

SCOTT MCCRACKEN NOTES TOWARDS AN ESSAY ON VICTOR WILLING

It is clear that painting offers us all a way to make a mark on a ground. Some marks will remain while others become lost over time. What do we see when we look at Victor Willing's paintings now?

Victor Willing depicts a variety of assortments: domestic objects, rigid structures, plants, walls and planes, geometric and biomorphic forms and shapes all co-existing within barren solitary spaces resembling deserts and beaches, or unfurnished, empty rooms. Although he avoids any direct representation of the human figure, his paintings do embody an unassailable presence. It is a presence that cannot be negated.

In the earlier paintings, such as *Place* (1976-78; the first painting Willing made after a vision), *Mud* (1979), and *Night* (1978), we can surmise that there must be an inhabitant of the scenes – forever absent but inevitably collecting and constructing, although to what purpose remains ambiguous. Is it to make sense of something: to create a kind of order – a system – out of the disparate components collected? Willing remarked that his paintings were “scenarios in which something has happened or is about to happen.” His sentiments and his paintings express a theatricality, but we are not afforded the drama of the performance. All that remains before us are the props. They occupy the unpopulated sets, replacing the positions of the actors who have exited stage left.

In later works such as *Sphinx* (1982), *Judge* (1982), *Boatman* (1985), and the *Callot* series (1983), the forms become autonomous and quasi-anthropomorphic; they do not replace the actors but rather, are the actors. To conform to the conditions of the tableau, the spectator becomes walled off from the unfolding action. Considering the paintings in this tradition, they are more reminiscent of *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) where the curtains open only momentarily to reveal characters standing motionless and silent; the scenes carefully staged and dramatically lit. Willing's paintings, much like *tableaux vivants*, are still rather than static and carry the potential for kinesis without ever depicting it. Unlike *tableaux vivants*, we are given more than a brief moment to encounter these entities; they are forever fixed in their positions, defiant and unwieldy.

In *Griffin* (1982), we could be looking into the studio of a sculptor (Willing initially trained as a sculptor before arriving at painting). The primary subject of *Griffin* is a tripod armature sitting on a small table, holding two wings that stretch diagonally across the upper half of the picture. White feathers lay dispersed on the ground, either having fallen off or waiting to be attached. Is this object in the process of being deconstructed – of being taken apart bit by bit? Our view of the griffin is of a beast that is only partially built – still lacking the lion's body and the eagle's head. It is incomplete, but so too is Willing's painting. Both sculpture and painting appear provisional. The ground below the armature is only partly filled in: the white gesso on the canvas is visible here, mingled with a few stray feathers which have fallen outside the space containing the more illusionistically painted image. While *Griffin* plays with the ambiguity between sculpture and painting through its subject and surface, another painting, *Judge*, plays with the pictorial ambiguity between shape and form.



Opposite:
Griffin
1982
Oil on canvas
250 x 200 cm





Callot: Harridan
1983
Oil on canvas
200 x 220 cm

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Meaning, for Willing, was an afterthought, coming only after his paintings were finished and titled. His paintings are associative: our minds wander along different arabesque routes rather than rely on interpreting any singular narrative. Willing presents us with a shifting *mise-en-scène*: these are paintings that should be perceived through sight and experienced through the body. No matter how we arrive at them, we are coerced back into the position of the observer – as a fellow witness to corroborate, contradict, or refute Willing’s account of events. Looking inside from outside. Looking outside from in. The metaphoric grounds are continually shifting underfoot. Our perspective leaves us seeing the objects as caught somewhere between bodily living forms, and insentient sculptural constructions. We are always caught between such dichotomies. In the cast of characters, we are given the role of the unreliable narrator: fact opposes conjecture, subjectivity opposes objectivity. We are watching and waiting for a moment that will never arrive or has already passed by. The heat and dryness of his pictured scenes are counteracted by the wet fluidity of the loose painted marks. Water, earth, air, and fire. Something deep-rooted and elemental that gives rise to the primordial – something old and necessary, but also transient and elusive.

Is it possible that the invisible fourth wall has indeed been shattered, as when Manet allowed his subjects to address their viewers directly? In *Rien*, a similar painting to *Griffin*, Willing depicts a half-composed body perched on a stool, legs splayed outwards. A black rectangle – what could be a chalkboard or a painter’s easel – stands on two triangular supports. This blackboard is without inscription except for a faint grid. A serpentine belt, centrally placed in *Rien*’s foreground, cuts across the shaky rectangular frame

of the overall painting’s initial drawing – a charcoal line which marks out the imaginary window that Willing claimed to be looking through. The belt curls out onto the foreground margin that frames the paintings central action, breaking open his window frame conceit.

Willing’s spatial arrangement of form and colour activates and breathes life into these paintings. In one of his early *Stepladders* from 1976, orange sizzles next to sharp green while earthy brown diffuses the high tonal value of the orange-green juxtaposition.

The paintings are larger, heavier versions of his drawings. In spite of their monumental scale, or perhaps because of it, they are efficient, direct, and reasonably economic. They are ambitious but in an unexpected way – it’s not the scale of the paintings that impresses (although the large format does afford them a certain presence when viewed in real life). Their strength lies in their matter-of-factness; their candidness. The paint is never used to over-describe or to fully obliterate the few examples of pentimento which are still detectable on and under the surface. This doesn’t mean that his paintings are not restless: they are. A still restlessness.

Distance is an important consideration within these paintings, or to be more specific, distance that can be measured by, and within the reach of the body. With any painting, scale and dimension govern how we approach and engage with it. Willing’s forms and spaces are depicted within a human life-size scale. A bodily scale. Our bodies existing outside the painting perceive of their visionary bodies inside the painting. The scale of Willing’s works requires an appropriate distance from which to view their totality – to see how the singular picture holds together – their individual elements suspended in the moment. Then

Preceding pages:
Left: **Judge**
1982
Oil on canvas
250 x 200 cm

Right: **Aha, So There You Are**
1980
Oil on canvas
200 x 200 cm

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Boatman
1985
Oil on canvas
220 x 220 cm

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they draw us in closer. We inevitably stand before them examining their surfaces. We feel that we could physically walk into them, cross the threshold of the picture plane, and inhabit the scenes ourselves.

The earlier works are tangible and rigid, as if we can reach in and grab hold; the later paintings less so, their solidity having diminished. They feel incorporeal – spectral entities that could have been wished into existence and, if

we concentrate hard enough, wished out of existence just as quickly.

An edge is a boundary that separates one thing from another. Willing works with the notion of boundaries in his paintings as, again and again, we can locate numerous polarising antagonisms at play: form and formlessness, figure and ground, the animate and the inanimate, the inside and the outside, the complete and the incomplete. At what point does one tip over into becoming the other and



Rien
1980
Oil on canvas
200 x 183 cm

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how do we perceive it when it happens? The motif that serves as the basis for such thoughts is the horizon line. It appears, in some form or other, in almost all of Willing's works from this period (as well as in some of the earlier figure paintings). This recurring horizon should suggest distance – of looking through and beyond – but the pictorial space in his paintings is, with a few exceptions, shallow and up-front; pushing outwards as the assemblages stand in front of walls and vertical planes. A backdrop.

He has a particular penchant for corners, leaving the entities trapped. Space and time have become displaced. There is very little information given about where these incidents are occurring – the settings are liminal and we struggle to orientate ourselves. They are sites where

the inside and the outside appear to exist simultaneously; a disintegration of a nebulous division between an interior (psychological) space and an exterior (physical) space. They should not be characterised as utopian or dystopian, nor do they sit in-between in what could be thought of as a quotidian world. They are closer in nature to the heterotopia – a parallel space of a world within a world, one that is typified in locations such as prisons, ships, museums. The propped planes in *Sphinx* and *Boatman* are almost museological – of something old and archaic – while the free-standing, precariously balanced shapes in *Callot: Judge* resemble a makeshift obelisk. It is an animism of sorts. It is the proposed-but-not-visible presence of the 'other' that renders the forms as prospective monuments – as markers that symbolise



Place (triptych)
1976-78
Oil on canvas
191 x 426 cm

Casa das Histórias
Paula Rego in Cascais



Backbreaker - Scott McCracken
2018
Oil on canvas
60 x 45 cm

Courtesy of the artist

something, or someone, that was once there but now is gone – each construction charged with an unidentifiable and unknowable essence or spirit. Within the paintings, absence and presence are felt but they can't be readily situated. Collectively, these abiotic structures could be described in ways that are redolent of Richard Serra's *Verblist*: standing, leaning, balancing, hanging, floating, swaying, contorting, stretching, blowing. Breathing. Waiting. Waiting for a moment of activity; for a catalyst.

Geometry is a recurring element that Willing manifests in different idioms. It is referenced in the background as a supplementary motif, as in *Place* where notations of shapes have been engraved or scratched into the wall. The shapes of *Place* re-appear several years later in *Three into Two Won't Go*, but this time they are now the focus: a sphere, a cube and a pyramid are clustered together, while on the wall behind, there is the same diagrammatic confluence of the circle, square, and triangle. Squaring the circle. It is a symbol, one that can be linked

to the mathematical, the alchemical, and the philosophical. Colloquially, the phrase 'squaring the circle' means trying to achieve the impossible. In Willing's paintings, there is always the potential for an inversion. So, the impossible becomes the possible, and squaring the circle flips to circling the square. Circling the square is a fitting analogy for how one makes a painting, as the four enclosed edges of the rectangular support are themselves a geometric form that has to be negotiated, worked around, circled before each move each mark is made.

It is clear that painting offers us all a way to make a mark on a ground. Some marks will remain while others become lost over time. What do we see when we look at Victor Willing's paintings now? A pictorial space that projects outwards, assemblages frontal and defiant, still lifes still living and breathing after all this time, suffused with rich hues, bathed in an intense light, and rendered in scribbly, unlaboured marks. These are paintings that have travelled. They continue to travel. To travel light.