

ARTNEWS

William T. Wiley, Influential Bay Area Funk Artist and Educator, Is Dead at 83



William T. Wiley with his 1968 sculpture *To Marcel Duchamp, 1887–1968, Artist, Tool and Die Maker*, now owned by the Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, New Jersey.
PHOTO LINDA EASTMAN/COURTESY JAN SHREM AND MARIA MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM OF ART

William T. Wiley, a Funk artist whose offbeat art and influential teaching practice have inspired generations of artists in the Bay Area, has died at 83. Los Angeles's Parker Gallery, which co-represents the artist with Hosfelt Gallery in San Francisco, said in a newsletter on Thursday that Wiley had died on April 25. *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported that he had Parkinson's disease.

During the 1960s and '70s, Wiley's work earned widespread admiration among a rising crop of artists intrigued by his Dada-inflected sculptures composed of unlikely ready-made objects, like logs and

unclassifiable things found at salvage shops. At the same time that he was appearing in major exhibitions around the world, he was also acting as a mentor to artists who would go on to achieve stardom, including Bruce Nauman, who was his student at the University of California, Davis.

Among the most historically important exhibitions that he appeared in was Harald Szeemann's legendary "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," a 1969 show staged at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland that helped to solidify the Conceptualist and Minimalist art movements. There, Wiley showed *Slab's Axe in Change* (1968), featuring an axe affixed to a Plexiglas disc. That axe, Wiley said, recalled one that his family owned. "The sculpture is a memory given concrete form—as mysterious as Man Ray's *Enigma* and as impossibly comedic as [H. C.] Westermann's *The Big Change*," curator Dan Nadel, who is currently organizing a Wiley survey for UC Davis's museum, wrote in a 2019 *Artforum* essay.

This sly, drily funny sensibility later wove its way into Wiley's watercolors, the works for which the artist is now best known. In these works, made starting in the late 1960s, densely rendered landscapes and imagined

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terrains are overlaid with seemingly random imagery. Wiley often wrote on top of them, lending narratives or contexts that made the works even harder to understand.

William T. Wiley was born in 1937 in Bedford, Indiana, and lived a peripatetic existence as a child, ultimately settling Washington. He attended the California School of the Arts (now known as the San Francisco Art Institute), where he came into contact with more established Bay Area artists like Joan Brown and Jay DeFeo, and developed an interest in Zen Buddhism and Jasper Johns's art.

During the '60s, Wiley was grouped in with a loose movement largely centered around the Bay Area known as Funk art, which marked a turn away from the styles associated with Abstract Expressionism toward figurative modes that were cartoonish, surreal, and often crass. Several of Wiley's colleagues, including Manuel Neri and Robert Arneson, were also a part of that movement, and their art was later included in the Peter Selz's 1967 Berkeley Art Museum exhibition "Funk!"

Wiley's art was later also included in three editions of the Whitney Annual and one of the museum's Biennials, two editions of the Venice Biennale in Italy, and Szeemann's famed Documenta V in 1972 in Kassel, Germany. His work was the subject of a retrospective that opened at the Walker Art Center in 1979 and later traveled to the Dallas Art Museum, the Denver Art Museum in Colorado, the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona, as well as a 2009 survey that appeared at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Throughout his career, Wiley embraced all things mysterious. "Things that are enigmatic seem clearer to me than that which is supposed to be clear," he said in a 1997 oral history conducted by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. "I mean, I think we have some idea of clarity, which is only an idea."

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