

## In the Grid: The Paintings of Thornton Willis

Modernist abstraction was born of the city and in the grid nearly a century ago. Robert Delaunay, in 1912, spirited by Cubism's geometries and fracturing of the plane; and looking toward the Eiffel Tower—its repetitions of vertical and horizontal thrust—did away with perspectival illusionism and Cubist conundrums altogether. Inspired by Parisian light and composing his rectangle out of a dynamic grid of movements and counter-movements, Delaunay dissolved Renaissance-old notions of near and far, here and there, three-dimensional space, and linear time. Asserting the alloverness of the flat and malleable membrane of the picture plane, Delaunay placed us, not looking through a window at a world that mirrors our own. He immersed us instead within the newfound organism of abstraction. A universe where now and then and here and there exist simultaneously.

Thornton Willis (b. 1936), one of the strongest living abstract painters, continues in that tradition. He has been working abstractly with the grid for nearly five decades. Although Willis was born in the South and reared in rural Alabama, New York City—the adopted city of Pollock, Hofmann, and de Kooning; of Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie"—is his home, especially as a painter. While studying to become an architect in the 1950s, Willis saw exhibitions of abstract paintings by Hofmann and the New York School and decided to become an artist. In 1967, after studying painting as an undergraduate at the University of Southern Mississippi and then, in graduate school, at the University of Alabama with Melville Price (a close friend of Kline and de Kooning), Willis moved to New York. But his love of architecture—expressed through the architectonics of picture-making—never left him: If anything, becoming an abstract painter and adopting Manhattan's grid as his home, made that love stronger.

Those who have followed Willis's work over the years may see his current series of paintings as a departure from the "Slats" of the 1960s, the "Wedges," or "Fins," of the 1970s and early '80s, the triangular facets of recent years, and the "Lattice" paintings from his last show, in 2009, at Elizabeth Harris. But all of these pictures have in common the allover surface plane held in tension, between figure and ground, as an interwoven field. They also share the subject of the urban landscape. The city and its grid are metaphors for Willis, which he explores pictorially through geometry, mass, angles, and overlaps; through forces of elongation and ascent; through confluences of body and spine; aerial and profile views; form and atmosphere—as when Manhattan's sky, held taut between buildings as rectangle or wedge, appears, as if solid, to press down to the street. But these pictures also share common ground (the malleable plane) through Willis's deep interest in string theory and quantum physics—in the interconnectedness of the unobservable world and the wave-like behavior and



*Red Dogs*, 2010, oil on canvas, 79" x 61"



*A Painting For You*, 1988, oil on canvas, 14" x 11"

interactions of energy and matter; in his paintings' ability to provide macro and micro, internal and external, seen and unseen (imagined) views simultaneously.

With each new surprising series, Willis's paintings get better and better—more direct, dynamic, and hardboiled. And this powerful new grouping, which evolved out of the interlocking geometries of Willis's small vertical canvases "A Painting for You" (1988), as well as some earlier works of the late 1970s, reminds us that he works not just in series, but also cyclically. Willis has unofficially referred to this group, in which the experience of the city is strongly felt, as "Step-down" paintings. The pictures evoke urban contradictions of weight and stasis vs. change and motion; of things in flux, yet locked in place; of whole buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods transforming as rapidly as theater scenery.

The last thing Willis would want is for people to look at his abstract paintings and see windows, doorways, buildings, and streets—to attempt to identify the Empire State Building. These abstractions (even though they have titles such as "Street Wise," "Sunrise," and "Gotham Towers") are not cityscapes. Purely non-objective, they depict forces and interactions, not things. They express what Delaunay called "simultaneity"; what Mondrian referred to as "dynamic equilibrium"; and what Willis, referring to his own work of recent years, once described as "areas of energy bouncing off each other." Sometimes, however, the urban reference is direct. Discussing "The Juggernaut," Willis said he was "thinking about buildings...about how they stack up and jut out in front of one another." But even here, as elsewhere, the works always insist on existing as freestanding abstract paintings, and their urban references fall easily away.

Willis deals in the fusion of opposites: translucency and opacity; expansion and contraction; open and closed; tension and release. His paintings explore beginnings, first steps, and the building blocks of picture-making—the progression of point to line to plane; and of movement arrested in the plane. These pictures resemble stacked blocks; brick-and-mortar; stained glass and leading. Though always complex, their language is as basic and straightforward as that of post-and-lintel construction. They suggest a family of ever-advancing and interlocking forms elbowing one another in an attempt to move closer together and closer to the plane. Though solid and weighted, these paintings move vertically; and they also progress laterally, decoratively. They combine elements of skyscrapers, Greek vases, and the unstoppable grill of an oncoming Mack truck.

In these paintings Willis nods to Mondrian, not only through the painting "Homage to Mondrian," but through his economy and his choice of a chiefly primary palette, as well as in his eschewal of the curve and the diagonal. Most of these paintings are primarily red-yellow-blue-black-and-white compositions. Even when Willis's palette steps into secondary hues or from pure color to tints, those colors,

such as orange, mint, pink, or green, often stand-in for missing primaries. In "Red Dogs," the yellow areas move from solid to fluid to atmosphere, acting as white and asserting yellow as both field and form; The painting's single vertical slice of olive-gray-green stands against red as the only complementary color, as well as the single gray between black and white. In the atypically Easter-egg-hued and beautifully ornamental "Gotham Towers"—a painting whose overlapping planes fan out before you as if a magician had announced "Pick a card...any card"—kelly green acts as black; and tan-colored lines suggest glimpses of flesh, glittering gold leaf, and burnished bronze.

Yet Willis's flat, hard-edged paintings, courting accidents—including wobbly contours and wayward drips—never let you forget the New York School hand that forged them. Underpainting, like the skeletons and ghosts of forms past, bleeds forward; and whole planes of scratchy color churn with a flurry of brushwork, reminding us that flat color—vibrating, pulsing—needn't sit there inactively. Press your nose to some of Willis's color planes and you'll discover a universe teeming with life.

This series conveys the range and richness of the city. Whites are pushed toward silver, butter, and ice. Blues are reminiscent of water, sky, glass, and metal. Orange burns like late-afternoon sun on walls of terracotta, and pinks and greens freshen and surprise his primary palette, just as flora does among urban grays. Quivering contours, when one form brushes up against another, suggest not only the movements of light and shadow, but also the energies and frictions of urban close-quarters.

But Willis's paintings do much more than revisit the flat plane of early Modernism and the aims of the New York School. They do more than relate the rhythms of the urban landscape; or alert us to the forces of energy and matter at the subatomic level. Willis's rhythmic forms gather not just as skyline, or as metaphors for another dimension. There is something more primal, visionary, even shamanistic going on here. Turning and craning, Willis's restless geometries poke their long-necked heads upward and around, as if to hear a distant drumbeat or to see above the herd. Although Willis is very much a painter of his time, his work, musical and tribal in nature, roots us deeper, in art and in ourselves, at least as far back as the illuminated letters and carpet pages of Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts; as well as the geometries decorating ancient pottery and prehistoric caves. Ultimately, what we get from Willis's paintings—in which the brazenness of Abstract Expressionism has been reformed, wedded to the grid—is the striking of a primary chord.

### Lance Esplund

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*Juggernaut*, 2010, oil on canvas, 79" x 61"