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William T. Wiley in Retrospect

By Sidney Lawrence

During the 1970s in New York, artists working in the West Coast and Chicago—including H.C. Westemann, Robert Arneson, Robert Colescott and Peter Saul—raised hackles and gained fans for their cartoonish, jitery and emotionally direct works loaded with offbeat materials and associations. The earnest ethos of East Coast art was not in their DNA; minimalist purity and the high-minded musings of conceptual art were anathema.

Among this group was a slightly younger artist from northern California, William T. Wiley, who was being noticed for his skillfully drawn, pun-loaded and casually enigmatic work, often subverting modernism's language of geometric abstraction and assemblage with a glut of personal meaning. Already credentialed by exhibitions in his home state, as well as Chicago, Paris, Milan, the Netherlands and Germany, this "Huckleberry Duchamp," as an Art News reviewer called him in 1974, soon emerged as a national figure.

In 1979-80, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis toured Mr. Wiley's first major retrospective to six U.S. cities, but no East Coast museum participated. Now, three decades later, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington is offering Mr. Wiley's second career survey, "What's It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect." Presenting nearly 90 paintings, works on paper, mixed-media assemblages and sculptures, plus early film clips, this exhibition curated by the museum's JoAnn Moser continues through Jan. 24 before traveling to Berkeley, Calif.

The question asked in the show's title—his own words from a palette-shaped sign that starts the presentation—couldn't be more apt. Life is a never-ending Möbius-strip; don't look for meaning; go with the flow, Mr. Wiley's works seem to say. His art can be friendly and offputting, skillful and rough, funny and serious, as confounding as Dada and as soothing as Zen.

One of the show's many jewel-like watercolors with ink, "Hide as a State of Mind" (1971), is a case in point. The letters H-I-D-E appear as dried-out animal hides in a rocky landscape with bits of flickering coastline. Tipped-up like a Chinese scroll, the composition resembles a map of the U.S. bisected by a black-and-white striped "range pole" (a surveyor's instrument used by the artist's father and a favorite motif). The "West" has grassy and earthen colors; the "East" is a frozen tundra. A Squaw-like 1930s-cartoon character below exclaims, "God only knows what we are exp- - -ing." Expecting? Exporting? Exploring? Exploding? Her head and arms create illegibility. But no problem as we linger to unlock a theme (maybe) of American cultural conflict.

Sidney Lawrence, "William T. Wiley in Retrospect." *The Wall Street Journal* (December 8, 2009), accessed online.

For every Wiley that puzzles a viewer, there's another that invites recognition and laughter. The punning "Working Under the Trance Sum" (1979), a 5 foot by 7 foot drawing in pencil and charcoal, pairs Mr. Wiley's versions of two 19th-century gentlemen's portraits by Eastman Johnson and James McNeill Whistler in atmospheric interiors. Art-school clichés appear in a transom: "Trust your spirit," "never use the color black" and "Yeah you crook you stole my ideas."

If there's any doubt that Mr. Wiley, now 72, has a personality all his own, nearby selfportraits on paper should shatter it. "Mr. Unnatural [sic]," a persona Mr. Wiley developed in 1975 in response to underground cartoonist R. Crumb's "Mr. Natural," is a skinny figure with a robe wearing Japanese wood sandals, a conical dunce cap and a rubber nose. Part Venetian carnival figure, part Medieval wizard, part Buddhist monk, he has anxiety fits here, sits serenely in a throne there, and poses like a nerdy "David" elsewhere. These theatrical works open a window into Mr. Wiley's quirky magnetism. His inner life is the subject of 1982's "In the Name of (Not to Worry It's Juxtaposition)." On a 9-by-10 canvas, layers of charcoal, ink and black felt-tip lines conjure the Giacometti-skinny artist relaxing in a barnlike studio amid personal props and musings—a mummy-model on a bed, a text decrying nuclear waste, a giant snail on a stool, and so on. A blazing diagonal of checkerboard colors pierces this monochrome universe from above, like a bolt of inspiration, producing an effect that a one-time denizen of San Francisco's hippie culture, Sarah Burns, now a respected art historian, has likened to "Acid cut with speed." To bring further astonishment, a found-object stick figure in the drawing rematerializes as a mixed-media assemblage to the right, the piece's second element.

In Retrospective

The Overlooked Influence of Arshile Gorky

After such operatically abstract, self-revealing works, Mr. Wiley's borrowings from Old Master, Medieval and other pictorial sources in the 1990s take some getting used to. More paint, less drawing and topical subjects are the keynotes here. In one 1994 painting, a burning village from Hieronymus Bosch's "Temptation of St. Anthony" (c. 1500) becomes Mr. Wiley's starting point, with various writings and vignettes, for a look into Chernobyl's grisly legacy. In a 1998 work, he melds Pieter Bruegel the Elder's intricate "Tower of Babel" (1563) with a steely Mesopotamian ziggurat full of puzzling ideograms and inscriptions. "Sold Yours Return" (2005) is about the war in Iraq. A serviceman with a hook hand and prosthetic leg enters an idyllic farmyard. Snaking paint, a cartoon bubble, splats of black and a grid enliven the brownish depiction based on a World War II illustration by N.C. Wyeth. Lacking Mr. Wiley's usual manic intensity, the work seems tame and literal.

Has Mr. Wiley lost his sense of humor? Hardly. In another 2005 work, a new keep-on-truckin' persona, "Seedy Rom," gingerly walks beside a river carrying canvases. And who can resist Mr. Wiley's "punball" machine, with its cartoonish personages and implied metaphors for winning and losing in life? He played this cultural artifact at the press preview. The machine went tilt.

Even when not 100% successful, Mr. Wiley's work is unlike any other in recent art, a visual analog to the stream-of-consciousness strain in 20th-century literature. Likening Mr. Wiley to Virginia Woolf or James Joyce is dicey, of course, but his swirling cornucopias of images, words and associations are every bit as intoxicating, operating beyond their medium, in the subconscious. He is less a contemporary artist than a national treasure.

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