No Hard Feelings

As Bill drove the hired Lancia insecurely through the crowded streets ... he was stunned by the variety of human personality. All were constructed of molecules, genetically encoded ... A street of Saturday morning shoppers, thought Bill, produces more genetic possibilities than all the stars in the milky way, than the ultimate prime number, yet their obsessions remain trivial - the building society, the bills, the toilet paper and crinkled-edged oven-ready chips - as though they cannot bear to face the dazzle of infinity.

David Benedictus[1]

Only dilettantes try to be universal; a real artist knows that he's connected with a certain people.

Isaac Bashevis Singer[2]

By keeping his eyes down, as it were, and concentrating on the minutiae of trivial human interaction, Peter Wilson is able to touch on some fundamental aspects of being alive. His psycho-dramas can be enjoyed simply as ironic autobiographies, but they also function as allegories or moral tales whose deeper, symbolic significance can only be unravelled little by little.

The atmosphere of his paintings can be so chokingly intense that one feels as trapped inside the storyline as one of the protagonists. The sensation is comparable to a day flavoured by a powerful dream, its mood and images lingering to remain as real as actual occurrences.

Conversely one's dreams often borrow material from the day, moulding it into a symbolic structure to encapsulate new meanings - each night you write your own play or direct your own film, as it were. Wilson's pictures function in much the same way - as heightened versions of ordinary events charged with symbolic significance and, especially in the early work, slanted to mirror the perceptions of a young man just establishing his identiry and position in the world.

Based on his own life, they are "a bit Joe Ortonish. I've just been reading his biography *Prick up Your Ears.*[3] It's set in the sixties and is the story of someone from the provinces on the make.,,4 Peter Wilson comes from Glasgow and the paintings are permeated by a stifling claustrophobia that echoes the limited horizons of cul-de-sac provincialism.

He had left school at sixteen with no qualifications and gone to work as a salesman in a gents' outfitters. "I fell out of school but as soon as I got into that job I began to wake up." The escape came via art school, and after a decade spent painting abstracts the work began to focus on his childhood environment and on those three years, from 1956-59, spent selling socks, ties and underwear, and fitting men's suits. "I think of it as the revenge factor - you want to get your own back on those suits!" These early dramas usually take place in the confined spaces of kitchens and suburban sitting rooms or in the menswear shop. "I wanted to make paintings about myself rather than about broad stripes of colour. At first I did a lot of drawing. *The Tie Salesman* (1978) was one of the first of the paintings. I'm the protagonist in it, the victim, the person struggling to overcome the situation. But I'm completely down and can't do anything about it - the helpless creature dreaming of escape and fantasising that the tie in his hand is really a saxophone which he is playing."

The lonely salesman smiles sycophantically out from behind his counter as he demonstrates his wares to the customer/viewer. But behind the obligatory charm there's a wildness and desperation. His expression and bearing suggest a trapped animal made to perform tricks for a circus audience. The salesmen pictures are far more, though, than a simple complaint about the frustrations of a dead-end job. Rather like a Pinter play or Bunuel's film *Los Olvidados* they are fables and an indictment of a way of life which offers few options or challenges and little hope, that stifles initiative, narrows expectations and dulls creativity. In his pictures those ill-fitting suits are like a livery indicating limited potential and the small-mindedness that it engenders. In *The Fitting* (1978), for example, a hapless customer is trapped in the enfolding arms of a salesman. The unwelcome embrace mirrors the confinement of the "civilising" suit, which he is trying on for size, and of the lifestyle that requires it.

Anger is, however, tempered by wit, irony and humorous self-deprecation. The sharp eye that sees the warts on other people's faces also recognises that its owner comes from the same milieu. The people in all the early pictures may be ugly, pompous, opinionated or deceitful, but they are also the friends, relatives and neighbours of his

The Fitting 1978
Oil on canvas, 122 x 122 ems

childhood. "The people are not objects of derision. I identify with them and see parts of myself in them." He is also in the room with them watching their antics and engaging in their plans, albeit quizzically and with an awareness of their absurdity and lack of realism. And in the limitations and shortcomings of his cast of characters _ the majority of them men - he also recognises his own.

Nor is the shopper in the gents' outfitters simply the victim of a role that has been thrust upon him. It's more complex than that. Vanity and self-importance play their part, as well as cowardice, in fostering the desire to conform and to be respectable. **In** the drawing *The Boss is Coming* (1979) the inhibiting factor is identified as someone further up the hierarchy, responsible for keeping the two employees in line. Being outside the picture, however, the boss becomes as much a mental image as a physical constraint. The poignancy of the drawing comes from one's recognition of him as the parental figure whom we internalise as a symbol of authority, watching over us and judging our actions. Wilson's people are all afflicted by guilt. Their protestant upbringing ensures that the super-egos of the two young shop assistants will function on overdrive; repression is so integrated into their personality structure, that the actual boss is scarcely necessary to enforce obedience.

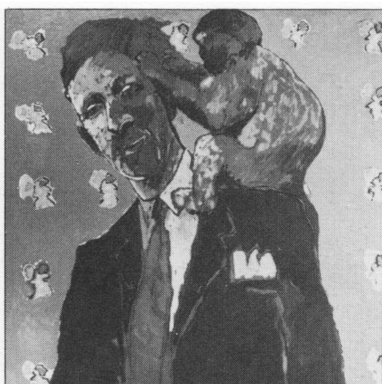
But Wilson's pictures do not take an entirely negative view. His narratives also applaud people's brave attempts to establish room for themselves and to find adequate ways of functioning within the limited scope that they are offered. Yet because his people are trapped as much by self-censorship as by external pressures and constraints, a profound sense of impotence permeates the pictures, which reflects his characters' inability to seize the initiative or to break loose. The intensity and rage in the eyes of the older employee in *The Boss is Coming* suggest that rebellion is fermenting there, and in paintings like *Egg Management* (1979) elaborate plots are being hatched around the kitchen table to embark on some fancy marketing strategies vis a vis the retailing of eggs.

Yet one suspects that the plans are little more than ill-fated fantasies which the protagonists scarcely believe in themselves. An air of theatricality, of producing rabbits out of hats, makes the discussions seem little more than party pieces - entertainment or escapist release rather than serious proposals. Facial expressions and gestures seem exaggerated or ill-suited and this discordance between idea and expression implies a lack of conviction or a malfunction somewhere in the system, which will cause the whole scheme to be abortive. "The paintings are about human folly - or I would like to think that they are. It's a question of finding the appropriate language to convey that."

It's remarkable that one can glean so much narrative detail and subtle insight from static and silent images. Peter Wilson also works as a performance artist, extending the paintings, as it were, into real time and space. The wit of his performances comes from his extraordinary powers of observation and his ability to mimic a gesture or reproduce a facial expression. When it comes to painting, he is able to translate these same perceptions into images whose nuances define character or suggest an interaction. He scarcely ever works from photographs or the model, preferring to rely on his visual memory and bodily intelligence. "The salesman pictures were done 'blind'. I drew a figure, put another beside it, then filled in the ground or context. It was like writing a story really."

Wilson's drawing is sometimes reminiscent of David Hockney's, that other, more famous, provincial- both belong to the narrative tradition, descended from Hogarth, of social commentary - but Wilson's people are less naive and more cunning than Hockney's. It would not be pleasant to wake up inside a Wilson drama amongst characters who seem petty and self-seeking as well as frustrated, and who belong in the emotional wasteland of a Fassbinder film or in the neurotic world of a Pinter play with its emotional blockage and poor communication. Smiles have hardened into grimaces, teeth are bared ready for a snarl; eyes stare with blank indifference at the viewer or are frightened, obsequious or suspicious. Hands are, one imagines, damp with the cold sweat of guilt or embarrassment, while fingers seem almost out of control - indulging in sleight-of-hand trickery.

For these characters are complex. A host of unacknowledged feelings hovers at the edges of the social smile. The hatchet in the hand, the monkey on the shoulder or the



Well Groomed 1979/80
Collcrion of the Arts Council of Great Britain

wolf under the table hint at suppressed urges, conflicting desires and mixed motives; while the spontaneity that has been stifled by acceptable codes of conduct is given expression in domestic pets. Snakes and dogs exemplify sensuality and other libidinal urges; parrots hint at the taming process which leads to conformity and mounted stags heads are the lifeless remnants of once healthy animal instincts.

The fiercely patterned wallpaper of these cluttered rooms has been witness to generations of imprinting, while these table cloths have become the arena for behavioural studies in which exploitation is passed on down the chain. Birds and animals, especially snakes, dogs, chickens and parrots, are put through their paces and are, like their owners, made to perform to order.

These pictures function in a similar way to the Dutch genre paintings of the seventeenth century which Wilson admires. In particular he is drawn to the tavern scenes of Adriaen van Ostade and Adriaen Brouwer which show peasants smoking and drinking. Despite being convincingly lifelike, their pictures are more like cautionary tales than simple narrative cameos of low life. Gluttony and intemperence, represented by pigs, empty vessels and cats drinking their fill, lead to violence, debauchery and the neglect of one's household duties. Brawling, vomitting and captions such as Brouwer's *Everyone is carried away by his sensual desire* spell out the moral implications of excess.

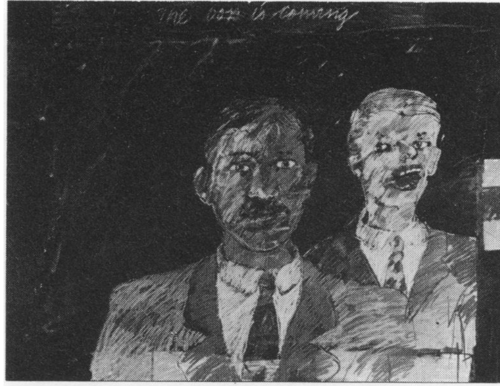
Many of these genre paintings were based on popular sayings, while the symbolism they employed was also part of common knowledge. Nowadays, though, our post-Freudian preference is for less specific imagery that allows for greater ambiguity. Even when he employs traditional symbols such as the snake, Wilson gives them a personal slant and a resonance suited to the needs of the moment. And just as one cannot always interpret one's own dreams despite being their author, so the artist is not always aware of the inferences that can be drawn from his pictures. Conversations on the subject are filled with prevarication, not because the artist intends to be evasive, but because he is "not always sure what the pictures are about, not because the images are arbitrary but because they have to have a revelatory nature - otherwise I wouldn't be interested in doing them. The paintings 'do themselves' more and more. It's like having a dream - some you can interpret and some you can't. In some senses, you don't want to know ... They don't come from drawings - I don't get models in. They come from some other agency."

There's also a strong legacy from Peter Wilson's years as an abstract painter. Far from merely illustrating a storyline or issuing a warning, his pictures are brought to life by a remarkable painterliness that invites one to relish a swathe of colour or an area of wild patterning for its own sake while also recognising it as a dress, a face or a tablecloth.

"I deal with issues that concern me at the time, but I also get very involved with the abstract qualities of the painting. I want to enjoy myself and be sensual with the paint." The relish with which he handles his materials is echoed in his marvellously evocative *Painting Sont* which purposely elides art and life. "Soak some Cobalt Blue on a face-flannel, add hot water and rub it round your neck. Squeeze Emerald Green on to a tooth-brush and go up and down - the way the dentist suggests. Fill your socks with Zinc Yellow, plunge your feet into the stocking tubes. Don't forget to plaster your hair with Lamp Black, look monkey sharp before you go out ... " His use of capitals for the names of the colours makes them sound like old and much loved friends.

The realities of painting both as action and as image set up an invigorating duality in the work. As well as being a rueful flashback to his years as a bored shop assistant, *The Tie Salesman* is, for instance, also a bravura demonstration of painterly exuberance. Those glass display cases filled with colourful socks and ties are also brilliant little essays in abstract fluency. A face is equally an elaborate series of blobs, dashes and cross hatching; a coat may dissolve into an extravagant pattern of pink and grey blotches.

This duality is also harnessed to give the narratives their extraordinary emotional intensity. A jarring discordance is established, for instance, between people and their environments through the use of harsh colours, jarring contrasts and the high-keyed patterning of wallpaper, lino, tablecloths, shirts, dresses, ties and socks. They compete for attention, refusing to let the eye rest



The Boss is Coming 1979
Crayon and ink on paper, 59 x 76 ems

while creating a visual clamour that evokes frayed tempers and jangling nerve endings.

The duality suggests vulnerability and human frailty. A person's very identity seems brittle and at risk if his or her image can at any moment dissolve into nothing more than scribbles and dabs of colour. *He was most anxious,* reads the caption to a drawing of a young man's profile, *when it was time for him to go into profile. His only worry was the side of his head ... was it flat enough?,* yet it also underlines the importance of visual self-presentation. Style, in terms of dress and make-up, becomes equated, through the free handling of the paint, pencil or lithographic ink, with style in art making. Wilson paints ties with colourful flamboyance as though they were narrow abstract paintings worn down the shirt-front, while performances such as *The Collar-detached Shirt and its Place Around the Neck* of 1980 reinforce this link.

Wilson's 1979 piece *What to Wear and What to Show,* performed with Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller, punningly equated exhibitionism with the exhibition of pictures, as two comparable ways of putting oneself on display and making one's inner world publicly visible.

THE RECENT WORK

The narrative thread that runs through the early paintings concerns, then, a young man's attempt to analyse his circumstances, to establish his identity and sense of self and to capitalise on his options. Like Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum,* these kitchen-sink dramas are infused with the intensity of an adolescent's distorting vision as he tries to interpret and understand the actions of his peers and the adults around him.

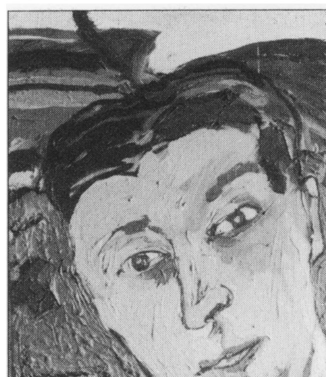
This theme persists in recent paintings, such as *Searching for the Flag* (1985), but it is explored through the eyes of Wilson's son Damien whose face, somewhat perplexed in its confusion, appears at the centre of the canvas. Cloying provincialism has been left behind. In place of those cluttered suburban interiors we have a much less coherent space invaded by large areas of abstraction. The single story has been replaced by snatches of unrelated narrative that are juxtaposed, but which take place on different scales. The effect is of a chaotic bustle of apparently arbitrary action, comparable in its profusion to watching all television channels simultaneously, aimlessly turning the dial on a radio, or flicking through the pages of a newspaper or magazine. The narrow horizons of his own provincial upbringing have been replaced by happenings on the world stage, which crowd in on the young man's mind as a confusing babble of information.

The repressive circumstances of a tightly knit and hierarchical community have given way to apparent disorder over which no controlling vision holds sway "I'm no longer painting an interior, a contained little world, a backwater - maybe because emotionally I've stepped out of that backwater. I'm not that boy any more and I'm not confined by those constrictions."

If his own youthful horizons were constrictingly narrow, now, via the media, the whole world invades the consciousness of a young person. The media, dwelling as they do on crisis, disaster and conflict, give a perplexingly unstructured and chaotic view of current affairs. And rather than feeling too large a fish for the little pond in which he finds himself, the young man seems overwhelmed by the scale of this disorder. For him the issue is not how to bend the rules in order to make room for himself within a rigid structure, but how to comprehend and perceive order in the system so as to establish a niche for himself within this teaming, urban mayhem.

A world that seems too large and too unstructured apparently offers as little scope as an environment that is too limited. Confusion leads to paralysis: "Many social ills", writes Alvin Toffler, "are less the consequence of oppressive control than of oppressive lack of control. The horrifying truth is that, so far as much technology is concerned, no one is in charge. We are aboard a train which is gathering speed, racing down a track on which there are an unknown number of switches leading to unknown destinations."[6] The abstract and figurative 'landscape' that fills the space around his head seems dangerously incoherent. The social matrix threatens to breakdown - he is trapped within impending chaos.

In many ways both the earlier and recent paintings are about boundaries - between self and others and between oneself and one's environment. But whereas the earlier pictures concentrate on human relationships and their potential for co-operation or exploitation - for



Headscape 1980
Oil on canvas, 32 x 28 ems

openness or deceit, love, envy or hate - in the recent paintings these interactions seem to have dissolved and given way to a despairing sense of helplessness and alienation.

Beyond the City, a lithograph of 1985, shows a bleak industrial landscape below which the heads of the passers-by move with a demonic ghostliness through a smog-like veil, as though they were below the waterline - drowning in industrial pollution.

One side-panel of *Searching for the Flag* contains a frieze of regimented figures, clad in grey overalls and moving sluggishly like the exhausted workers of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis.* The other has a frieze of naked figures walking a tightrope, while also being manipulated by giant hands as though they were no more than paper cutouts. In either case the capacity for independent thought and action is negligible. These are the robots of industrial society - the inmates of Godard's *Alphaville,* a city in which everyone is conditioned to function like machines.

In the earlier pictures the possibility existed that one of the young men, carried along by the momentum of his anger, might gather his wits together to break loose. Birds were recurrent symbols of flight. *Migratory Patterns* (1984-5), for instance, shows a family attempting to imitate the flight patterns of ducks in the hope, once again, of getting in touch with their instincts. But the boy's tiger mask and the girl's blank, baby-doll disguise suggest that, for them, it is too late - they have already succumbed to Tarzan and Jane stereotypes.

But in the recent paintings the spirit of rebellion seems to have died altogether. The space that rightly belongs to the birds has been taken over by noisy aircraft and "the sonic booms that drive us all mad". The imaginative space of transcendent thought has been occupied by military and civil aviation. Escape comes only on prescribed routes - such as the two week holiday on the Costa del Oblivion - while the birds that do battle with the planes seem little more than· stuffed replicas "just bobbing about up there in the mind. If there was a wind it would blow them away."

In place of escape comes diversion by means of narcosis - either through entertainment or religious fanaticism. *Sun Ra Curtain Over the Street* (1984) features the Sun Ra Arkestra, a New York jazz band whose charismatic black leader imagines himself to be in touch with other planets, including Saturn. His devotees - the Arkestra- are lined up in two regimented rows. Their eyes stare vacantly out in hypnotic concentration, while their faces seem drawn from the same template. Their anonymity is relieved only by the bright colours painted across their faces, which creates a sense of dazed alienation and of wits dulled by retreat into a fantasy that offers no genuine satisfaction.

In *Sun Ra Curtain Over the Street* Wilson employs the device of a curtain that splits the painting into horizontal segments. These segments can be used to playoff one another by presenting different facets of the same event. The public and private, the conscious and unconscious, the actual and the imagined or the individual and the collective can, for instance, be contrasted within one painting. The lower level can act as a footnote to or a comment on the upper register, or it can function like an aside in a play, a flashback in a film, or a reverie in a novel.

By introducing an air of theatricality to each scene and establishing, as it were, areas on and off stage it also provides the opportunity for fruitful speculation about the nature of appearances and reality. The jazz band in *Sun Ra Curtain Over the Street* weaves its hypnotic spells on the curtain in front of the exotic backdrop of the pyramids, while beneath them we are reminded of ordinary, interpersonal relationships by means of men's and women's shoes and a Deux Chevaux. In -the lithograph *Bald Eagle Curtain Over the Stage* (1984) the curtain is used to make a political point. The rituals of daily life are enacted on the stage, but the curtain is already coming down. On it the American eagle presides over the scene and ushers in the final act. Men's and women's shoes represent private life, continuing as best it can despite the power politics being whispered overhead.

In Wilson's paintings 'truth' and 'truthfulness' are at best relative concepts. Painting is in any case an art of deception, but Wilson again and again insists that things are rarely what they seem; that inner and outer worlds rarely match; that public utterances differ from private actions and that hhypocrisy, deceit or simply lack of self awareness are almost universal ills.

View from the Train 1983
Oil on canvas, 45 x 50 ems

TRANSITION

No clear divide is evident between the earlier and recent paintings. The change in orientation and self-image from the rebel to the parent seems to have come about gradually. A series of *Headscapes* (1983) - people framed by their mental landscapes, mainly areas of bright colour that read as landscape fragments or interiors _ can be seen as a transitional phase, a re-evaluation of the relationship between an individual and his or her environment.

But *The Farewell Rehearsal* (1984) nevertheless seems to me a significant painting, since it appears to mark an emotional shift within the artist - or rather the recognition of the end of a psychic chapter. The painting is like a farewell to or a letting go of his youth and an acknowledgement of his adult status. We witness a power struggle taking place between a mature woman and a diffident young man, while beneath the curtain on which this scene is enacted - in the audience, as it were - the diminutive figure of an older man looks on. A son bids farewell to his mother in preparation for his move into the adult world. The older man could be his father or the artist, now an adult, reflecting back on this important moment of transition.

Only after this - in paintings such as *Searching for the Flag* - do we find Wilson adopting the parental position of concern for the next generation, rather than that of a young rebel taking on the system. *Insurrection* (1984) is an especially poignant interim work, since it speaks from the point of view of both man and boy at the same time. We see an encounter between a youth and an older man, perhaps father and son. The young man confronts his mentor with his dreams, desires, ambitions and ideals- suggested by a stork, seagull and snake hovering above his head. "Some kind of rebellion is taking place - one order is being dissolved and another will re-form." A parrot superimposed on the older man's profile, its beak contiguous with his lips, implies that this challenge will be met only with stale platitudes.

We. can see the artist in both the older and younger male. The painting recalls his own adolescent rebellion but, more pertinently, it also acknowledges his painful sense of inadequacy now that he is faced with his son's restless enquiries and re-evaluations. He has no assurances or wisdom to pass on - at such times all certainties seem to evaporate.

R.B. Kitaj has said that "all paintings tell what happened to the artist". [6] This picture is doubly autobiographical and its poignancy comes from that knowledge of both sides of the experience. Its greater significance, though, comes from Wilson's ability to transform the personal into the general and the anecdotal into the symbolic. As well as referring to specific moments of confrontation or leavetaking, both *Insurrection* and *The Farewell Rehearsal* represent essential stages in one's progress towards maturity. These paintings are not, then, allegories or moral tales like many of the earlier small-town scenarios, so much as emblematic cameos that mark the significant stages of emotional and physical transformation which one must inevitably pass through.

"My idea of art", wrote Kitaj, "is that it conceals and reveals one's life and that what it confesses is, as Kafka called it, 'a rumour of true things"'? Peter Wilson's paintings are like dreams that chart one's progress and, occasionally, mark the conclusion of a phase of profound psychic change. They are also like visual rites of passage - a way of linking individual to group experience by means of a symbolic frame of reference. And because, like all good artists, he is in tune with his times, they also act as a barometer of the state of the collective psyche. "I think I'm painting beautiful pictures and I surprise myself because, in the course of the painting, it turns into a charade before my eyes with that tragi-comic irony ... I don't seem to have any control over that."

SARAH KENT

FOOTNOTES

David Benedictus *Floating Down to Camelot,* Macdonald, 1985, p210.

2 Isaac Bashevis Singet quoted in Marco Livingstone *R.B. Kitaj,* Phaidon, 1985 p146.

3 John Lahr *Prick Up Your Ears,* Penguin, 1980.

4 All comments by Peter Wilson were made during an interview with the author in July 1985.

5 Peter Wilson *Painting Song* in *Menagerie,* Midland Group, Nottingham, 1979, p18.

6 Alvin Toffler *Future Shock,* Bantam Books, 1971, pp 431, 432.

7 R.B. Kitaj in *R.B. Kitaj* op cit p145.

8 R.B. Kitaj op cit p146.