



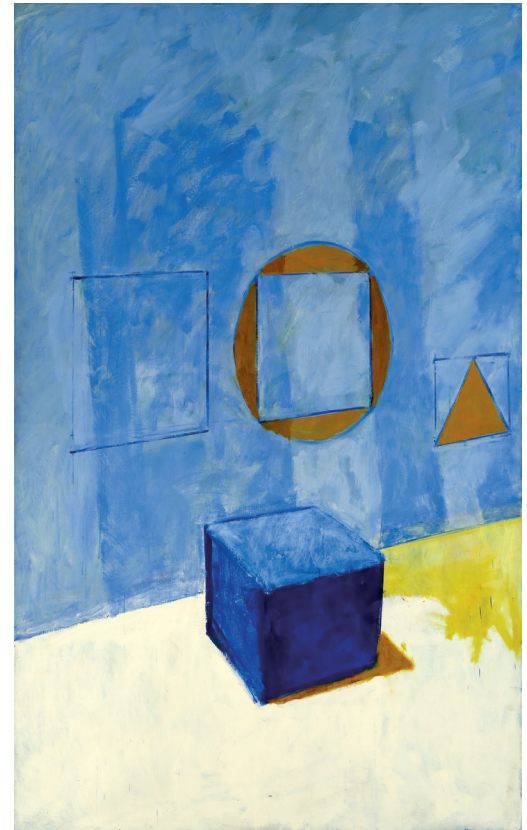
**TRAVEL LIGHT:  
VICTOR WILLING'S  
PAINTINGS 1976-1985**

**Scott McCracken**

*The canvas is both open and closed, infinite yet with precise dimensions, out there, exterior, fixed in space, yet in me and summoning up an array of presences which are interior to me.”<sup>1</sup>*

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, beaches, or unfurnished, empty rooms. Although he avoids any direct representation of the human figure, his paintings do embody an unassailable human presence. It is a presence that cannot be negated. This presence was first truly felt in 1976 when Willing had a revelation. Or, to be more specific, when he experienced a revelation. Sitting in his window-less London studio, a scene appeared before him: the wall opened up, allowing him to look directly into a surprising and unexpected space. After the vision had dissipated, and he was left confronted with the cold, harsh reality of the studio wall, he made a quick drawing of what he had just witnessed.

These visions, or states of reverie as he subsequently described them,<sup>2</sup> re-occurred throughout the next four years, and they presented Willing with a new situation, a new environment, one that he was able to record immediately each time that it was revealed to him as modest but spirited charcoal and pastel drawings. The paintings he made between 1976 to 1980 were taken directly from these hallucination drawings while the paintings produced from 1980 onwards were the result of Willing being more receptive to his own imagination than he had been prior to that first vision.<sup>3</sup> He began to draw upon vivid childhood memories, favoured myths, and sampled art historical references. In the *Callot* series Willing obliquely references the etchings of the 17th Century French engraver Jacques Callot. Through the effects of the visions, Willing found that he had something to paint from – more than simply observing and working from life as he had been instructed while at the Slade<sup>4</sup> he found that he could



1. Andrew Forge *Painting and the Struggle for the Whole Self in Observation: Notation* (New York, 2018) p181-182  
2. John McEwan *Images of the Self in Victor Willing* (edited by Fiona Bradley) (London, 2000) p.38  
3. Lynne Cooke *Thought Made in the Mouth in Victor Willing* (Whitechapel, London, 1986) p.15  
4. *Victor Willing in conversation with John McEwan* in Victor Willing (Karsten Schubert Ltd, London, 1993) p51

**Place (1976-78)**

Oil on canvas

191 x 426cm

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‘make things up’. Willing’s drawings served as an aide-memoire and offered a way into painting. What concerned Willing was being faithful to the vision, and more often than not, the drawings were an inadequate representation of what he had seen.<sup>5</sup> The translation from drawing to painting frequently meant details had to be re-worked or removed completely, ‘pruning’ as he called it.<sup>6</sup>

In the earlier paintings that Willing made after his vision, such as the first one *Place* 1976-78<sup>7</sup>, and then *Night* (1978), and *Mud* (1979), we can surmise that there must be an inhabitant of the scenes pictured, forever absent but inevitably at work collecting and constructing, although to what purpose remains ambiguous. Is it to make sense? To create a kind of order – a living system – out of the disparate components collected? Willing remarked that his paintings were “*Scenarios in which something has happened or is about to happen.*”<sup>8</sup> This sentiment and the paintings themselves express a theatricality, but we are not afforded the drama of any performance itself. All that remains before us are the props. They occupy the unpopulated sets, replacing the actors who have exited stage left. In later works such as *Sphinx* (1982), *Judge* (1982), *Boatman* (1985), and the *Callot* series (1983), the props become autonomous and quasi-anthropomorphic forms; they have themselves become the actors.

5. *Victor Willing in conversation with John McEwan* in *Victor Willing* (Karsten Schubert Ltd, London, 1993) p61

6. p53

7. p52

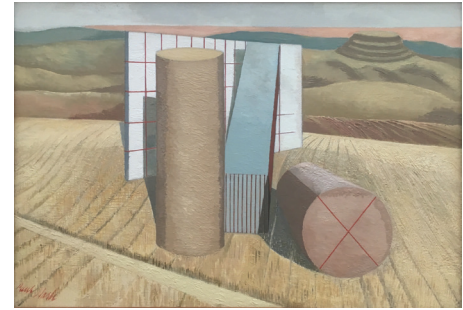
8. p58





Considering the works in the tradition of painting as tableau, a tradition on which spectators become walled off from any unfolding action, Willing's paintings 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. The screen we are watching has been paused; those entities 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<sup>9</sup>). 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. *Callot: Cavalier* reads as two distinct structures, the one on the left incorporating different components attached together while the one on the right is a volumetric form that mirrors the hourglass shape from the neighbouring companion, albeit as a condensed, solid variant. In *Callot: Judge*, colour is used as a means of distinguishing form from shape; the three-dimensional forms are monochromatic colours while the shapes are white. The once considered spheres (forms?) that support the tower are now intimated to be flat circles (shapes?), a pack of them wedged underneath, propping up the base. *Callot: Harridan* does not convey the stillness, or the unrealised movement evident in some of the other paintings. We feel the breeze swaying throughout the scene. The central assemblage is part body, part head and the relationship between the various forms is more interconnected. The destination of the scene is less ambiguous. We are outside; it is a beach, as signified by the small hut standing in the distance. *Callot: Fusilier* is a composite head and foreshadows the later series of smaller works Willing began making two years later in 1985 until his death in 1988. Unlike *Callot: Harridan*, with its sense of established site, *Callot: Fusilier* has no feeling of location at all – the background is made up of multidirectional marks of different values of green that eventually hit and mesh with a rich yellow



Paul Nash  
**Equivalent for the Megaliths (1935)**  
Oil on canvas  
45.7 x 66cm



Victor Willing  
**Matisse's Sideboard with Knife (1974)**  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 121cm  
© The Estate of Victor Willing  
Private collection

9. Lynne Cooke *Thought Made in the Mouth in Victor Willing* (Whitechapel, London, 1986) p.10







band near the base. *Callot: Fusilier* is compositionally different from the others as our viewpoint is closer. The alignment of objects emerges from outside the picture plane on the bottom edge of the canvas rather than occupying the more or less centrally positioned, middle-distance that is a feature with most of Willing's other paintings.

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, which exist 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 and the individual elements suspended in the moment. Then 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 frame, and inhabit the scenes ourselves. The earlier works are tangible and rigid, as if we can reach in and grab hold; the later paintings have less of this effect, 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, like a mirage in a desert.

Assessing a selection of artists of the past working within the still life genre; Cotán, Zurbaran, Chardin, Cézanne, and Morandi, it is evident that their work shares a similar orbit to that of Willing's. In still life we are brought to a position of nearness; of closeness. Our propinquity with the subject makes it all feel more intimate; the act of watching becomes increasingly voyeuristic – private moments being shared – in many ways, Willing's paintings could be seen as a revision to the still life genre; still life painting presented on the grander scale of history painting.

*“Still life is in a sense the great anti-Albertian genre. What it opposes is the idea of a canvas as a window on the world, leading to a distant view... Instead of plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye, it proposes a much closer space, centred on the body. Hence one of the technical curiosities of the genre, its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table. Instead of a zone beyond one finds a blank, vertical wall, sometimes coinciding with a real wall, but no less persuasively it is a virtual wall, simply a cutting off of further space... That further zone beyond the table's edge must be suppressed if still life is to create this principal spatial value: nearness.”*<sup>10</sup>

One of Willing's pictures painted immediately before he started experiencing the visions is *Matisse's Sideboard with Knife* (1974). It's an interior scene, one with a relatively high viewpoint, and in the foreground we have a table, a draped item of clothing, an elliptical plate, a vase of flowers, and a glass half full (or is it half empty?) A knife is precariously balanced over the edge of the table. Although *Place* is the beginning of the 'vision series' and has been cited as the example of his work that contains all the vocabulary and motifs that Willing would refer to over the subsequent nine years<sup>11</sup>, *Matisse's Sideboard with Knife* can be understood as the precursor to the later visionary paintings. The domesticity of the scene is later replaced and reconfigured into

10. Norman Bryson *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London, 2001) p. 71

11. John McEwan *Images of the Self in Victor Willing* (edited by Fiona Bradley) (London, 2000) p.39



Jean Helion

**Les Pains (1951)**

Oil on canvas

72 x 91cm

Giorgio Morandi

**Natura Morta (1952)**

Oil on canvas

40 x 50cm





something altogether more metaphysical. Metaphysical and metamorphic still lives. Willing seems to hover between expressionism and surrealism without ever firmly landing on either. Although his paintings should not necessarily be recognised as linear descendants of Paul Nash's *Equivalents for the Megaliths* (1935) or Edward Wadsworth's *Souvenir of Fiumicino* (1937) they certainly share common elements with those paintings as with those of Giacometti, another seminal influence whose work also share many attributes with Willing's: the centrally-placed subject, the shallow pictorial space, the defined frame, and the scratchy, sketchy marks. The less biomorphic forms, particularly those in the *Callot* series, could have been influenced by geometric modernist sculpture, a hybrid of a Calder mobile crossed with a Tinguely metamechanic. De Chirico's strong light and distinct shadows, Morandi's weighty and ambiguously scaled bottles, Man Ray's off-kilter geometric constructions of his *Shakespearean Equation* series (1947-49) and Jean Helion's domestic-oriented still lifes – works such as *Les Pains* (1951) and *Lobster and its Reflection* (1975) – all rotate in and out of Willing's imagined scenes. Works by all these recognisable names bounce around in the mix of Willing's visions.

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 pole tip over into becoming its opposite and how do we perceive it when that happens? The motif that serves as the foundation 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). The horizon serves as a baseline, it could almost be the first mark made as a means of dividing the picture and also grounding the forms, giving them their sense of gravity. It should also suggest distance – of looking through and beyond – but it doesn't; 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. There is almost always a backdrop.

Meaning, for Willing, was an afterthought, coming only after his paintings were finished and titled.<sup>12</sup> The paintings are associative: our minds wander along different arabesque routes rather than relying 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 puts 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 included and given the role of the unreliable narrator: fact opposes conjecture, subjectivity opposes objectivity. The Rashomon effect. We are watching and waiting for a moment that will either never arrive or has already passed by. The heat and dryness of his pictured

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12. Nicholas Serota *Trapping Reality in Victor Willing* (edited by Fiona Bradley) (London, 2000) p.20





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 a sense of 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 painting's 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 works *Green Drape* from 1976, orange sizzles next to sharp green while earthy brown diffuses the high tonal value of the orange-green juxtaposition. In *Callot: Harridan* a cosmic prussian blue hits the coral-scarlet and pushes the entire picture plane forward as the creamy, off-white shapes simultaneously hover off the picture plane but also read as cut-outs in the surface. This type of combination is common; overly saturated regions of colour butt up against darker, tonal areas. The surface of Willing's paintings, particularly those that came after his hallucinations subsided, portray and emit a very specific light, achieved in part by the way he applies the paint. The surface is porous, interstices of white light from the ground of the canvas sit behind thin layers of oil and pigment, generating a luminosity. Sharp and refined light coupled with high contrast colour reinforces and heightens the intensity instilled by the active, loose and fluid marks of the brush.

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 and there are only a 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. It is a still restlessness. He has a particular penchant for corners, leaving his entities trapped. Space and time have become displaced. There's 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. These are places that



**Untitled 1.10.79 (1979)**

Charcoal and pastel on paper  
42 x 30.5cm

©The Estate of Victor Willing

**Study for Errant (1978)**

Charcoal and pastel on paper  
34x45cm

©The Estate of Victor Willing





**Pavilions (1979)**

Charcoal and pastel on paper

30 x 42cm

©The Estate of Victor Willing

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 Michel Foucault's idea of 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 – old and archaic – while the free-standing, precariously balanced shapes in *Callot: Judge* resemble a makeshift obelisk. There is an animism of sorts here. It is the proposed – but-not-visible presence of the 'other' that renders such forms as prospective monuments – as markers that symbolise something, or someone, that was once there but now is gone – each construction becomes 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 might 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 some catalyst to provoke them into movement.

Geometry is a recurring part of the work 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 to 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.

In one of his short essays, Willing wrote "*beneath our desire to change society and the need to communicate is a need, urgent in some of us, to affirm with our scratches that 'I exist. The activities going on in our mind – thoughts and memories – are ephemeral, disappearing when we do. So scratch the wall and step back...turn around and look again tomorrow. There it is still – tangible proof'*"<sup>13</sup>. The question then becomes is survival through painting enough, is it even possible? 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.<sup>14</sup>

13. Victor Willing in Lynne Cooke Imaginary Portraits in Victor Willing Recent Paintings (Karsten Schubert, London, 1987) p.14

14. 'Travel light' was one of Victor Willing's mantras. Cas Willing in John McEwan Drawing Inconclusions in Victor Willing Uma Restrospectiva (Casa das Historias Paula Rego, 2010) p.41

