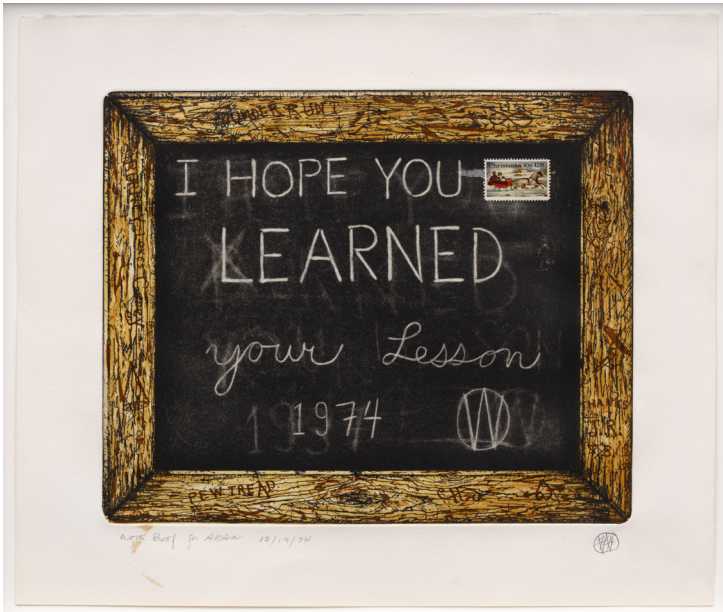


HYPERALLERGIC

William T. Wiley's Wild Art Legacy

Nothing Is to Be Done for William T. Wiley is a roller derby of irreverent and energetic ideas and a serious revelation about Northern California's art historical significance.

by Daniel Gerwin



William T. Wiley, "I Hope You Learned Your Lesson" (1974), aquatint from copper plates, printed in three colors on J. Barcham Green, 14 x 17 inches, 16 x 18 1/2 inches framed; work proof (all images courtesy Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, photos by Paul Salvesson)

LOS ANGELES — A well-curated exhibition makes a fantastic art class, and a shining example can be found at Parker Gallery if you hurry over there before the current group show closes on August 6. *Nothing Is to Be Done for William T. Wiley* is two things at once: a roller derby of irreverent and energetic ideas, and a serious revelation about Northern California's art historical significance.

The Southern California art scene is generally equated with the West Coast's contribution to American mid to late 20th-century art, which is to say, deftly whipping the rug out from under New York's high-minded Minimalism with a brew of conceptualism and humor. Familiar names in this arena include John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Ed Ruscha. But there was enormous energy further north in the Bay Area, and a good chunk of it emanated from William T. Wiley, a founder of the

funk movement, who taught at UC Davis in the 1960s and died last year.

Wiley is represented by six artworks in this show, including sculptures and works on paper, reflecting the breadth of his invention. My personal favorite is "Allan's Book of the Month Club" (1966), in which the artist, a famous punster, has built a war club with a wooden handle, whose business end is a book sporting a nasty spike. I have never joined a book club for fear that sitting in those circles would feel exactly like being beaten over the head by a cudgel more or less like Wiley's, so this sculpture spoke to me immediately.

A current of humor, often involving wordplay, flows out from Wiley and into many of the 47 works presented. Jimmie Durham has a terrific piece titled "Scruples" (2014) involving two small stones displayed in a bell

Daniel Gerwin, "William T. Wiley's Wild Art Legacy." *Hyperallergic* (July 26, 2022), accessed online.

jar, with a handwritten note explaining that the Latin root *scrupus* refers to a stone in your shoe causing you to hesitate or change direction. As good a definition for art as any: great art can be an irritant, making us rethink our values and even our lives. Bruce Nauman, a master irritator and a student of Wiley's, embraces his teacher's playful spirit in seven works on paper, all untitled from 1968. One is a simple list of phrases, each launching off the previous one in a meandering chain of associations, so that Nauman eventually finds his way from *check in* to *square off*, to *give up* and on to *jerk off*, then *take off*, and finally *add up*. A drawing nearby shows Nauman following a similar visual linkage: an overhand knot becomes artist H.C. Westermann's ear. These works are not only a window into Nauman's exploratory process, but a tidy demonstration of how stream of consciousness thought experiments underlie so much great art.



Installation view of *Nothing Is to Be Done* for William T. Wiley at Parker Gallery, Los Angeles

Daniel Gerwin, "William T. Wiley's Wild Art Legacy." *Hyperallergic* (July 26, 2022), accessed online.

Wiley was a pioneer of text-based art. “Tension on the Cable” (1972) is a fine example of his approach. A sweet watercolor depicts a large tree branch supporting a cable, whose function is far from clear but may involve a rope swing above a stream. Three cursive lines written below masquerade as a caption but have no clear relation to anything above; they are simply goofy doggerel encouraging the reader to keep the rhymes, and the game, flowing like the burbling stream in the picture.

Subsequent artists have indeed kept up Wiley’s rhythm, including those who were never his students, such as Ree Morton, Sue Williams, and Amy Yao, all represented in this show. I love everything Morton ever made, and am as delighted as ever by her drawing “Untitled (Woodgrain, Flower Parts)” (c. 1974), in which she sketches and labels a flower’s reproductive organs, leaving viewers to glean all that’s implied. Flowers produce fruit, and this exhibition opened my eyes to the ripe harvest of Wiley’s legacy.

Daniel Gerwin, “William T. Wiley’s Wild Art Legacy.” *Hyperallergic* (July 26, 2022), accessed online.