

Introduction

"Part of my past follows me on four legs, and bites my necktie, resulting in frayed shirts and ruffled hair"*

Peter Wilson is an artist who for some years has been preoccupied with his own past, and has frequently referred back to it in his paintings and writings as a sort of exorcism. Up to about 1980, this took the form of highly coloured images with an intensely charged atmosphere referring to his experiences as a teenage gents' outfitter in Glasgow. The images he generated then have a feeling that some sort of crisis is about to be reached, and leap off the canvas and wedge themselves, like unwanted guests, firmly in the mind. There is a special sort of disturbing quality about them in the looseness of the paint, the bonelessness of the figures and the deliberate lack of precision in expression and gesture - a breaking of the "rules" of the medium - that makes them paintings first and foremost and narratives afterwards. The crucial importance of paint and colour in Wilson's work comes over in his writing, too, where images try to escape from the printed page and fling themselves onto a canvas:

"Pull a button off a cuff - rip a seam apart. Pretend it's made of paper. Spread some Alizarin Crimson on a piece of toast, watch it stain the old enamel teeth. Soak some Cobalt Blue on a face flannel, add hot water and rub it round your neck. Squeeze Emerald Green on to a toothbrush and go up and down "

Wilson operates at the violent end of the narrative tradition in British painting, alongside the *Rake's Progress* of Hogarth and Hockney, the subject paintings of John Martin, Fuseli and Dadd, and some of the paintings of Carel Weight. There is a strong touch of the theatre, too, in Wilson's work, particularly in his concentration on the dramatic moment, the pause and the silence. His use of stock "characters", such as the pushy salesman, the bowler-hatted gent and the nervous young man, is a positive theatrical device which has parallels in the exaggerations and the absurd in the work of Tom Stoppard, Dennis Potter, Tony Hancock and the Pythons and in pantomime. At the same time, Wilson consciously or unconsciously gives his paintings a distinctly period air. They drift about set somewhere between the wars and peopled with figures who look dangerously as if they are about to burst into a number from "Pennies from Heaven". Their ambiguous sense of time and their heated, unreal colours, "distances the pictures and the situations developed in them from the viewer.

Wilson did not begin his art training until he was 20. For two and a half years after leaving school in Glasgow he worked in a gents' outfitter, and in 1960 went to Glasgow School of Art. His formal training ended in 1965, and since then he has worked in performance, street theatre and film-making, as well as painting and printmaking. In the second half of the 1970's, after a brief flirtation with abstraction, Wilson's paintings began to deal firmly with figure and animal subjects.

His first preoccupation in figure painting at this time was with subjects drawn from the mysterious worlds of the gents' outfitter and the city

office. **In** this group there is *The Fitting* (1979) where a pin-striped, Brylcreemed, after-shaved assistant comes too close to a worried customer, and wonders if he is being served. The *Tie Salesman* (1978) stands in front of a line of drawers and tie racks and shoots a significant glance to the right. A characteristic of the Salesman paintings is the tense relationship between the figures and the very tight space in which they are set. Frequently, as in *Tie Salesman*, *Time Keeping* (1979) or *The Boss is Coming* (1979) there is the lurking suspicion that we are witnessing merely an entr'acte, and that, beyond the dense patterning behind the figures, more activity of even greater significance is going on.

From time to time Wilson gives us glimpses of the events that we feel we might be missing, but even so he is only pulling off one skin of the onion, and there are greater depths beyond left unexplained. *For the First Time in his Life he Seemed Vulnerable* (1980) shows us an unhappy man with prominent and nervous hands (notice how important hands and gestures are in Wilson's work) with a snarling mongrel on one side of him, a naked man sidling up to him on the other and, behind a background curtain, a pair of significant feet. Images of this sort are essentially rituals whose power comes from the sparseness of the explanation given by the artist. Wilson has made a number of images in this category, and among the most potent of them are his etchings, such as *Higher Management Training Scheme* (1980), and *Private Practice* and *Tea Time in the State a/the Nation* series (1979).

These figure compositions explore similar territory to John Davies' sculptures and to some of the drawings and prints of Glen Baxter and Chris Orr. They also share the themes that Wilson additionally develops in his performances. As he has said in a recent interview with Adrian Lewis, Wilson likes to think of his performances as "in some ways providing footnotes to the paintings. People in the audience have said to me that they've found them quite illuminating, that it enables them to gain an added insight into what's going on in the paintings." Wilson performs with his paintings hung on the walls around him, and makes cross-references between them as part of the performance. **In** one performance, for example, he treated *Tie Salesman* as a mirror in which to do up his neck tie. He spoke to the character in the picture, and took himself back to the time when he, too, sold ties. At other times, Wilson will hang two blackboards at either side of the performance area and draw heads on the boards, developing their characters and their relationships in dialogue as he goes along. As the performance progresses one or other of the characters - salesman or customer - will become dominant, although Wilson does not know which it will be until it happens. The different aspects of Wilson's work, performance, painting and printmaking, are tightly interlinked, and ideas born in one medium may well be developed in another. He uses his performances, additionally, as a means of releasing tension and to calm himself down.

A second major theme in Wilson's work is his animal paintings. Animal subjects are notoriously difficult for artists to pull off successfully, as they have been so laden with clichés and preconceptions since the 19th Century. *Elk* and *White Fronted Goose* (both 1978) were among his first single figure animal paintings, and

in the summer of 1981 Wilson returned to the subject again. He lives in the Rutland countryside, with farm animals at hand, so subjects such as *Pigs in Sunlight and Mud* and *Sussex Hen with Chicks* (both 1981) are around him daily. These are both very big paintings, and their subjects, particularly the hen and chicks, are vastly larger than in real life. In *Blue Tit and Milk Bottles* (1982 - unfinished at the time of writing) the gigantic scale takes on a new significance. The bottles are seen from below, and the perspective gives them the shape and power of cooling towers seen from the ground. With this idea in mind, the blue tit takes on a frightening and dramatic new role, and makes the painting suddenly disturbing. At the time of writing, Wilson was contemplating adding the hand of a postman or milkman on the right of the painting, and this new domestic element, on a gigantic scale, would even further increase the threat in the painting.

Whether the hand appears or not, mention of it leads us on to the third theme in Wilson's work, namely the paintings in which animals and people appear on equal terms. Examples of these are *Affectionate but Tame* (1981), in which a woman blows a kiss to her dog, and *The Nature Lesson* (1981) where a Canada Goose flies away over the heads of two figures. In the paintings in this group, Wilson is exploring a different sort of relationship to that between people which he looked at in the Salesman group. By including animals, particularly dogs, in the paintings, it is immediately clear who is the dominant character, and Wilson is able to explore the theme of control. *Believe Me I Know Best* (1981) has a neat middle-aged man removing a ball from his dog. This echoes and makes a pun on the two visible eyeballs of the protagonists who glare steadily at each other, and all three elements together create a tight and crucial triangle around which the composition of the painting revolves.

The period quality in the work gives a sense of déjà vu to many of Wilson's figures. Some of them are invented, but the majority come from illustrations in colour supplements, part-works, encyclopedias and the out-dated sort of instruction manual that can always be found for 10p outside second hand bookshops. One such book, *50 Years with Dogs*, written in the 1920's by Colonel E. H. Richardson and Mrs. Richardson, has been culled mercilessly of its ready-made images for Wilson to adapt and slot into his paintings. *Believe Me* and *Breaking In/Locked Out* (1982), for example, began here. The woman in *The Nature Lesson* is adapted from another source, a photograph of Gracie Fields with her pekinese, found in another of Wilson's favourite source-books. Charles Cochrane appears in *Every Dog has his Day* (1981) and Bertram Mills in *Between Employment and Enjoyment* (1981). It is no coincidence that these characters come from the world of entertainment, or that Wilson openly identifies them. Their presence is evidence that in his recent paintings he is moving away from using his own experience as a starting point, but is rather using figures which are part of the experience of a vast mass of people. By giving these familiar figures abstruse roles to play in his paintings, Wilson is further underlining his works' essential strangeness.

Peter Wilson's work, alongside that of contemporaries such as Anthony Green, Jeffrey Camp and John Bellany, represents a return to a tradition of ambiguous and teasing narrative in painting that

was a forbidden area in the late 1960's and 1970's during the heyday of the Untitled abstract. Recent exhibitions, including *Narrative Painting* at the Arnolfini in Bristol in 1979, *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy in 1980, the Arts Council's touring exhibition *Fragments against Ruin* (1981/82) and Carel Weight's touring retrospective (1982), are gradually bringing the public's attention to new paintings that, while operating entirely visually, nevertheless have a strong narrative thread. If this is one sign of art beginning to involve its audience, another is the development of Artist in Residence schemes in galleries in many parts of Britain. Wilson has just completed a three month period as Artist in Residence at the Ferens in HULL, and this exhibition is a record and a celebration of that time.

The smell of wet paint should be the most natural thing for a visitor to expect in a gallery, and that it comes as a shock is perhaps a symptom of the gulf that has developed over the years between the artist and the public, and between the making and the showing of art. Artists' residencies will help to bridge this gulf, and the work of Peter Wilson and figurative painters of his generation represents a changed climate to that which, in 1953, made Winifred Nicholson paint out her contribution to an exhibition in Festival of Britain year because, as she confessed (to me) in 1977, "Ben thought it was too literary."

James Hamilton

*From "Painting Song" by Peter Wilson, in *Menagerie*, page 18, published March 1979.