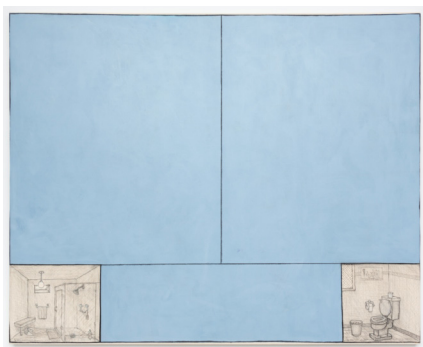


HYPERALLERGIC

The Power of Puns

William T. Wiley's message is urgent, disquieting, and necessary to these addled, disjointed, the rich-get-richer times.



William T. Wiley, "Abstract Painting with Shower & Toilet" (2008), acrylic, charcoal and graphite on canvas, 61 1/8 x 75 3/4 inches (all images © William T. Wiley, courtesy the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles)

Let's begin with "Abstract Painting with Shower and Toilet" (2008) in the exhibition *William T. Wiley: Real Eye on Change* at Gordon Robichaux, through the gallery's exchange with Parker Gallery in Los Angeles. (Parker Gallery is currently hosting a group show of Gordon Robichaux artists.) The painting is one of 16 works in different mediums that are included in this, Wiley's first solo show in New York in a decade. The works range in date from 1963 to 2018.

I don't think many people know how bitinglly precise and unsettlingly funny Wiley can be. He is one of the foremost critics of America's egotism and unsustainable way of life, expressing his critiques in beautifully and sharply rendered paintings and drawings. He is tenderer and less eruptive than Peter Saul, but his message is just as urgent, disquieting, and necessary to these addled, disjointed, the rich-get-richer times.

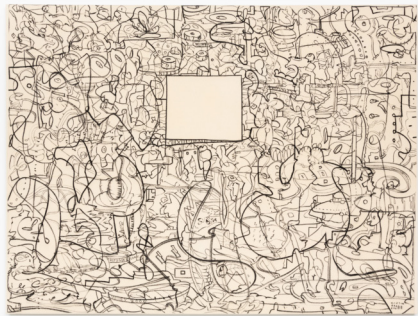
The blue monochrome surface of "Abstract Painting with Shower and Toilet" is a pitch-perfect echo of the hue Robert Motherwell was so fond of. Using charcoal to make the connection to Motherwell (and particularly his *Open* series) more explicit, Wiley divides the surface vertically and horizontal into three blue zones.

Nestled in the lower right- and left-hand corners are exact pencil drawing on unpainted canvas. The drawing on the left depicts a large, transparent shower stall in a room with a bare bulb and a pair of slippers under a bench. In the right-hand corner, Wiley has drawn a view of a bathroom with a toilet, trash receptacle, and roll of toilet paper.

The drawings — one about cleanliness and the other about the efficient disposal of human waste — anchor the painting. It is too easy and reductive to see this painting simply as a rejection of abstraction. Rather, I think it reveals a conundrum that Wiley has wrestled with throughout his career: What is the relationship between art and life?

Wiley's love of abstraction is tempered by his awareness of what is going on outside the sanctuary of his studio. In the large charcoal-on-canvas "No Sign for the Refugee Camp" (2006), an empty rectangle in the upper middle of the composition is surrounded with charcoal lines of different densities. The lines oscillate smoothly between images and meandering trails: One second you see a transparent pennant or a one-eyed head, the next you see black arabesques and open curves.

John Yau, "The Power of Puns." *Hyperallergic* (March 21, 2020), accessed online.



William T. Wiley, “No Sign for the Refugee Camp” (2006), charcoal on canvas, 60 x 80 inches

Wiley is not sitting on the cusp between abstraction and figuration — a commonplace tactic — but rather embracing both possibilities. He is deft enough to make marks that approach abstraction or figuration without quite pushing into the comfort zone of either. Moreover, the layered drawing in “No Sign for the Refugee Camp” sits between mayhem and order; I am never quite sure what I am looking at, which is one of the work’s pleasures.

In the lower left-hand corner, we read the title. Below it, “Wiley 2006.” The date is a clue — other than these words, there is no overt reference to the refugee crisis that was happening when Wiley made this drawing, which included the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Sudanese

from their homes. Is the empty rectangle — where a painting might be — the only sanctuary? Is that why Wiley has refused to make a mark there?

I am reminded of this line from Michael Palmer’s “Baudelaire Series”:

A man undergoes pain while sitting at a piano
knowing thousands will die while he is playing

For Wiley, the question is not if art can be made after Auschwitz (per Theodor W. Adorno’s famous phrase), but whether or not it can be made in the present.

In the watercolor “X Claimed” (2012), Wiley depicts an open wood frame with a crossbars forming an X. The ground is a dense, atmospheric gray, somewhere between a stormy, portentous sky and a dirty blackboard. Just above the bottom bar of the frame, Wiley has written:

& SO X CLAIMED ... framed in EXOTIC WOULD. AS WELL AS COULDNTS & COULDS!!

The watercolor, with its X, names itself (“framed in EXOTIC WOULD”), as well as evokes the limitations of art, its “COULDNTS & COULDS.”

By employing puns — a low, disruptive form of humor that is often aligned with jokes of bad taste — to expose a conflicted state of consciousness, Wiley scrutinizes the barrier separating the internal realm (thinking and wishing) from public or shared experience (action and recognition): the would from the wood, and could from couldn’t. This argument, and all its detours and associations, is Wiley’s focus in his art.

In using puns to shape moments of conflict, particularly between his thoughts and society’s actions or inactions (the “Real Eye/Rely” of the exhibition’s title), Wiley underscores the feelings of frustration and marginalization that are endemic to everyday life; each of us feels left out in one way or another. Despite this realization, and even as one protests, grows angry, becomes frustrated, can one celebrate? This is a question the artist repeatedly returns to.

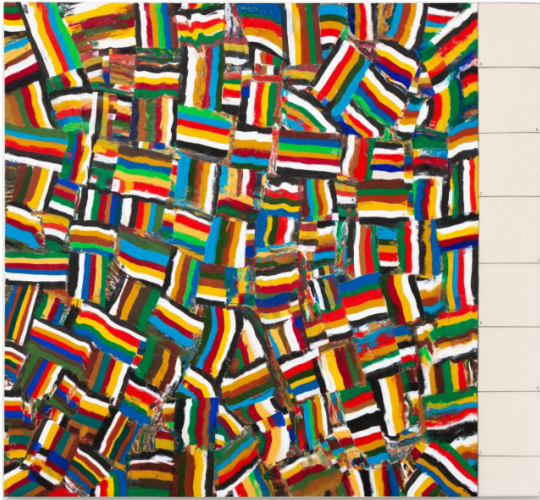


William T. Wiley, “X Claimed” (2012), watercolor and ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches

John Yau, “The Power of Puns.” *Hyperallergic* (March 21, 2020), accessed online.

By embracing all kinds of puns and the fracturing of language, he formally accomplishes two things. First, he uses an aggressive, antisocial humor to comment on a public discourse that seldom involves the exchange of free ideas and information, as well as incorporates a destabilized, debased form of language that is capable of suggesting multiple readings and is at odds with itself. The beauty of a pun is that, in order to work, it must expose its own mechanisms, which Wiley also does visually when he juxtaposes a toilet and shower with an abstract painting.

He is a consummate draftsman for whom the doodle, words, drawing, and the brushstroke are equally important. He invites the viewer to sort through various languages, from abstraction to figuration, and from written words to sounds — recognizing that none of it fits neatly together.



William T. Wiley, "A.B.'s Tract" (2013), acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 61 3/4 x 67 inches

function as disruptions that must be reflected upon. They suggest that a stalemate has been reached in discourse. The only response is to dramatize the impasse that society has arrived at with no sense of how to move forward.

Wiley's practice requires that he constantly unmask himself and become vulnerable. In contrast to a studio practice in which thinking leads to action, to deciding to do this or that, his makes his ruminations the subject of much of his work.

He is an iconoclast and, in this regard, shares something with his peer Peter Saul, with an older artist he befriended, H. C. Westermann, and with Philip Guston. Like them, he is motivated by both aesthetic and ethical reasons to address what I would call the American psyche. Like them, Wiley wants to tell stories.

Wiley's iconoclasm often takes the form of simultaneous homage and critique. His verbal puns and visual juxtapositions

John Yau, "The Power of Puns." *Hyperallergic* (March 21, 2020), accessed online.