

Megan Williamson

Defying Gravity Catalogue Essay

In the new series of paintings and works on paper that constitute “Defying Gravity,” Megan Williamson succinctly and gracefully transforms the venerable theme of the circus into a lively and engaging twenty-first-century arena of painterly discourse. She acknowledges the circus’s hallowed tradition and its exalted place in the history of art, as her work directly or indirectly alludes to a range of antecedents.

Many 19th-century devotees of the theme focused on the novelty of the performances: Edgar Degas, for instance, comes to mind, particularly with his *Miss La La* at the *Cirque Fernando* (1879), a stirring image of a death-defying aerial act. Circus performers inspired Berthe Morisot’s celebrated pastel *Tightrope Walker* (1886), Seurat’s *The Circus* (1891), and many of Toulouse-Lautrec’s paintings and drawings. Picasso ushers the theme into the 20th century with a remarkable shift in emphasis. His resplendent family of *Saltimbanques* (1905) shows the circus performers at rest. Picasso seems to have initiated a kind of non-hierarchical and rather nonchalant circus iconography that over the years resonated with younger generations of painters (up to and including Williamson’s).

In more recent times, the behind-the-scenes daily lives of circus performers, workers, and circus environment inspired a host of artists, from Reginald Marsh and George Bellows, to Calder, with his 1931 kinetic sculpture *Circus*, and Botero, whose rotund acrobats populate his “circus maximus.” To my mind, Milton Avery’s circus pictures, at once playful and profound, bear a special relationship to Williamson’s. Like Avery, and many of the other artists, Williamson embraces the theme of the circus as an egalitarian environment, where social classes, economic, and ethnic differences evaporate. The protagonists of “Defying Gravity” are diverse, and very much of-the-moment. Effervescent, buoyant, and even whimsical, her figures never appear arcane or nostalgic.

Circus Training, for example, shows in the foreground a hyper-active exercise field where horses canter and dogs leap through hoops at the command of several youths of diverse race and gender. In the background, aerial artists spin around at the end of long ropes suspended from a tall pole — gravity defying, indeed. In *Circus Horses* a similarly diverse group of youths tends to a number of elegantly rendered steeds in the foreground and background. They prance through a verdant hillside, beneath a radiant cerulean sky.

The Chicago-based artist, who studied at the Studio School with New York Abstract Expressionist stalwart Nicolas Carone (1917-2010), has a deep understanding of the language of abstraction, and the fluid energy inherent in a deft brushstroke. In each work, she explores with alacrity and good taste the emotional impact of color, never pushing for an over-sweet or

sentimental visual statement. The works are about rhythm and vitality, physical strength and psychological perseverance. Her schematic figures often correspond to those of contemporaries, such as Katherine Bradford, embarked on a similar journey toward re-imagining the possibilities of the figure. On a formal level, Williamson's quasi-geometric compositions of compressed spaces, fluid perspectives and indefinite proportions are hallmarks of modernism yet fused with a contemporary, non-rhetorical sensibility.

An emblematic composition like *Hoop Dancer* is a striking example. It shows a boy at left-center rolling along a slat-wood stage with his green-and-white hoop assuring him motion as well as stability. In the language of abstraction, the circular form here plays counterpoint and activates the surrounding rectangular shapes. The figure, though, enjoys its own eccentric trajectory.

Employing a startling perspective and a large dose of humor, *Trapeze Artists* features, to the left and to the right, large, imposing figures tethered to three diminutive spotters or trainers far below on the sandy ground. Deliberate, effective, and finely calibrated, the distortions serve a scene that is incongruous but somehow wholly convincing. With her fluid brushwork, extraordinary color sensibility, and imaginative presentation of the figure, Williamson suggests that painting itself just could be the most exhilarating dare-devil act of all.

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