

ARTFORUM

HUMANLY POSSIBLE

DAN NADEL ON THE ART OF WILLIAM T. WILEY



William T. Wiley, *Modern Sculpture with Weakness*, 1968, wood, Plexiglas, metal, rope, 17 × 80 × 17”.

It's 1970 and William T. Wiley, up in Marin County, California, underneath a canopy of trees by a spindly creek, writes to H. C. Westermann:

I've been working and bumming around—spooking myself. Me and the dog and the Iguana. I guess I'll walk down to the post office mail this letter and then out to the studio and see if there are any miracles to wrestle with. Or maybe I'll just hang around the stage door and congratulate the winners. Nothing to lose.¹

Wiley was referring to his own work space, his theater of creation. *Painter Baffles and Excess in California*, 1969, is one of his numerous watercolors from the late 1960s, all of them depicting the stage, the miracles, and some winners. In a deceptively illustrative mode, these images form an artistic autobiography. In *Paint-er Baffles*, Wiley's studio is overrun by objects and ideas, many of which were already, or would eventually become, parts of individual artworks. Some, like the wide brush at top left, immortalized in *Hard Rock Painter*, 1967, were already the subject of drawings and sculptures. A twisting pipe appears to pour ink into a basin, and the dark patterns of its surface prefigure a group of line drawings from the '70s. A log, fixed in place by a rope and a cable, offers a clue to a possible sculpture, like *Out Rageous Extension*, 1969, or per-haps the previous year's *Modern Sculpture with Weakness*. The collapsed, strung-together slats on the lower left were an idea for an unrealized object, while the woven bits of green cloth underneath appear often in the studio watercolors as individual x's (marking the spot) or multiplied across entire surfaces.

Dan Nadel, "Humanly Possible" *Artforum* (April 2019), accessed online.



William T. Wiley, *Painter Baffles and Excess in California*, 1969, ink, pencil, felt-tip pen, and watercolor on paper, 28 1/4 x 20 1/4".

Like his early influences Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, and Westermann, Wiley makes artworks that are dense with meaning and that are built by developing, recombining, and cataloguing, in all media available to him, the elements of a visual vocabulary suffused with memory and emotion. This activity is grounded in his Zen-influenced embrace of mystery and happenstance, combined with both a devotion to craft and an affinity for found, and especially natural, objects. His artmaking occurs both in- and out of doors—he brings materials from shelter to nature and back again. This way of working is similar to those of other artists of his generation in Northern California, including his high-school friends Robert Hudson and William Allan. In the '60s and '70s, these artists were part of an ad hoc community (intimately chronicled by his then wife Dorothy Wiley and fellow film-maker Gunvor Nelson in the essential 1971 documentary *Five Artists: BillBobBillBillBob*) whose work floated free of theoretical discourse and has been, for that very reason, hard to pin down, and thus to make visible. Yet in retrospect, their holistic approach appears radical in its own way.

Wiley was born in 1937 in Bedford, Indiana. His family was constantly

in transit: through Wyoming, across the Southwest, touching down for a year in a small forgotten town fifty miles south of Dallas where his parents bought a gas station and the Red Top Café, finally settling in Richland, Washington. Wiley picked up a taste for maps, local slang, and the great American visual vernacular: oddball mascots; folk signage; comics, especially Fred Harman's *Red Ryder*, with its law-and-order cowboy adventures, and Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, with its environmentalist messages and cutting wordplay rendered in virtuosic calligraphy.

Richland sits at the confluence of the Yakima and Columbia Rivers, out east by the Oregon border in flat desert land. It was bought and cleared by the US Army in 1943 as a restricted-access community for employees of Hanford Engineer Works, a plutonium reactor. Wiley's father poured concrete for the plant. The family lived in Chubbs Trailer Court, in one of hundreds of prefabricated homes that sprang up to accomm-



Dorothy Wiley and Gunvor Nelson, *Five Artists: BillBob-BillBillBob*, 1971, 16 mm, color, sound, 70 minutes.
William T. Wiley

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William T. Wiley, *Modern Sculpture with Weakness* (detail), 1968, wood, Plexiglas, metal, rope, 17 × 80 × 17".

odate the Manhattan Project. The politics of human and environmental destruction were ever present: Neighbors brought home radioactive wrenches from the jobsite to show the kids; adventures out in the desert ended with stern warnings from the military police; the high school teams were named the Bombers and their logo was a mushroom cloud. At Columbia High, Wiley met Hudson and Allan. All three shared the same transformative high school teacher, Jim McGrath, who introduced the boys to a personal canon that included Northwest mystic painters Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, Dada, Surrealism, and the Asian art collection at the Seattle Art Museum. McGrath invited Yakima tribe elders to the classroom to discuss the history of the land and how it was taken from them.

In 1956, Wiley enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute (then called the California School of Fine Arts), where Allan was already a student.

Hudson would soon join them. There, they would meet Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, and the rest of a slightly older cohort of Bay Area artists on the edge of the Beat scene. The pool of teachers at the school at midcentury, which included Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell, was catholic in taste and rich in talent. There was not a dichotomy between abstraction and figuration. The absence of any local art market helped foster a tight-knit community, in which students and teachers were equals. In 1958, Wiley discovered Paul Reps's book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (1957), and like so many other Americans in that era, he became fascinated by Zen Buddhism. In Wiley's case, Zen was not a passing fad but an enduring interest, which laid the groundwork for his later engagement with John Cage's writings and processes. Both Reps and Cage demonstrated the idea that accepting contradiction and irresolution is a way to navigate life and art. That equipoise is evident in the work: all those objects strewn about the studio, all equal, at ease apart or together.

When Wiley first saw Jasper Johns's *Target with Four Faces*, 1958, on the cover of the January 1958 issue of *Artnews*, and *Flag*, 1945–55, shortly after, he recognized, as Cage did, the older painter's understanding of absurdity and contradiction and intuited the work's relationship to Marcel Duchamp and Dada. Most crucially, he took it as a signal that he could focus on the idea of America as embodied in the sights of his childhood—"America" as both subject and terrain, ideology and physical entity. And while Johns made concise and complete systems, robustly constructed yet allowing for multiple readings, Wiley's approach is more ragged: a jumble of natural and manufactured things in precarious interrelationship, a brokenness that acknowledges and is present with our fraught history, without any triumphalist or escapist gestures.

Like many of his peers, Wiley left San Francisco as soon as he graduated. Even then, the city was unaffordable for most artists, and Wiley preferred the country life in Marin County. In the early '60s, the University of California, Davis, ninety minutes northeast in the Central Valley, was assembling a radical art department. He began teaching there in 1962, alongside colleagues including Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, and Wayne Thiebaud.

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William T. Wiley, *Movement to Blackball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)*, 1968, black friction tape, wooden stool, gold leaf, rubber tricycle tires, carved wooden log by H. C. Westermann, paper and tape on board, linoleum flooring, 50 × 24 × 24".

Among Wiley's earliest graduate students was Bruce Nauman, who arrived in 1964. Nauman embraced Wiley's use of rough, found materials, wordplay, and life-is-art-art-is-life ethos, while Wiley took in Nauman's cerebral, proto-Conceptual approach to what an art object could be, epitomized in the younger artist's untitled fiber-glass-and-polyester—resin sculptures. In 1965, the pair jointly wrote an admiring letter to Westermann and prankishly asked what the artist, whom they hadn't met, thought of the fact that Man Ray's work *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, was mysteriously referred to as *The Riddle* in a con-temporaneous catalogue. On the same postcard, they praised Westermann's 1963 sculpture *The Big Change*. It is one of his finest works, a true Surrea-

list enigma, an impossible object—an embodied contradiction that would have lodged in Wiley's Zen-conditioned brain. This action, which aligned Wiley and Nauman with an admired elder and his Surrealist and Dada forebears, set the stage for a larger project.

That same year, Wiley happened on a linoleum-fronted wooden object vaguely resembling a child's chair in the Mount Carmel Salvage Shop. Nauman returned with Wiley to look at the Slant Step, as it would soon be called, and later encouraged him to buy it. Wiley did, and this odd item, which seemed to indicate, but never articulate, a purpose, inspired work from the artists and many of their friends, including Allan and Hudson, all resulting in a 1966 exhibition at San Francisco's Berkeley Gallery and a cult following (which would lead to publications and more exhibitions). The Nauman-Wiley/Davis-Marin nexus in the mid-'60s was a magnet for young artists looking for unorthodox materials and ideas. This loose coterie developed an organic West Coast corollary to the kind of allusive sculpture that was being made in New York by Eva Hesse and Keith Sonnier, among others—"Eccentric Abstraction," as Lucy Lippard dubbed it. Mary Heilmann, then a graduate student in sculpture at UC Berkeley, met with Wiley and Nauman weekly for critiques and frequent discussions about Duchamp, whom the former was studying closely. "We must use his example of mobility and flexibility as an imperfect but well-intentioned model of existence,"² Wiley wrote.

As Nauman and Heilmann understood, that mobility and imperfection is crucial to Wiley's art. It is what Harald Szeemann likely saw when he chose it for his 1969 exhibition "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form" and for Documenta 5 three years later. "He lives deep in the woods and makes pointed situations where statics meet aggressive eccentricity,"³ Szeemann wrote. One such situation would be *Painter Baffles*, which was included in the 1969 show, as was *Slab's Axe in Change*, 1967, a miniature mélange of landscape, studio floor, and what might be titular sculpture. That sculpture, also titled *Slab's Axe in Change*, 1968, is an assemblage of found components: an ax that the artist has said reminds him of one his family owned is bolted to a Plexiglas disc meant to represent the sound of the tool striking wood. If the drawing is a fantasy of the sculpture in an impossible landscape bordered by lush washes, the sculpture is a memory

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given concrete form—as mysterious as Man Ray’s *Enigma* and as impossibly comedic as Westermann’s *The Big Change*.

In 1968 and ’69, Wiley exhibited *Movement to Blackball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)*, 1968, in New York and Los Angeles. In its first showing, Wiley invited visitors to add to a globe of black electrician’s tape. In its second, paired with a recording by Wiley’s film and performance collaborator Steve Reich, he turned it into an ongoing work in progress. The movement, the monument, would only be finished when it “achieve[d] proper proportions,” he wrote, perhaps anticipating that the demise of white supremacy was a long way away. When exhibited today, the work is accompanied by a 1969 gift from Westermann, whose drawings and sculptures had long represented the horror of American violence: a split and hollowed-out log intended to hold rolls of black tape. It was, Wiley wrote to his friend, an “excellent container for inspiration and sustained effort.”⁴ Wiley undertook this sculpture immediately after hearing the news of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Progressive for its time, it retains the sense of a shocked, almost naive response, and the punning title nearly tilts into presumptuousness. But Westermann’s intervention has made it into something else, a monument that stages its own unfinished task; it enacts the horror of being an ever-growing cenotaph for the casualties of racism. Collaborative, invested in material presence yet insistently historicized, imperfect but open to change, it exemplifies Wiley’s ethos.

The black globe appears in perpetually changing states throughout Wiley’s paintings and works on paper from 1970 onward. In another studio-view watercolor, *Wizdumb Bridge*, 1969, it sits on a worktable next to the 1969 assemblage with which the drawing shares a title. A belt is pinned to logs with mini rhino horns (an allusion to both the endangered species and an earlier group of artworks) and adorned with an infinity symbol apparently affixed by a lead pyramid (another earlier motif). On the wall is a blank canvas. The modest materials of the “bridge” enforce its status as a changeable, contingent object that could collapse or last forever. In the drawing, it forms an X with an aqua-colored spill from a tipped-over paint can. We are “there” on a metaphysical map. The story underneath the image tells of Wiley’s father, “the tool that didn’t seem to fit” obliquely referencing his surveyor’s pole, which is itself not in the picture. The subjects of the drawing—personal history, the art process, the cyclical nature of life—are neither wise nor dumb, as the title punningly asserts. They just are.

In *I’ve Got It All on the Line*, 1970, we at last get a glimpse of what’s outside Wiley’s studio, the edge of which is indicated by the stuff of worldly business—a phone, some notes, a hat. The parched ground of the artist’s youth terminates in an agrarian landscape, California as Pieter Bruegel the Elder might have imagined it. If *The Painter Baffles* depicts the stage, *I’ve Got It*



William T. Wiley, *Movement to Blackball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)*, 1968, black friction tape, wooden stool, gold leaf, rubber tricy-cle tires, carved wooden log by H. C. Westermann, paper and tape on board, linoleum flooring, 50 × 24 × 24”.

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William T. Wiley, *Slab's Axe in Change*,
1968, wood, steel, Plexiglas, 40 1/2 × 17 × 3".

All on the Line, 1970, we at last get a glimpse of what's outside Wiley's studio, the edge of which is indicated by the stuff of worldly business—a phone, some notes, a hat. The parched ground of the artist's youth terminates in an agrarian landscape, California as Pieter Bruegel the Elder might have imagined it. If *The Painter Baffles* depicts the stage, *I've Got It* offers the world around it. This is the terrain—indicated by Johns's *Flag*—stolen from the Yakima tribe and despoiled by the Manhattan Project. And in it, Wiley has arranged a clothesline's worth of symbols, among them an infinity sign and a scythe, for the prelapsarian harvest, balanced impossibly on that black-and-white banded pole. Art, he seems to indicate, is out there, on the line, even in all this compromised beauty: frail, in pieces, but possible.

Dan Nadel is a writer and curator based in New York. He has organized the exhibitions “Building a Different Model” (through December 29) at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, Napa, California, and “Landscape Without Boundaries” at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art in Davis, California, opening in May.

NOTES

1. William T. Wiley to H. C. Westermann, 15 July, 1970, H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of Joanna Beall, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.
2. William T. Wiley, “Thoughts on Marcel Duchamp,” in *William T. Wiley*, ed. Brenda Richardson, exh. cat. (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum, 1971).
3. Harald Szeemann, “How Does an Exhibition Come into Being?,” in *Selected Writings* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 40.
4. William T. Wiley to H. C. Westermann, 7 February, 1969, H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of Joanna Beall, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

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