

Bill Willis Passing Fancies

The first time I saw Bill's work, I asked if he was interested in the painting of Peter Saul. It turned out that Saul had been his mentor at the University of Texas. That influence—the cartoony references, punchy color, and odd/dark fun-ness—is prevalent in Willis' paintings. It's good to see these features still at play in his recent exhibition *Passing Fancies* at Isabella Valise/Devin Borden (November 18 through January 18). The show offered strangeness and was entertaining. Willis takes the familiar and retro, transforming them into clever, grotesque images that are playful yet commanding in presence.

Willis has been posting his watercolors on Instagram for years, although before that, he was more known for his oil paintings. This show has both. The current exhibition is in one room, with watercolors on one wall, stacked salon style, and works on canvas – easel-sized, vertically oriented, and framed with light-colored wood - spaced out neatly in rows on the subsequent three walls. The watercolors are smaller, consisting of standing figures, mostly women. In contrast, the larger oil paintings are all still lifes, focused on either food or flowers.

These watercolor paintings are stylish, mostly in pale colors or black and white. They feature images of Aubrey Plaza, Karina Longworth, and other slinky girls often shown in groups of two to four, though I didn't recognize them right away. Had it not been pointed out, I might not have made the connection. Many of these scenes resemble typical glamour magazine layouts, painted with quick washes that give a loose, vague quality, matching Plaza's personality. Other figures take on the detached aloofness of supermodels, like mannequins, conveying a sense of disconnection and little interaction.

The oil paintings shift focus from figures to still lifes featuring dishes of food and floral arrangements. The images are based on photographs from mid-twentieth-century cooking magazines, such as *Bon Appetit*. These illustrations predate Martha Stewart's illustrations, showcasing old-fashioned food presentations like ham with sugary pineapple and maraschino cherries. There are meat pies, pastries, casseroles, and other concoctions, some of which are abstracted to the point that they no longer resemble food. It's clear that color and composition dominate the paintings more than the metaphorical qualities of yesterday's culinary fare.

The original magazine photoprints referenced in these paintings share similarities with another now-dated sensation. Technicolor was also a significant advancement in its time, widely seen by most viewers as "real." But in truth, both are remarkably unnatural in appearance. Willis explores this rich territory as a starting point, using bold offbeat colors for plated foodstuffs, and pushes them further into the peculiar and surreal. Willis's best use of color and pictorial mark making radiates an internal energy as if offering knowledge, which seems incredulous considering the subject matter. Who knew how much fun it would be to revisit food items from the past? It feels a little heartwarming to see these trivial images now glorified in the world of fine art.

The flower paintings are also not grounded in any coherent reality. Willis mentioned in his artist's talk that AI-generated images, replete with spatial errors, largely inform these pictures. Compositions that seem simple at first glance turn into nonsensical digital illusions. Parts of the plants appear to emerge from the colored background, failing to connect with the rest of the flowers. Devoid of vases, there are no stems either. Lacking water and soil, these floral arrangements stand as self-supported forms, taking on figurative qualities. These "flowers" seem animated, like sunflowers and Venus flytraps on the prowl. One especially charged image, set against a blue background, resembles a twisted face blending the attitudes of *Zap Comix* with Renaissance portraits of Giuseppe Arcimboldi, complete with protruding Muppet flower eyeballs and a curling tongue. All the works feature animated figuration, but this face motif does not appear to be Willis' main prerogative.

There is an odd feeling to these images that leans toward the ineffable, that sleight of hand that can't be fully explained but must be experienced. It would be interesting to see how that quality might be enhanced if these pictures were larger. It's true bigger isn't always better. Some artists use scale as a formulaic path to grandeur or as a vague idea of doing something new. In the case of this artist's strong mastery of color and the emotional resonance it distills, should Willis go beyond his modest size, it might elicit dramatic results and reveal new tensions.

Isabella Valise / Devin Borden
3913 Main St / The Historic Isabella Court Building
Houston Texas 77002