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Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On Salander-O'Reilly, "Thornton Willis, Paintings: 40 Years" at Sideshow Gallery, and "William Bailey on Canvas" at Betty Cunningham Gallery.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts the story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with his art. As Dryden tells it: "Pleas'd with his idol, he commends, admires,/ Adores; and last, the thing ador'd, desires." Ovid's tale captures the unnatural power that art can have over man—and the lengths to which some will pursue it.

Over the past month, a remarkable chain of events has led to the collapse of one of New York's most esteemed galleries. At the center of this story is the gallery's owner, Lawrence Salander of Salander-O'Reilly, an artist himself as much as a businessman, whose love for art may have kept him from the truth of his worsening situation.

Now the story has ended up in a court of law. There are allegations of debts piled upon debts, promises broken, and tens of millions borrowed and lost. Allegedly, rent on the gallery's \$200,000-a-month townhouse has gone unpaid and work owned by other people has been sold as gallery property.

The curtain came down on the day of the vernissage, the gala opening of the show that was intended to be the highlight of the season. Hours before guests were to arrive, the exhibition's co-presenter, the London dealer Clovis Whitfield, took flight, loading some forty loans into a truck, including the Caravaggio, the centerpiece of the show. Barry Slotnick, a lawyer for one of the plaintiffs, who once represented the subway shooter Bernard Goetz, supposedly encouraged Whitfield's departure, scuttling the show and hastening the fall of the house.

With the works assembled and Salander's assets under one roof, creditors smelled blood. Lawyers swarmed in. Security guards manned the doors. The police were called. When the Salander family emerged from the premises, the son lunged at a reporter. Photographs of this incident show the father pulling him back by the collar, the wife and daughter looking on. Eventually a sign went up on the window that the exhibition has been postponed. In fact, the show will never be seen. A week of legal wrangling, including the sale of Salander's personal library, kept the gallery afloat. But with mounting lawsuits, and the lost confidence of lenders, the show was shut down by court order.

What remains of "Masterpieces of Art: Five Centuries of Painting and Sculpture" at Salander-O'Reilly, previewed in this space last month, is now locked up tight. Meanwhile Lawrence Salander is prevented by law, for now, from entering his own gallery or selling art anywhere in the world. The only visitors to "Masterpieces of Art" arrived a week after the scheduled opening. Justice Richard B. Lowe III of the State Supreme Court led a "musty" tour through the abandoned show. He

was accompanied by a dozen lawyers, reporters, and a representative there to refill the humidifiers.

A trade publication called *Maine Antique Digest* first detailed Salander's troubles many months ago. David Hewett's account of angry creditors, "Ponzi schemes," and abused clients sounded, regrettably, all too ordinary in the unregulated business of art. Then over the summer, word came down that several of the gallery's top deputies had departed. Philip Boroff of Bloomberg.com picked up on the story, reporting regularly from East 71st Street. He now continues from the court house steps.

As a critic, I have covered Salander's exhibitions many times. I have come to know and admire the gallery and the man behind it. Salander is a connoisseur who can mount museum-quality shows of John Constable and Gustave Courbet while promoting latter-day painters such as Robert De Niro, Sr. and Graham Nickson.

Over the summer, when Salander first described his blockbuster "Masterpieces" show to me, he expressed some concern. But he never let on about the magnitude of his troubles. He continued to fill every room of his gallery with manic energy. He lauded the qualities of older art and believed that he could educate contemporary collectors of these qualities as well. His faith in these qualities can be infectious.

Salander has an appetite for acquisition. Most likely he overreached in expanding to his townhouse on East 71th Street. His payroll stretched from New York to Europe. As the prices for contemporary art continue to soar, he misjudged a reversal in the Old Master market, which has yet to materialize. Without the "Masterpieces" show, it is assumed that he will not be able to make good on the loans. Now the matter is in the hands of the courts. Who knows what improprieties, on all sides, will come out in discovery? The art world is a wild world. What's certain is that New York has lost a fine institution for art.

When the assets of D. H. Kahnweiler, Picasso's early dealer, were seized and sold at auction by the French government during World War I, the value of Cubist art collapsed. Now, with Salander out of the picture, at least for the moment, and hundreds of Renaissance and Baroque paintings possibly off to the auction block, I fear that something similar might happen in the markets for Baroque and Renaissance art. Contemporary art will face one less hurdle on its march to market domination. Presumably the art world will also feel the pressures of regulation. The fall of Salander, in what the critic Mario Naves has called the "Enron of the Art World," will undoubtedly have many implications.

Once, not so long ago, Lawrence Salander explained to me his philosophy of art. He said that greatness adds up to more than the sum of its parts. He then said: "two plus two equals five." Unfortunately, what's right for art is not always good for business. For Salander this proved to be his tragic miscalculation.

Across the city, a world away, a very different story is unfolding, this one with a happy ending. Almost forty years after his New York debut, the painter Thornton Willis is creating some of the boldest work of his life. The success of his retrospective show now on view at Sideshow Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, following a brilliant exhibition of recent work at Elizabeth Harris Gallery a year ago, speaks to the enduring legacy of abstraction for this career painter. [\[1\]](#)

The son of an itinerant minister, Willis was born in the rural South in 1936. His interest in painting began in architecture school at Auburn University in Alabama. Two traveling exhibitions came to town: One featured the students of Hans Hofmann, the legendary painter and teacher of the Abstract Expressionists, and the other was a show of New York School painters brought by the American Federation of Arts. Willis decided to become a painter, enrolling in graduate school to study with Melville Price, an abstract artist from the 10th Street years who died in 1970 at the age of forty-nine.

By the time Willis arrived at abstract painting, Pop Art and Minimalism were already the rage. But Willis rejected these possibilities. Fortunately his move to New York in the summer of 1967 came at a moment when other painters were also challenging the new trends. Improvisation again entered the mix, albeit now with an awareness of serialism and boundary. Brice Marden, Richard Serra, Robert Ryman, and Sean Scully are among Willis's contemporaries.

The earliest works on view at Sideshow are the monumental *Black Wall* and *Red Wall*, both from the late 1960s. Thick stripes of paint build up horizontally one over the another. Like the slats of a window shade, the effect both obscures the image beneath and becomes the image itself.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, as these slats rotated off the horizontal axis, Willis evolved a signature style that brought him international attention. He called it "the wedge." Predicated on the relationship between figure and ground, a tension that Willis built up in his edging and color choice, these haunting images could resemble a curtain or a mountain peak, a threshold or a monolith. Minimal in construction, wedges such as *Bisby* (1977) and *Jacob's Ladder* (1980) found an eager market. Collectors and dealers ranging from Larry Gagosian to Charles Saatchi to Sidney Janis to Jackie Onassis scrambled to the studio and galleries to buy them.

But at the height of his fame, Willis felt he had exhausted the motif. He abandoned the wedge and figure-ground paintings for a reexamination of Cubism. Work such as *Gray Harmony* (1993), in which patterns are flattened to a grid, featured regimented designs of quiet beauty.

Then the attacks of September 11, which Willis witnessed from his Soho left, rocked these latest designs to their foundations. In *Cubist Painting for Vered* (2001), the first haunting work he created after the attacks, drips run down the front of the canvas. Black, white, and red, the design collapses down, a terrifying lamentation. Since then, a new urgency fills his work. His paintings bend into knotted areas of energy. His latest designs of folded stars are animated by a career in abstraction. Through November 15, it is possible to see their development under one roof.

In 1983, Mark Strand edited *The Art of the Real*, a landmark survey of "the new realism." The book leads off with an essay by William Bailey, whose work also appears on the cover. Born in 1930, Bailey has managed to develop a world all his own—a strange place imagined through ordinary elements. Early in his career, he became attracted to painters like Ingres, "who seemed to arrive at mystery through the clarity of their painting."

Now at Betty Cunningham for a second show at the Chelsea gallery, his recent paintings of crockery and nudes look stranger than ever.^[2] Not that they've changed in any significant way. In fact their consistency is part of their strangeness. Bailey has been painting the same thing for four decades. We merely grow stranger in relation to it.

In his catalogue essay, Terry Teachout considers the difficulty in classifying Bailey's art. The artist considers this issue himself in *The Art of the Real*. He says that he is abstract: "I found that what had happened to me in trying to describe something was more abstract and carried more meaning than when I was simply trying to put something down that merely looked abstract." He says that he is figurative: "A realist would insist upon a contemporary context and meaning, whereas for me they have a metaphorical existence. That's why I prefer the term *figurative* in describing my work." He then concludes that he is "an avant-garde painter ... finding values that [are] leading the way to something else." Wherever "something else" may be, it is a strange and beautiful place.

Notes

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1. "Thornton Willis, Paintings: 40 Years" opened at Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, on October 13 and remains on view through November 15, 2007. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. "William Bailey on Canvas" opened at Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York, on October 18 and remains on view through November 24, 2007. [Go back to the text.](#)

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