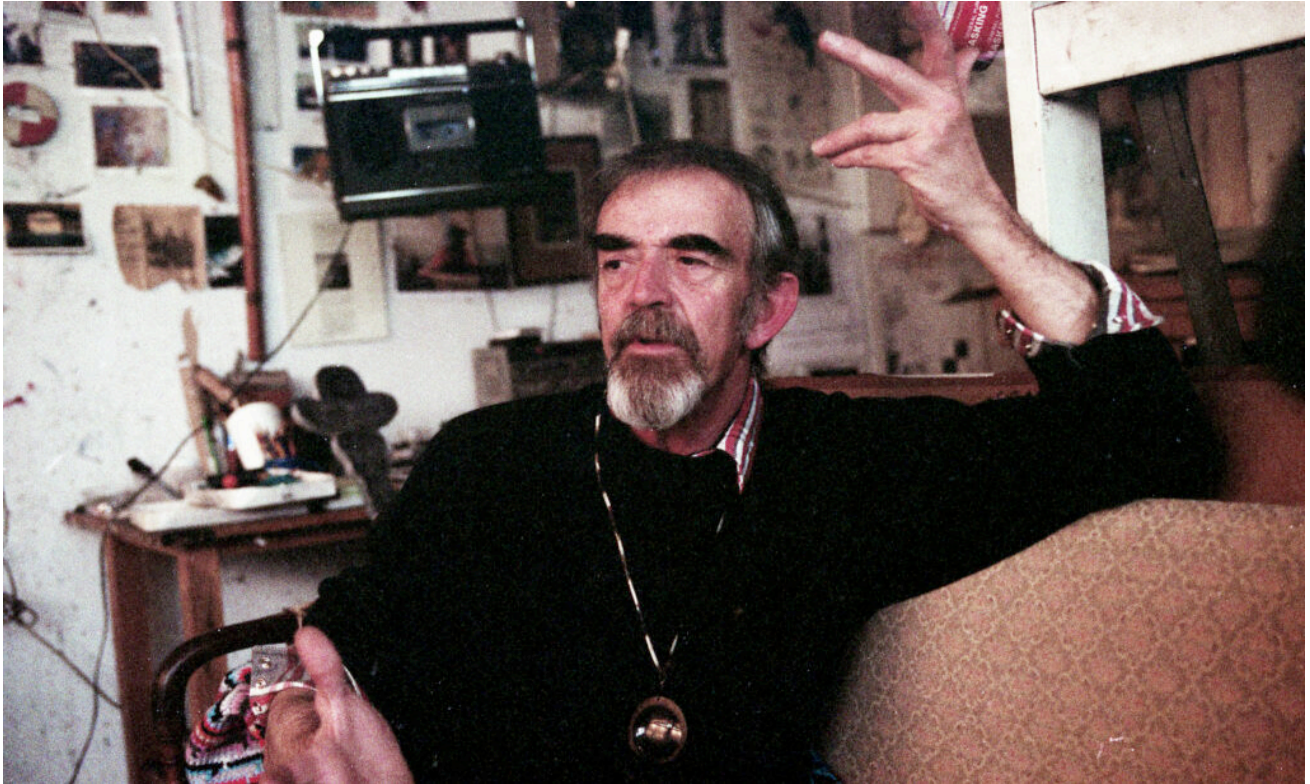


San Francisco Chronicle

William T. Wiley, multifaceted artist and educator integral to Bay Area art scene, dies at 83



Artist William Wiley is interviewed in 1996 at his Woodacre studio in Marin County.
Photo: Jerry Telfer, The Chronicle 1996

William T. Wiley — a founder of the Bay Area Funk art movement who expanded into every medium and style of creation from watercolor to printmaking to giant sculptures in a career that lasted from 1960 until just a few months ago — died Sunday, April 25, at Marin General Hospital.

His death was due to complications from Parkinson's disease, which he'd suffered from since 2014, said his son, Ethan Wiley. He was 83.

A painter with a unique style developed at an early age, Wiley had exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1960 when he was 23 and still an undergraduate at the San Francisco Art Institute. Since then, SFMOMA has come to own 50 of his pieces, with eight of them — in mediums from ink on felt and leather to etching on paper — on display in a designated gallery since the museum reopened in March.

Sam Whiting, "William T. Wiley, multifaceted artist and educator integral to Bay Area art scene, dies at 83."
San Francisco Chronicle (April 28, 2021), accessed online.



“Tools and Trade,” 1978 by William T. Wiley on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Photo: SFMOMA

A comprehensive solo exhibition has been long planned to debut next January in the campus museum at UC Davis, where Wiley had been hired straight out of art school in 1963. He joined the first generation art faculty at UC Davis, where he taught alongside Wayne Thiebaud, Roy De Forest, Robert Arneson and Manuel Neri.

“He was a wonderful spirit and I watched his work from the beginning when he was an abstract expressionist painter,” Thiebaud, now 100, told *The Chronicle* by phone from his home in Sacramento. “We disagreed all the time and still liked each other. He was a real gentleman and a lovely person. The last time I saw him he gave me a nice kiss.”

Throughout most of his career, Wiley lived in the San Geronimo Valley of West Marin, with his first wife Dorothy and sons Ethan and Zane. Everyone he came into contact with, including his wife and students, called him simply “Wiley,” to differentiate him from a plethora of contemporaries named either Bill or Bob. Dorothy Wiley even made a 1971 documentary film about that called “Five Artists: BillBobBillBillBob,” featuring Bill Wiley, Bob Nelson, Bill Allan, Bill Geiss and Bob Hudson.

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Wiley left the UC Davis faculty in 1973 after 11 years, but during his time on staff he was considered “to have been the single most influential artist for students in American art schools,” according to a museum catalog essay written by Paul Karlstrom, West Coast regional director for Archives of American Art.

“Wiley was charismatic and energetic and tall and handsome and kind,” said Todd Hosfelt of Hosfelt Gallery, Wiley’s longtime dealer. “He was also an environmental and social activist. Everything that people care about now, Wiley has been talking about for decades and putting in his artwork.”

One reason art students loved Wiley is that he knew absolutely no bounds. This was clear from the start. His debut at SFMOMA was described by A.J. Bloomfield, art writer at the News-Call Bulletin, as “having all the subtlety of 10 sticks of dynamite. There’s drip, splatter and impulsive brush stroking all over the place. Anarchy seems to be the rule.”

It was a rule he followed and it resulted in three solo shows at SFMOMA, along with solo exhibitions and career retrospectives at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Fondazione Marconi in Milan; Frankfurter Kunstverein in Germany; the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; and just about every museum in California.

“William Wiley brought to every work he made an inimitable combination of eccentricity and erudition, humor and mischief,” said Sarah Roberts, head of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA.

She described the selection that will be on display in the fifth-floor galleries through the summer as “thought-provoking — and often laugh-inducing — visual puzzles and wordplay.”

William Thomas Wiley was born Oct. 21, 1937, in Bedford, Ind. His father, Sterling Wiley, was a construction foreman who moved the family around. One of his stops was a gas station with a diner attached on a lonesome highway in Texas. Over breakfast in the diner, the elder Wiley bought the place and put his family to work running it. (Young William’s first art works were comics, cartoons and drawings of horses posted on the walls of the diner, said his son Ethan.)

After a few years, the family moved to California and on to Richland, Wash., where they lived in a trailer home. Wiley eventually came to San Francisco in the mid-1950s to enter SFAI, then called California School of Fine Arts.

On a summer break back in Richland, he met and married Dorothy Dowis, in 1959. They were divorced by 1999.

In 2005, he married digital artist Mary Hull Webster. They settled in Woodacre before moving to Novato six years ago, when Wiley was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

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Gallerist Hosfelt said you could never describe Wiley as simply one type of artist. Wiley was wily and worked fearlessly in film, performance, installation, sculpture, even watercolor when it was considered old-fashioned and unfashionable.

He played harmonica and sang and used some of his sculptures as percussion instruments. He even cast himself as Mr. Unnatural in a series of theatrical performances he made while wearing a dunce cap to accentuate his character. He also made self-portraits of himself in the dunce cap.

“He never fit into any of the New York categories,” said Hosfelt. “New Yorkers thought his work was silly or lightweight because he used humor.”

But underneath the quirky art were always serious issues ranging from the environment to war crimes and torture.

San Francisco collector Roselyne “Cissie” Swig keeps a 4-string guitar made and painted by Wiley in her home in Presidio Heights, where she also displays his paintings and drawings on the walls. Reached by phone, Swig said she’d start crying at the mere mention of Wiley’s name.

“He had such a special way of expressing himself,” she said. “He was endearing and embracing of his talent.”

He was embracing of the talent of other artists, too. In 1999, he was offered a solo show at the Oakland Museum of California. But instead of doing it solo, he turned it into an omnibus exhibition titled “What Is Art For?: William T. Wiley and Mary Hull Webster and 100 Artists.” The museum’s Great Hall was stuffed with all forms of art, from painting and photography to an antique bicycle to a giant steel wagon full of gourd-like forms made of cardboard.

“People who ordinarily find new art disorienting could suffer dizzy spells in a carnival of images as chaotic as this,” wrote then-*Chronicle* art critic Ken Baker in his review of the exhibition. “Other visitors may feel liberated, newly permitted to bypass what doesn’t catch their interest and relish whatever does.”

Since its opening in 2016, the Manetti Shrem Museum at UC Davis has always had at least one work by Wiley on display. At its entrance is a giant gong with a mallet for banging by anyone who visits. That is classic Wiley.

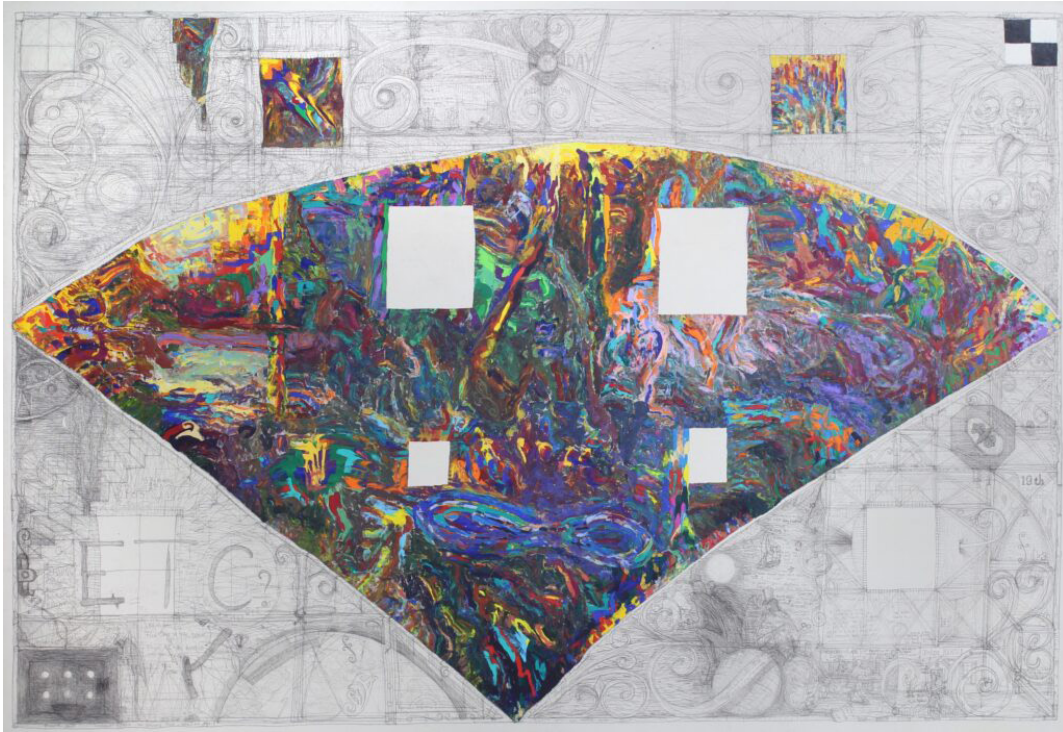
Also in the Davis collection is a 1970s abstract painting called “Working out the Wrinkles,” a landscape watercolor titled “Rim Rat’s Cabin” and “The Slant Step,” a found object in the form of a child’s chair.

“Bill was a guy who started developing a language of symbols in the early 1960s and he used that language to make work about how to live in the world, find beauty and embrace mystery,” said Dan Nadel, curator-at-large at Manetti Shrem.

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The upcoming show, titled “William T. Wiley and the Slant Step: All on the Line,” is the first to closely examine the development of his art in the ’60s. Thirty pieces will be represented. In curating it, Nadel has been making regular visits to Wiley’s studio in Novato.

“He was enthusiastic and we worked together to select art that he still felt was up to his standards,” Nadel said.



“Spooky on the Line,” 1987 acrylic and graphite on canvas by William T. Wiley.
Photo: Courtesy Hosfelt Gallery

Wiley was predeceased by his younger brother, Charles, who became a special effects artist at Industrial Light and Magic. Survivors include his wife, Mary Hull Webster of Novato, ex-wife Dorothy Wiley of Forest Knolls, sons Ethan Wiley of Forest Knolls and Zane Wiley of San Rafael, and four grandchildren.

A memorial is planned for summer.

Donations in Wiley’s name may be made to the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco, CA, 94133.

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