

# An Unassuming Curb

An exhibition text by Chloe Nahum

On an unassuming curb side, an opportunistic weed is growing up through the cracks. In its subject matter and glancing, chance composition, Morgan Wills' *Weed* is, at first sight, an inconspicuous and familiar scene. But look again, and it gathers an unsettling potency. The leaves, we come to realise, are shaped as human forms, with an uncanny, cookie-cutter regularity. Someone who remains out of sight gazes down with us at this natural curiosity – their shadow falls on the same pavement, reminding us to stop and observe that which might otherwise be missed. Such moves are typical of Wills' work, which forces its viewer's eye to linger on the unexpected, only to be rewarded when it does.

In both the leaf and shadow of *Weed*, we encounter the human, but in a strange and unfamiliar form which implies its presence while simultaneously evading any overt depiction. Through this uneasy and indirect imprinting of the human onto his painted surroundings, Wills seems to ask where the objective world beyond the eye meets the sensory and emotional experience of it that is held in human memory. In these works, Wills creates what he terms a 'felt image' that is interested in the striations of memory and emotion which texture the subjective experience of both place and image. Looking, sensing and remembering – what, of these experiences, can be captured in paint?

This question has, in part, emerged out of a new development in the artist's practice. Like other paintings in the exhibition, *Weed* is based on photographs that he has taken in the area surrounding his south London studio, and is the first time that he has worked directly from such source images. This adoption of the photographic referent has been concurrent with a new use of jute canvas – a change which has afforded these works an overtly textural quality that sets up a tension between the fine grain of their source material and precision of his mark making.

Any straightforwardly photographic depiction is further troubled by Wills' approach to the images, which he views at a small scale, thus creating gaps in the visual data which ensure that imagination and fantasy weave with the image captured by the camera lens. In *Release*, we find that the results of such experiments of the imagination do not tell a straightforward perspectival story, but engender a striking flatness that allows a destabilising parity to human figure, paving stones and strewn litter alike.

*Release* finds us again in the domain of the street and the shadow – a figure runs across the canvas, holding a floating shadow aloft. Shadows, more usually employed to achieve realism and a sense of pictorial depth, hold a very different function in these works. The shadow necessarily depends upon a material object for its existence. But here, it is uncoupled from that more solid being, gaining ground as an independent form. Typically incidental to that which is occurring elsewhere, the shadow becomes the painting's most intriguing subject. This fundamental absence, an obstruction of light, is an assertive physical presence: Wills imagines them in embodied terms, explaining that they could 'get wet, be cut up, move in the wind'.

But no matter how embodied they may be here, the shadow will always withhold the identity of the figure who casts it (or, in this case, does not) – something that speaks to Wills' recurrent decision to conceal expression, and favour ambiguity. Figures hide their faces or, as in *Display* and *Flight*,

find them obscured by persistent pigeons. Indeed, social interactions among the casts of Wills' more populated canvases gain a sense of unease from missed or evaded eye contact – even in the spirited physical extravagance of *The Dance*, five figures tightly clutch one another's hands, while strenuously avoiding any connection made through the reciprocal gaze. In contrast to the communion of their bodies, each seems sealed within their own psychic space.

*The Dance* is part of a broader exploration of the choreographic grouping of figures that runs through Wills' practice. As in Henri Matisse's *Dance* (1910), from which the painting takes its cue, the scene at once suggests momentum and dynamism, while remaining inevitably static. In the line painting which demarcates the back of the space and the abstracted patterns of the rug on which they move, Wills asks his viewer to remain alert to the two-dimensionality of the canvas and, in turn, to the strange suspension of disbelief which allows us to understand marks of paint as dynamic and embodied beings. In the clamour of *Baggage*, Wills plays directly with this painterly conundrum through the interaction of unadorned planes of cardboard boxes and partially visible figures, who duck and bend arms and hands in an arresting pattern of figure and flat surface.

Wills works directly onto the canvas, allowing composition and subject to emerge and build over time. He has said that his canvases become 'storied' through the process of being made, as relationships between figures and objects gain substance and weight. But this meaning is never resolved, and ambiguity remains the watchword. We are left in the space between the seen and the felt unseen, in which these works gain their mysterious, dreamlike character that eschews logic or finality. The tableau, traditionally a site of visual legibility achieved through the arrangement of figures, is made puzzling and unsettled. In scenes such as that of *Display*, parts of the story seem to be deliberately withheld. What unites these figures in their awkward postures? What is happening just beyond the parameters of the canvas? These works decline to answer in direct terms. But it is in their refusal to resolve that these mysterious and pregnant felt images draw us in, and insist that we look again.

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