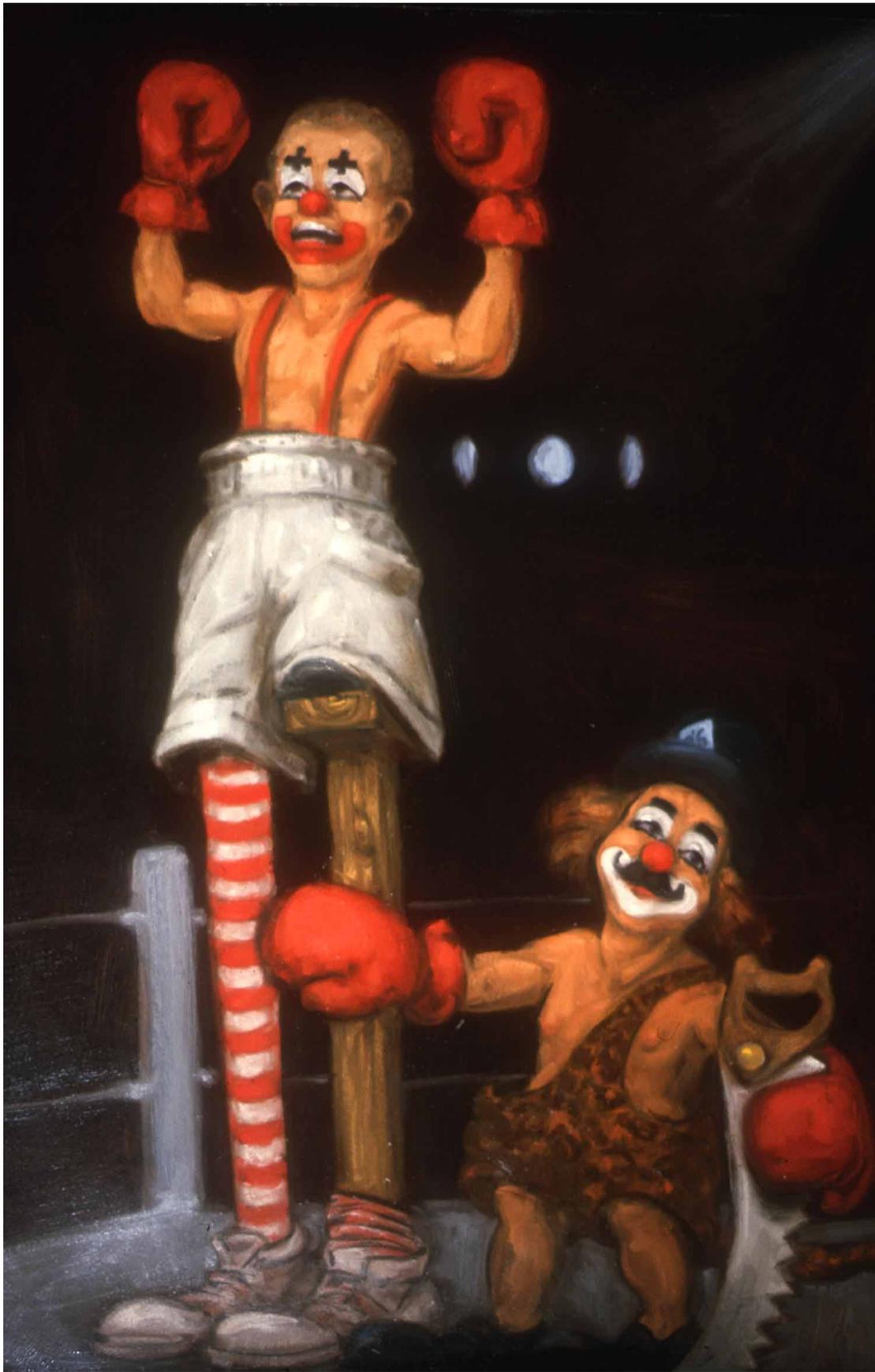
Willis is first and foremost a painter. He feels passionate about this medium and its demise. The unfashionability of painting in these post-object times has led to several generations of artists who are unfamiliar with the complex technology of painting. The medieval workshop system which lasted well into the late nineteenth century fostered apprentices. Masters divulged their secrets and imparted the wisdom of their experience. To be able to paint well such intensive training is essential. Under the patronage and encouragement of Arthur Boyd, Willis has locked himself into the basement of Boyd's London studio. No longer the Duchampian disciple, he is now the pre-modern apprentice. For the last seven years he has lived for the paint and canvas, reclaiming and reinventing this archaic technology for himself. Life is now stirring in that basement and a hard won eloquence is beginning to arise. Beneath the nose of that grand tradition, those pots and brushes are beginning to dance, and Willis like Mickey Mouse in *THE MASTER'S APPRENTICE*, is intoxicated with his new found command.

Bring on the clowns. What is Willis referring to? Who are these fools? Clues are to be found in the origins of the subject, these outsiders, these drifters, drumming up an audience, the spruikers, les saltimbanque singing for their supper, Harlequin and Columbine playing out their parodies of love's follies, *la commedia dell'arte*, *le cirque*, The strong man and the fat lady, the freaks, the lion tamer and the flying trapeze, amaze us with their dare-devil acts. The artist is the performer and the performance is the painting. A static two-dimensional object seducing the audience's attention keeping it spell-bound and inspiring a quickening look. Here we find Willis playing the fool making light of what are essentially serious matters. *The Illusionist's* disillusioning little trick, *The Escapist* skipping in and out of the bonds of love; '...she loves me, she loves me not...'. *L'Arlecchino's* slack act, his inability to juggle three lovers' handkerchiefs at once. All making dolts of themselves bringing our attention to the folly of our own humanity.

As his masters are the pre-modernists, these CARNIVALE paintings could be passed off as retrospective pieces, painted by an artist caught in a time warp. Yet, unlike many of the artists who have worked with this theme at the beginning of this century and whose work were glimpses of the world around them. Willis' pieces are more poetic in nature. The images are an interpretation of his emotional landscape and not depictions of his physical environment. Whilst Willis draws upon traditional figures such as the Auguste, Pierrot and Punch, he also combines these classic sources with his own fantastic inventions such as LA PRIMAVERA, HARPO and the monocyclist NEW MOON. Willis' unique combination of style, imagery and mythology leaves clues to the fact that he is a late twentieth century painter. These slight of hand tricks stand outside the context of time, the veritas of his imagery remains just as true for this century as the last. In reclaiming the *fin de siècle* for the millennium, Willis' paintings transport us into a poetic theatre of the imagination, where the lines between reality and illusion, between the mythic and the historic and between appropriation and invention are willfully blurred.

ON WITH THE SHOW !

Kate Challis
Germany 1998



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'BIG BUDDY and the LITTLE TIGER' Oil on Linen (Private Collection)

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