

ARTFORUM

PASSAGES

WILLIAM T. WILEY (1937–2021)



William T. Wiley, 1966. Photographer unknown.

Wiley enjoyed. So let's run through his life: grows up in Richland, Washington, his father having poured concrete for the Manhattan Project; has a high-school art teacher who makes the Yakama Nation a part of his students' lives; in 1958, enters California School of Fine Art already understanding the terrible power of human ingenuity, the import of nonwhite traditions, the captivity and destruction of same, and has a particular penchant for wordplay from a childhood of ravenously consuming the great American commercial-art landscape. He graduates in 1962 with a master's degree, moves to Marin County, and teaches at the University of California, Davis.

A virtuoso draftsman who could switch between bravado strokes and tentative descriptive marks, he passes through different modes of artmaking—hard-edged Pop abstraction, intricately delineated sculptures of imagined objects—and finds a grammar of symbols that carries him through life. As an influence, H. C.

LOVING WHATEVER IT IS that you clutch to your chest and call “art” means taking some care of the culture around that word and its objects. It's a positive gesture to some kind of eternity. It means you love the making of things, and you do not fear those things, nor fear or resent the artist who makes the things you don't understand. You care for the artist who passively refuses to take part in whatever culture he deems damaging to his mind or spiritual well-being. These are the ways I want to love and the ways I believe in William T. Wiley, who died on April 25. I first met Bill Wiley in early January 2015. I was staying near his place in Woodacre and left a phone message asking if I could come by the next day. The voice on the call back early the next morning was barely a whisper: “This is Wiley. Stop over in a little while.” I did. Inside his modest red-barn studio was the sort of artistic effusion and palimpsest of creation he has so often drawn and painted. Nothing was turned against the wall. Old, new, unfinished, never-to-be-finished, existing for each other, for him, and, just a tiny bit, for me.

To grasp the enormousness of Wiley as an artist is to never really grasp it—the kind of ca. 1960 pop-Zen paradox

Dan Nadel, “Passages: William T. Wiley (1937–2021).” *Artforum* (May 10 2021), accessed online.

Westermann and his unbeatable combination of humor and horror were paramount; and then Duchamp, Man Ray, Magritte, all of whom were present in the West Coast museums of the 1960s, as well as Joseph Beuys, whose shamanistic and shambolic efforts were followed by Wiley and his comrades. He became best known in the late 1960s for his watercolor snapshots of the studio as a place in which art objects come alive together and are free to develop their own existences—sometimes in physical space, other times in a realm unknown. His sculptures, a woodland equivalent of the East Coast’s “Eccentric Abstraction,” brought him to international attention in shows like “Live in Your Head—When Attitudes Become Form” (1969), Documenta V (1972), and a solo project at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1976. In the 1980s, Wiley became extremely concerned with nuclear proliferation, mass incarceration, and later the first war in Iraq and then our current never-ending war. In his last years, he worked on slow-building abstractions.

But much of this you can find in my *Artforum* essay from 2019. What feels most important about Wiley as an artist is his willingness to be messy, which is another way of saying he was disinterested in the idea of making a “body of work,” for better and (commercially) for worse. On the one hand, he allowed and invited viewers to discover what they needed within the tangle. On the other, he foiled, intentionally or not, any attempt to offer a linear explanation of his life in art. Another way to think about him is like the Grateful Dead, for whom he opened (with Mike Henderson) on New Year’s Eve, 1983: He insisted on making mistakes in public, on making art for the sake of art, even if it was embarrassing. There’s an example here. More mistakes, less packaging; more experiments, less messaging.

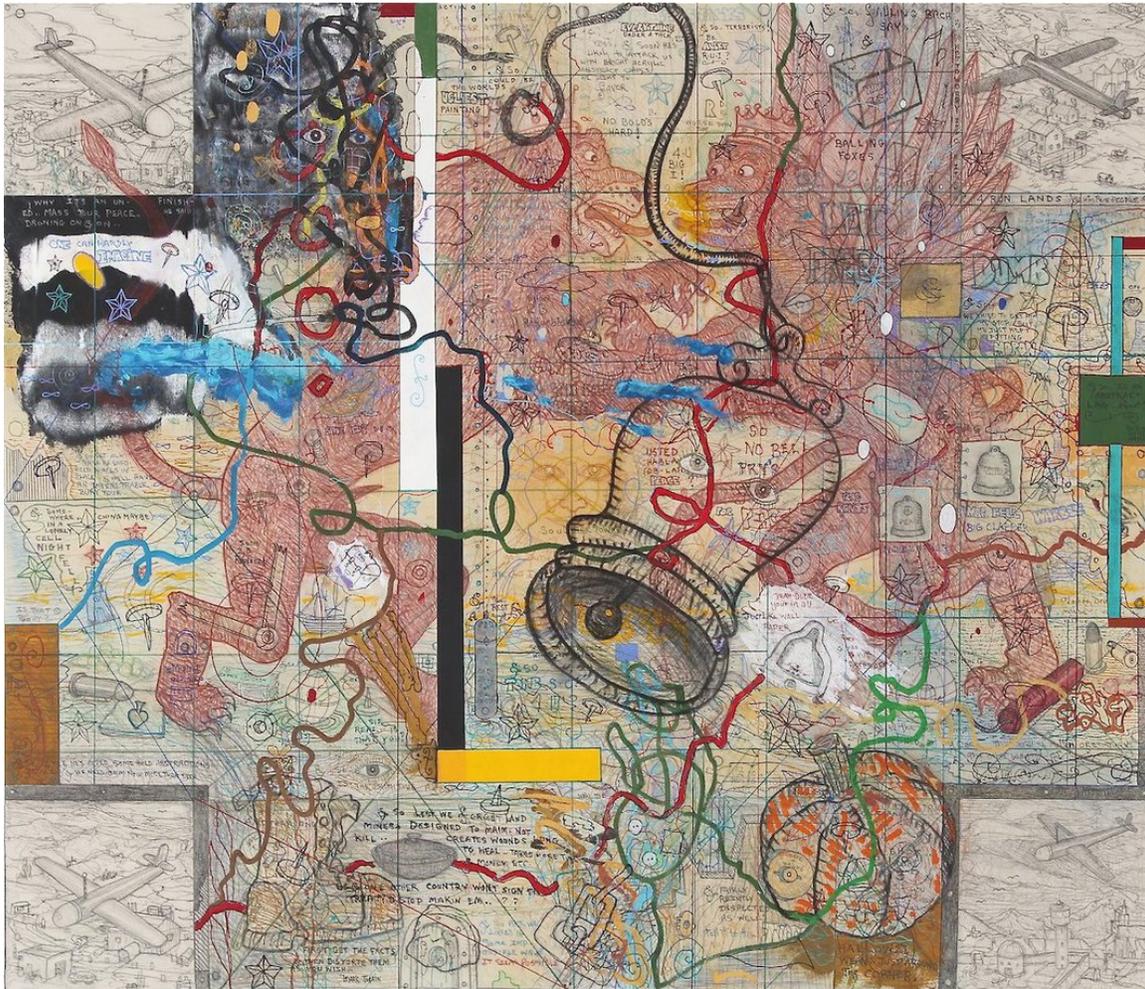
Most times I visited Wiley, he would tell me two things. First: “Yogi says, ‘When you come to that fork in the road, take it.’” Meaning, everything is absurd, there is no right way, but you still have to make a meaningful choice. Until this sunny May morning, I assumed Wiley was referencing an ancient philosophical maxim—he threw the *I-Ching* every day and was well read in the ways of Zen Buddhism. In fact, it was Yogi Berra giving a pal directions to his home in New Jersey. Second: H. C. Westermann’s remarks to Wiley on meditation: “It’s supposed to make me more calm, but it makes me anxious. Ah, balls, I could sit here all night and never see the light.” To be human was to both get your hands in the dirt and aspire to float above it.

So, Wiley, who was photographed in 1965, beautiful and flying a question mark as though it were a kite, was serious in his humor, funny in his seriousness, viewing art and life as intertwined processes of profound questioning. I think of him now when I listen to Bill Callahan’s recent song “Cowboy,” about “living like the cowboy on the late, late movie.” Under those words is a lilting Western waltz, a mournful trumpet, and the sound of tumbleweeds. He means it, but he means it with a grin. Wiley loved those old movies, and he was authentically an old Western man himself, but one who held no illusions about the price paid for the life and the land. His art, in all its shambling glory, is the final evidence of that. “Freedom,” a friend recently wrote to me, “is its own consequence.” In the end, movie cowboys, artists, and artists who play cowboys—they are all, as Callahan sings,

Trying to fit it all in
Before the test pattern and the anthem
And off to bed you go, and off to sleep
And off to dream that trail you ride.

Dan Nadel, “Passages: William T. Wiley (1937-2021).” *Artforum* (May 10 2021), accessed online.

Dan Nadel is curator at large for the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, University of California, Davis. His book *It's Life as I See It: Black Cartoonists in Chicago, 1940–1980* (New York Review Comics, 2021) will be released in June to accompany his exhibition “Chicago Comics, 1960s to Now” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (June 19–October 3, 2021).



William T. Wiley, *No Bell Prys for Peace with Predator Drone*, 2010, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 61 x 71 1/2”.

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