

Alta

Funk Art and the Pursuit of Authenticity

William T. Wiley and his creative philosophy were unapologetically linked to the Bay Area.

By Charles Desmarais



The first time you met William T. Wiley might have been in 1992. You told him you were planning an exclusive dinner in his honor, to celebrate the opening of an important exhibition of his art at the museum where you worked. Your real motive, likely, was to show him off to the backers of the museum, but you couched it as an opportunity to meet collectors and build his clientele. He said he'd rather go fishing.

So that's what you did, on a yacht commandeered from a friend by the museum board chair. A party of trustees and donors entertained one another, cruising the Orange County coast, while Bill fished from the stern. Your retinas could not bear the light of him for long, that ecstatic grin beaming back into the glimmering sun.

Wiley died in a Marin County hospital in April, at 83. Obituaries yielded a lively impression of the man and the idiosyncrasies he revealed through his art. Skillful in all media, he was a masterful draftsman and watercolorist. Yet it was the stories he told—intricate, frantically embellished yarns spelled out in improbable visual contrivances, rebus puzzlers, groan-inducing verbal puns—that both made him famous and stymied critical acceptance.

Charles Desmarais, "Funk Art and the Pursuit of Authenticity." *Alta* (September 27, 2021), accessed online.

He was, by choice, a Californian. He was born in Indiana. He came to the Bay Area to study art, and he stayed.

He stayed, one assumes, in part because his talent was instantly rewarded here. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art gave him a one-man show in 1960, even before he graduated from what is now the San Francisco Art Institute, which had lit the fuse with scholarships that eventually supported both undergrad and graduate degrees. An easy step, then, to the faculty at UC Davis, to become immersed in the anarchic art scene peopled by such figures as Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, and Wayne Thiebaud, all of them urged on by students like Mary Heilmann and Bruce Nauman.

He stayed, as well, because it felt reminiscent of his rural upbringing. In 1997, in one of the many rambling, invaluable interviews Paul Karlstrom did as West Coast regional director for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, Wiley said he'd "been pretty much in Marin County, some part of it," since the late 1950s. Even in San Francisco, "you could, even without a car, walk across the Golden Gate and get down onto the ocean and fish." In Marin, though he might have to drive to Davis regularly, he could have a studio and live in the woods, on a creek in the San Geronimo Valley.

The working-class life Wiley knew as a teenager, though far from urban, was not like that. After the family left its farm in Indiana, his dad tried a number of things, looking to have his own business. "Cafés—filling station combinations and motels, we looked at a lot along the way," Wiley told Karlstrom.

A lot of blue-collar kids raised in those uncertain days after World War II emerged from similar backgrounds, descendants of people forced to construct a life from nothing, nearly. My own father drove a hack in New York. Sold vegetables. Headed to poultry farms in Jersey, making low-stakes deals, then drove the streets of the city as the egg man, selling from the back of a 1950 Chevy panel truck.

Wiley, his younger brother, Chuck, and their parents ended up in a trailer park in Richland, Washington. One of the most abused areas on the planet, Wiley recalled. "It's so polluted, they don't think they can ever clean it up.... It's where, along with Oak Ridge and New Mexico, where some of the first plutonium for the bomb was processed."

POWER OF FUNK

The full scope of Wiley's art is vast—so wide-ranging that no critical framework has yet been constructed to fully accommodate it.

The easy part of Wiley scholarship, such as it is, was done early on. In 1967, the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley presented an exhibition of enigmatic, surrealistic, and just plain goofy sculpture that the museum's director, Peter Selz, called *Funk*. Selz himself could not nail down what he meant by the title—"When you see it, you know it" was a formulation he found acceptable—but the show included Wiley, some of his fellow Davis artists, and others prominent on the Northern California scene of the day. The next year, when critic John Perreault dubbed Wiley a "Metaphysical Funk Monk" in an article in *ArtNews*, the die was cast. Whether he wanted to or not, Wiley would never shake the funk label.

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Wiley's "Hear in Silence" (2009), a seven-by-five-foot painting from an exhibition, "William T. Wiley: MONUMENTAL," on view at San Francisco's Hosfelt Gallery through October 16.

No one quite ignores Wiley's antiwar, pro-environment, generally progressive political commentary, which runs from the satirical to the bitter. Yet that aspect of the work, expressed in imagery and in the extensive texts that frequently appear in his paintings and drawings, is generally shrugged off by critics. More often, Wiley has been seen, as an article in *Artforum* puts it, as "part of an ad hoc community...whose work floated free of theoretical discourse."

For that matter, the depth of his love of language is yet to be fully plumbed—the puns, the long and involute titles he considered essential elements of many works, the pieces that are dense with words, the songs he composed, and the performances he wrote. Autobiography and anecdote twine through everything, much of it still waiting to be teased out and examined. Just a thesaurus of the thousands of Wiley phrases would be a worthy graduate thesis. The name of the ancient philosopher Lao Tzu rendered as "Lout Sue." A "pay per hanger" and a "pay per moon." "Gullibles travails" and the "were fair state."

Wiley said he'd stumbled onto Zen Buddhism in a copy of Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, which he'd come across in the now-defunct, quintessentially San Francisco bookstore Paul Elder & Company. References to Eastern thought make explicit appearances in certain works, but Wiley's personal understanding of Buddhism quietly imbues everything.

More than a score of books and major exhibition catalogs are devoted to Wiley's art, and his work is in perhaps 100 public collections, including virtually all major U.S. museums. Yet despite such attention to his lifelong efforts, no author has really laid a glove on him in all his complexity. Nor will you find his work topping lists of auction results. Critic Deborah Solomon, who wrote his obituary for the *New York Times*, proposes the most plausible explanation for the gaps.

"In New York," she writes, "Mr. Wiley remains less feted." She cites the critical bashing his work received while on display at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976 and recalls his abhorrence of the pervasive commerce of New York's art scene.

Some slights are crushing blows. Others, though, can be a badge of honor. Wiley told Karlstrom that in the late 1960s "it was all going down some very narrow road that didn't allow for very many people to accompany it. I didn't think it was healthy for art or those on the road. So, I wanted to...have a different connection with art, and being here [in the Bay Area]."

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“Poets and that whole literary connection that’s in this region” were key, he said. And, perhaps more than anything else, “the connection with nature.”

“I suppose in the mid-sixties,” he said, “I had some fantasy about getting a loft in New York and maybe staying there and doing that, but...now I can’t imagine. It doesn’t seem like enough to exist on in some way. Where would the art come from?”

POWER OF PLACE

To be good at fishing, one has to know the river. A good gardener understands their unique site. The soil, the weather. *This* aspect of *this* gentle mountain. This proximity to the stump where the honeybees shelter. One doesn’t have to be native—the bees are not. Wiley recognized where he fit in, like the vine that wraps its root around a stone, its tendrils grasping for trellis.

On my phone, I have a 2014 picture of Wiley alongside Barry McGee, 30 years Wiley’s junior and another major Bay Area artist whose work slips easily through critical filters. We were all at the Epiphany Party that was put on each January by Paule Anglim, the late gallerist who was equally a puzzle to most of the art “world.”

Others who could tell similar stories about choices made were probably there too. Paul Kos. Enrique Chagoya. Lynn Hershman Leeson. Jim Melchert. Tom Marioni. Alicia McCarthy. Catherine Wagner. Clare Rojas. And so many more, whether invited by Anglim or there in spirit. People who since the 1950s have shaped a history of American art that proceeds from the West, in an easterly direction. People who have determined to embrace the there here.

A new documentary, *Tell Them We Were Here*, recounts much the same story in a more pointedly political way. It looks at a different, mostly younger group of artists anchored in the Bay Area. “In an age of hyper-capitalism,” says artist and gallerist Griff Williams, who made the film with his son, Keelan, “this region has represented an empowering alternative worldview. One that emphasizes creativity and community over capital, one which is defiantly nonconformist, resistant to commercialization, and shaped by the progressive energy that defines the region’s history.”

Attachment to place, for a creative producer, is a kind of humility, a kind of grace. An acknowledgment that one is important only in relation to the larger web. That one’s personal significance is really just a calibration of vertex and viscosity.

I once wrote that Wiley was “revered by fellow artists, former students, and a broad public audience.” A onetime student who read the piece responded that I had it all wrong, that Wiley was not a giver. That all he ever did as a teacher or as an artist was wait for people to come to him.

Artist Mary Heilmann sees her former teacher’s self-effacement differently. She told Solomon, “He never made a phone call to advance his career.”

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Wiley might have said that both stories rang true. He reveled in contradiction, and throughout his career he pursued what he called “wizdumb.” He frequently depicted himself in a dunce cap.

One early work, from 1968, is a masterstroke of abnegation. It is a rectangular wooden box, 13 by 17¼ inches, 6 inches deep. You read it as a highly stylized human figure: A handled rope—call it a cord—emerges from an umbilicus in the belly of the box. Higher up, at the seat of thought, is a series of adhesive letters, the cheap ones they stick on mailboxes, that spell out the sculpture’s title. “WIZDUMB,” the letters say.

Written in ink, filling the bottom panel of the box, is a text above the artist’s signature. It reads, in part:

Some will probably feel this isn’t enough and that it’s some sort of put on. But there is no such thing as a put on. And even if there is it’s not very harmful. Then too nothing ever seems like it’s enough. I guess that’s about nothingness. Or taste or aesthetics. But art always seems a little bit sad and embarrassing too me. Except when I’m not afraid then I can see it all, in its good, bad, and sad, stupid, beautiful way and love it all over again

He might make a painting of grand ambition, then prick its balloon of pretension with a self-satirizing sketch in the margin. *Who Is Not a Slave (part a)* (1987) is a vast, swirling maelstrom of expressionist color and emotion, more than eight feet high and twice as wide. But the painting has a part b, a scribble of ink and pencil on a 14-by-11-inch sheet, in which the artist suggests that the whole thing was painted in the dark. As for style: “Suit your Ism,” he writes.

POWER OF LIGHT

I have no special claim on William Wiley’s memory. Many people loved him, but I suspect that most of us got to know him well only through his art. That’s the way it goes with artists who reveal so much of themselves in public. We want to slap them on the back when we see them, like an old friend. But real intimacy doesn’t come with the price of an exhibition catalog or a museum admission, or even with a long professional acquaintance.

Still, I have learned from him, and other artists like him, whose work and thought are in pursuit of authenticity. Such a practice cannot be shaped to a market or relocated for the convenience of someone else. It is secure in the place where it thrives best—part of a larger organism yet serving its own unique function.

It is wizdumb that prompted your own exodus from the city to a rural spot. Like Wiley long before, dislodging himself from a comfortable social niche, turning his back on the plan others had for his success. You start each day, as fog recedes from the eastern slope of Sonoma Mountain, surveying the results of last night’s skirmish in the long war with the small mammals who demand a share of anything you grow in this, their territory.

Around the time you learned of Bill’s death, a white-tailed kite first appeared in the sky above the nearby vineyard. An ally in the rodent war, with more sanguine tastes than yours and talon-sharp instincts. That first one you saw, you thought it was a lost seabird of some sort. Then it reared, and beat its wings, and hovered in the wind like an accipitrine Holy Ghost, backlit and radiant against the sun. •

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