

About the recent work of Stephen Wilks

Mark Gisbourne – All the fun of the fair and much more besides

Autobiography and the 'danse macabre' seem strange partners in pursuit of an engaged artistic life. But the nature of performance, sculpture, and now the first exhibited paintings, have always seemed strange emotional bedfellows in the works of the English artist Stephen Wilks. Perhaps best known for his performances where he has toted a stuffed sculpture of a donkey called Balthasar in a suitcase across Europe, there has always been in Wilks a fundamental fascination with anthropomorphically associated iconography. Indeed, Orwell's *Animal Farm* was among his last major project where he entered into the human-to-animal universe. The historical donkey or ass, as beast of burden, is a multilayered iconic image familiar from the Classical Age, as in Lucius Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, in some measure derived from the Priapus story, through to Shakespeare's character Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both sharing libidinal but more importantly possessing dislocated comedy contents. To travel with 'a donkey on your back' is not only a slang regional English usage, but also an inverted use of *amour noir* in the case of Wilks. The donkey as an itinerant beast of burden, an animal entity associated with the poor and the impoverished, is given a dominant role throughout his recent body of work. The autobiographical component of the work, is the idea of an association and identification on the part of the artist, a seeing the world from the position of 'other' as a reversed viewpoint. If it appears as humour so much more so in that it is critical of the unjust conditions of our contemporary world.

In his current gallery exhibition the donkey takes centre stage forming a carousel in the centre of the gallery space. In a mechanical rotating sculpture some five metres in diameter, and capable of both interior and exterior installation, Wilks uses the now somewhat archaic metaphor of the funfair to make his point. By reference to the orrery, an early eighteenth century astronomical machine that mimicked the rotation of the planets, he draws analogies between human life and De la Mettrie's *L'homme machine*. The heliocentrism of the universe is further reflected in the deliberately banal use of the self-contained circularity of the carousel. And, by extension, at least, how human life has been turned into a state of machine-like circular repetition of denial and prohibition. The references to motorisation, wooden mechanisms and hand-sewn textile donkeys, is made even more explicit in its intention by the fact that the green donkey (ironically called Homer, a 'Trojan' donkey) has written on his back (in arabic) the words 'nothing to declare'. Another reference, perhaps, to the perilous life lived by migrants today, and the conflicted state of the European world to Islamic culture. The wooden skeleton structures and cogs that carry the rotating hebdomad donkeys, in turn form a weekly round that merely reiterates the trapped status of the migrants. It is symptomatic of Stephen Wilks work in general that through the most humorous or witty of means the artist is able to establish a highly critical work. He echoes the underlying truth of Shakespearean comedy "though it make the unskillful laugh, it cannot but make the judicious grieve." (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

The idea of the skeletons is taken up again in the paintings and drawings that accompany the carousel-based sculpture in the exhibition. The drawings rather than function as sketches form another complimentary universe to the wooden skeleton structures in *Donkey Roundabout*, the actual title of the carousel. It should also be noted that the English word for carousel is a 'roundabout' which adds yet another complex layer to the work, filling out the dense iconographic strategy that the artist has undertaken. It is ironic also that the word carousel itself derives from the verb 'to

carouse' which means quite literally to engage in boisterous, drunken merrymaking. However, the skeletons draw directly upon the tradition of the late medieval *Danse Macabre* (Dance of Death) at the time a contemporary response to the horrors created by the Black Death. The fact that the figures are frequently presented in the form of a dancing circle no doubt appealed to Wilks, using it in the creative inspiration of the carousel or roundabout.¹ The idea of the Dance of Death comes from early *vanitas* imagery, and was used to warn people as to the vainglorious nature of earthly life. The individual figures carry the stuffed donkeys on their skeletal shoulder frames. The dunce's cap placed on the head of one of the skeleton drawings, further emphasises humiliation, since it was frequently used by the Inquisition for interrogating heretics. The word 'dunce' deriving from the famous Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus, and means quite literally 'dim-witted'. It is most famously known from Goya's painting called *The Tribunal of the Inquisition* (c.1812)

The large paintings in the exhibition fill out further Spanish associations. The painting called *Benvenidos* makes specific references to Picasso's *Guernica* and other iconography of the Spanish Civil War. The green donkey Homer (metaphor of the founding of the Western Civilisation) is swept up and carried off in a migrant's cheap travelling bag, familiar to anyone who knows the Islamic migrant and other peripheral states of Europe. In *Carousel Revised*, the *Danse Macabre* (Dance of Death) figures are reprised in a night scene by using provocatively garish colours and an expressive frontal engagement with the viewer. A painting called *The Golden Mean*, shows a skeleton toiling under the midday sun, cast in a desert-like space with an urban environment depicted behind. We are thereby tempted to think of references to the exclusions of Arab and Islamic culture, references to which have been already cited. However, the actual reference is to Mexico, where the same ideas of migrant exclusion vis-à-vis the USA similarly apply. Also the ass or donkey has such powerful associations with Hispanic cultures, that we are tempted to see Wilks acting as some latter day Sancho Panza, whose paintings are ironic commentaries, modern *sanchismos* or proverbial 'belly' laughs based on black humoured observations on the world. A contemporary Cervantean hero (more anti-hero) tilting at the windmills of modern injustice. Thus metaphors of containment and prohibition are rooted in all of the paintings in different ways, whether it be a painting of his travelling suitcase with his donkey packed inside, or simply the circular imprisonment that is represented for many people by life itself. In the off space there are drawings and sculptures of caterpillars presenting another theme in Wilks's work.

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¹ See *The Dance of Death* (1493) by the engraver Michael Wolgemut(1434-1519) from *the Liber chronicarum* by Hartman Schedel (1440-1514)