

**JOHN WILKINS**

**John Wilkins**

**Turps Gallery**

14 November – 5 December 2015

## **You can't come up.**

John Wilkins is fond of telling the story of how on a cold day in the winter of 1981, with snow falling outside, he was disturbed whilst working on a series of new paintings in his house in Maida Vale, North London. He was disturbed and it was disturbing. He had been caught red handed making paintings again, and watercolour paintings at that.<sup>i</sup>

This series of works marked a return for Wilkins to painting after a break of six or seven years. He had always been a painter, and saw painting as all he could do, it had been his ticket through both school and college in Colchester, but after having enrolled at Saint Martin's School of Art in London in 1971 he realised the discipline was in a conundrum and he in an existential crisis of sorts. In his words 'the last painting had already been painted'. Although Wilkins thought he could make a 'later painting' (a post-last painting) by 'repainting the last paintings' of Ad Reinhardt', which 'really would be the last painting', the history of this subject that had somehow sustained him from boyhood, was all washed up. At least it was for painters who didn't just want to 'paint flowers and harbours'.<sup>ii</sup> It was a personal disaster.

Whilst a student at Saint Martin's, Wilkins made a series of successful Reinhardt like, all-over dot and dog-tooth check abstractions, painted in the 'non-colours' of earth and beige, and created in oil paint using rulers and ruling pens thereby withdrawing from any ideas of gesture or a subjective composition, ideas which he sought to question, to distance himself from the late modernist Greenbergian milieu which was then prevalent in the painting area (though, it has to be said not elsewhere in the art school). These paintings were well received at the time, they were selected for that year's East London Open at the Whitechapel Gallery, and on their strength they enabled Wilkins to then spend three frustrating years in the Royal College of Art's Painting Department then still housed at the V&A in Kensington.<sup>iii</sup> Three years where, he retreated into the Royal College and V&A's libraries, gave himself an education, and worked with a politicised group-art project rather than spend time in the more traditional painting studios. Each year he successfully just dodged being asked to leave the College due to the lack of work he produced, through the support of the more maverick elements of the Painting faculty.

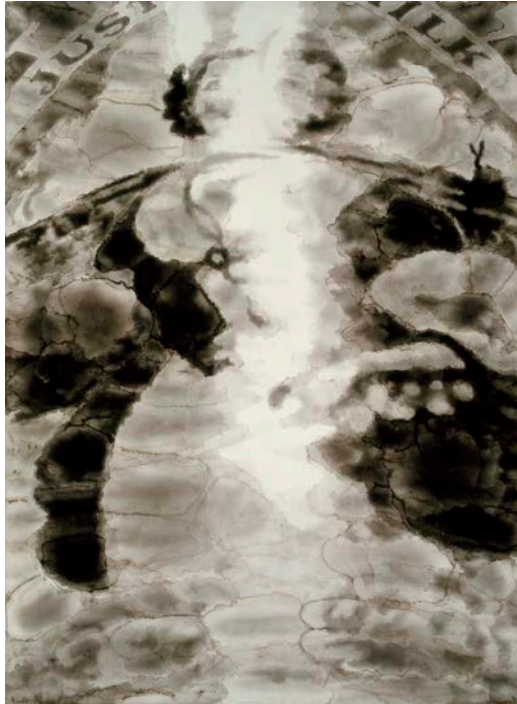
It was some of his friends from his days at Saint Martin's who came to visit him that evening in 1981, intrigued that he had moved back to the neighbourhood after time away in South London, and equally intrigued to hear that he was painting again. Among the group was John Stezaker, who was subsequently to be in many early exhibitions with Wilkins, and who his work was often seen to connect to at the time; and Rosetta Brooks, the then editor of the ground breaking ZG Magazine and who was to write about his paintings and curate his work into various important exhibitions in the 80s, around the idea of simulation, in both London and New York.<sup>iv</sup>

Wilkins was reluctant to let his friends in, he told them they couldn't come up, he was uncertain—embarrassed even—as to what he was doing, but somehow the freezing weather and falling snow meant that they came in and found him fully absorbed in a series of large-scale watercolours which were laid horizontally all over the floor, and which depicted a detailed abstraction of an image from the packaging of the even then retro label of the Ovaltine drink. A product that was as homely as it was old-fashioned.

The watercolours were very complex and layered with references. Not only had he photographed, visually distorted, and projected the image of the label's fecund maiden—a woman holding wheat sheaves and a basket of eggs above the words 'just add milk'—he had also painted it through a remarkable hands-off watercolour approach of what he calls 'puddle management'. Here pools of black watercolour were coaxed into depicting the image through skill and a horizontal ad-hoc Heath Robinson armature that created slight undulations in the paintings surface and that made dips and troughs in the paper. The resulting painting with its crusty-edged inkblots coerced into representation, was part of a series of works, the *Ovaltinies*, which was to preoccupy him for three or so years, and which is laced with fragility and a pathos for a type of nostalgic image and the complicated duplicity of surface to image and their entwined inter-relationships.

It is valuable to remember the genesis of Wilkins' re-investment in painting through his *Ovaltinies* series when looking at his later paintings as all his work is really about the act of painting and the deceit of images and actions which these paintings explore. He explores actions such as how a painting is made from other paintings and how the haphazard and the controlled define the making of his most rational or

irrational of works. Indeed Wilkins has only issued one statement about his paintings and it rings true for his whole oeuvre: 'The paintings are *of paintings, of painting, and always of the of.*'<sup>v</sup>



*Ovaltinies #22*, 1980-1982, 131cm x 97cm, watercolour on paper

There have been many series in-between the early *Ovaltinies* watercolours and the works in this current exhibition. The work has developed in series over the years, each relating to the last and each series still holding true to the tenets that Wilkins discovered in the early 80s and which connect his work, as has often been mentioned, to both British and American artists who deconstructed painting and the idea of the reproducible image to question itself.<sup>vi</sup> Like many of those artists Wilkins begins with painting as almost a rogue

practice, one that was subsumed by ideas of failure, but his is no endgame strategy. Rather he has developed a position that through his reflection on the photographic image (often degraded and always of another person's painting) and an equally questionable process of applying paint, he opens up new ground.

There were the highly decorative large-scale red and yellow water-colours from the mid 80s, that were again based on appropriated imagery, this time of whole wheat fields or decorative wheat sheaves, and which formed the basis of his solo show in New York at Cash/Newhouse Gallery (1985) and subsequent Lisson Gallery representation and Riverside Studio's exhibition in London (1986).

Then followed the grey acrylics, for which he is now perhaps best known, and where the appropriated image is more nuanced, and where the act of painting itself seems to be more fully under scrutiny. In this respect Wilkins' work can be seen to align with Robert Ryman's famous statement about his own work from 1969, 'there is never a question of what to paint, just how to paint' and those later artists of Wilkins' own generation like Christopher Wool who seem to have adapted and run with this position. Wilkins' grey acrylics are built from a deconstructed vocabulary of forms, gestures even, that are channelled to investigate the very idea of painting itself. He uses a dead-pan humour to devastating affect, a humour that is as bizarre as it is tragic, to build paintings which whilst echoing classic modernist paintings from the recent past, be it Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland or Mark Rothko, use an absurdist 'sausage-like' motif of highlight and shadow to reflect and celebrate both the potential and meaningfulness of these painting and its exact opposite. These tubular lines are built with stencils, but contradictorily are clearly handmade as the stencil is used to hold careful shading executed in black

paint with a sable brush and topped with a thin white hand drawn highlight. These forms, for they escape the idea of a simple critique of a masterful-brushstroke swiftly, hold time in precarious limbo. They are bold, but not gestural, yet are filled with painstaking gesture that is both comic and calligraphic. In the words of the critic Michael Newman, who was an early champion of this work writing about it in both journals and catalogues, Wilkins' paintings 'problematise the attribute of meaning to the concatenation of marks by simultaneously evoking and denying it, occupying an edge between representation and decoration, between something and nothing.'<sup>vii</sup> For a London audience these grey 'sausage' paintings are most readily associated with a series of four beautiful exhibitions at Anthony Reynolds Gallery that spanned the 1990s and the migration of Reynolds' space from a vast east end basement to a Soho town house (1989, 1993, 1996, and 2001).

The current paintings which form the basis of the Turps Gallery exhibition, Wilkins' first one person show in London since 2001 (though there have been solo exhibitions in South America, Asia and Europe) picks up from where these London exhibitions left off, as Wilkins continues to develop the use of a free floating stylized motifs or gestures on a low-depth grey ground. However Wilkins should really be seen as returning to the grey and limited palette of black and white after a very fruitful detour into colour and a series of green and pink paintings which he began developing whilst an Abbey Fellow in Painting at the British School in Rome in 2005. These coloured works have preoccupied him for the last few years and use acrid washes of red or yellow to create coloured tints over his grounds much as a sepia photograph can be mimicked through a chemical wash on a black and white print.



The relationship between Wilkins' paintings and photographic processes is intriguing and central to any sustained consideration of his work. It comes in my mind from his non-painting days at the RCA, which saw him construct a darkroom in his bathroom and the Xerox and cut-n-paste culture that epitomised his activity then (as I would argue do his very hand-made card stencils). Not only can the early watercolours be seen to mimic in a casual and half hearted way the manner in which wet chemicals transform paper to build an image, so too can the monochromatic backgrounds of his more recent paintings. These surfaces get built through a recycling of past paintings and a varnishing and painterly-wash technique, that can be seen to resemble within their super-glossy surface a photographic print. Albeit a print that is as big as a person. A surface that through the way that liquid gets poured and painted can lead to slight imperfections needing 'touching up' with small brushes just like a photographic print does when hairs or dust adhere to its emulsion. The way in which Wilkins paints and stencils his drawn motifs onto this surface also exaggerates this quality—as the drawn element hovers in sharp focus over and above the slightly blurred background. A background that nods to Gerhard Richter's *Grey Paintings*, John Martin's sublime skies and photographic blurring as much as it does to the general detritus on Wilkins' own studio floor. This dual plane quality is similar perhaps to what one might expect if one drew or painted on a photograph, but this is of course untrue, a deceit which escapes the idea of cliché through it being materially linked in colour and the matter-factness of pigment. It is an intriguing and wonderful quality similar perhaps to the false shadows in some of Laura Owens' painting or the fake dissonance in a squeegeed painting by Richter.



*And Light the Day*, 2015, 244cm x 184cm, acrylic on canvas

About 4 years ago Wilkins photocopied an element from a painting by Picasso. It is a close rendering of this element, which he has drawn with the aid of his card stencils and a steady-hand in his calligraphic and tubular style, that floats above the distressed and photographically-smooth ground

of his most recent painting *And Light the Day* that forms the centrepiece of this current exhibition.

Wilkins had found an illustration of Picasso's *Femme au Sourire* (1929) reproduced in a biography of Picasso by Gertrude Stein and was drawn to the surrealist absurdity of the painting itself as well as the degraded quality of the book's reproduction which dated from the late 1930s.<sup>viii</sup> (In a similar way to Wilkins' early watercolours we are revelling in the complexity of the points of departure.)

Picasso's painting depicts a tower block as a face: a bizarre and wonderful conceit. The block like building on a stylised hill, with nomadic people wandering on it is superimposed, much like Wilkins' own paintings, with a schema of lines depicting an angular head complete with strands of hair and dot-like eyes and nostrils. The element that Wilkins focussed on was a mouth which Picasso had drawn in a swift linear manner and which together with the other drawing anthropomorphised the building it was superimposed onto and transformed it, with a leap of imagination, into a head. This drawn mouth then, detached, appropriated, retaining its vertical axis and refined by Wilkins' own rendering, is turned, in his words, 'into a Fontana'—one orifice gives way to another—one painting begets another.

The grey paintings often do this; they enact other paintings both blatantly or latently through a non-aligned detail and an absurdist logic that is present and absent at the same time. Sometimes Wilkins will describe a work as an attempt to repaint a Rothko, a Stella or even in a series of more recent head paintings that he showed in Athens and London, a work by the British romantic artist William Blake.<sup>ix</sup> Ideas that are just visible if you like, glanced at, and hinted at, and which are held in tension between the figure and the ground and

between figuration (and the quasi-depiction of past paintings) and abstraction.

To return to *And Light the Day* we must understand that the relationship between this stylised drawing and the scuffed and stained super-glossy ground is a relationship of difference. At times these surfaces, for it always feels as though we are looking at two different solid formal planes, are in harmony with each other, explaining and drawing from each other, whilst at other moments they are at odds. At times they are like Leonardo da Vinci finding pictures in the cracks in his studio wall as inspiration, but at other times like the graffiti scrawled over damaged plaster and brickwork, with the marks bearing no relationship to the substrate's condition and formal structure. At times we see the whole painting, like a Fontana hole, at other times like an upended mouth, and at other times still, like a drawing over a stain in the canvas itself. A multifaceted complexion of opposing but harmonious, voices. Difference and absurdity unified and made complete. Care over the haphazard. It is always Wilkins' paintings internal logic that makes these artworks so mysterious and multifaceted. They have a lot to say all at once—in a clear and precise vocabulary but in multiple voices—and this is both rich and frustrating—one needs to concentrate and if one does it is so very rewarding.

Daniel Sturgis

London, November 2015

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<sup>i</sup>It seems poignant that this story unfolds in 1981, a year which seems to have become a touchstone for recent discussions on painting. It heralded not only Douglas Crimp's famous critique of the medium of painting in the 'End of Painting' but also Benjamin Buchloh's essay 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression' which addressed the return to figuration and expressionism, both articles in the same issue of the journal *October*, vol.16, Spring 1981; in London the Royal Academy of Arts held the exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting*, 15 Jan-18 March 1981; and the Scottish painter Thomas Lawson, a friend of Wilkins', published a repost to these main positions in 'Last Exit: Painting', *Artforum* Oct 1981.

<sup>ii</sup> Quotes from Wilkins and much of the substance for this essay came from a recent visit to his studio in Bethnal Green on 15 October 2015.

<sup>iii</sup>East London Open, Whitechapel Gallery, London 19 April-20 March 1974.

<sup>iv</sup> John Wilkins' and John Stezaker's work was written about together in a number of texts around this time see: Rosetta Brooks 'Everything you want... and a little bit more' *ZG (Desire)* 1982; Michael Newman, 'Simulacra' *Flash Art* No.110, Jan 1983; John A Walker *Art in the Age of Mass Media* Pluto Press 1983. Rosetta Brooks wrote two other articles on Wilkins during this period, Rosetta Brooks 'The Corpse of the Image' *Artforum* Feb 1985, Rosetta Brooks 'Art of Controlled Madness' *Art & Text*, April 1985. She also curated *Close to the Edge* White Columns, New York, 17 Feb-6 March 1983.

<sup>v</sup> I have been unable to identify when the statement was first formally issued. Suffice to say it has been referred to since the early 1980's and has been used in Press Releases and articles since then.

<sup>vi</sup> From the 1980s Wilkins' paintings have been compared to work by artists such as Peter Halley, Jack Goldstein, Philip Taaffe and the legacy of this association was discussed by the painter Tim Renshaw in a long article for *Turps Banana* magazine No. 13, 2014. It is also worth saying that during the 1980s Wilkins established links with Josh Baer who was then the Director of White Columns in New York where he had exhibited his work and who was close to Rosetta Brooks, this brought him into direct contact with many of the American circle around *ZG Magazine* and *Real Life Magazine*.

<sup>vii</sup>Michael Newman 'John Wilkins Re-Marks' London: Anthony Reynolds Gallery, 1989. Michael Newman also contributed articles on Wilkins to *Flash Art*, No.110, 1983 and contributed the essay 'The Analytical Theatre, New Art from Britain' a travelling exhibition in the US organised by the Independent curators Incorporated, 1987-88.

<sup>viii</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd, 1939.

<sup>ix</sup> The 'head paintings' from the series of coloured paintings he made in the mid 2000s were shown in a number of group exhibitions in London and Europe. Two notable showings where these work were central were *Once Removed* at the Apartment in Athens, Greece (14 June-30 Sept 2010) and *Head* at the Approach Gallery in London which was instigated by John Stezaker and developed by Jake Miller (1 July-1 August 2010).



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