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THE NEW YORK TIMES ART REVIEW | 'WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN'

In Case You Missed the Revolution, Man

By **KEN JOHNSON**

WASHINGTON — If you didn't know that William T. Wiley was a real person, you might think he'd been invented by Thomas Pynchon. Over the last half-century Mr. Wiley, 72, has been producing zany paintings, drawings and assemblages that look as if they been created by a dope-addled survivor of the California counterculture.

One of the founding fathers of West Coast Funk art, along with figures like Robert Arneson, Roy Robert Hudson and Roy DeForest among others, Mr. Wiley rose to national prominence in the 1970s, when offbeat craft, storytelling and personal symbolism were all the rage. In the '80s his woolly shtick lost traction in the high-art world and lapsed into regional purgatory.

“What's It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum here offers a good opportunity to reconsider his place in late-20th-century art. Organized by Joann Moser, the museum's senior curator of graphic arts, the show is by turns entertaining, exhilarating, perplexing and disappointing.

Mr. Wiley, who has lived most of his adult life in Northern California, is a skillful and fearless draftsman and a terrific watercolorist. He applies an expansive, satiric imagination to all manner of subjects, from the stains on his studio floor to concerns about the environment and international politics to Buddhist metaphysics. But his works can also be self-indulgent and needlessly obscure. (The exhibition includes films of performances, but they don't make much of an impression.)

The one thread running throughout his oeuvre that has garnered near-universal admiration, and deservedly so, is his work in watercolor. Combining fine, black, felt-tip line drawing and luminous hues, his watercolors picture indoor and outdoor spaces and odd assortments of objects in such detail that it is as if you were seeing through mystically enhanced eyes. “Free as a Bird” (1977), a vertiginous, aerial view of a cubistically jumbled city with a dark-blue bird soaring near the center, is Whitman-esque in its comprehensive vision.

Often the watercolors depict mysterious constructions of a sort that Mr. Wiley also realizes as three-dimensional sculptures. Handwritten captions, composed as if by a hippie cowboy and peppered with puns and clever turns of phrase, ruminate on art, global warming, war and other exigencies.

“I’ve Got It All on the Line” (1970) presents a view through an open studio door to an expansive landscape. To the left is an elaborate, indoor still-life of scores of objects rendered with near-miniaturist exactitude — a pink, wall-mounted telephone under a sheet of numbers; a leather hat and a shoulder bag on a wooden rack; books, tools and more on shelves below. In the front yard to the right, a coat hanger bent into the figure-eight shape of the infinity sign dangles from a telephone wire, while smoke rising from the far horizon hints at some catastrophic happening in the distance.

Along the bottom edge Mr. Wiley wrote, “ ‘I’ve got it all on the line — and the time it takes — to make mistakes — if there is such a thing.’ WIZDUMB — from Lout Sue.” Embracing the particular and the universal and the comic and the cosmic, it is a transporting picture.

A precocious talent in his youth, Mr. Wiley had a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art before earning his undergraduate degree from the California School of Fine Arts in 1960. Under the influences of Abstract Expressionism and Bay Area Figuration, he made big, oleaginous, semiabstract paintings.

In the '60s he cut back on the gestural brushwork and made large, deadpan, cartoonlike pictures. "Shark's Dream" (1967) expresses frustration with the formalist regime of the day. It depicts an oblong, severely geometric, gray sculpture with a sharklike dorsal protuberance. A stream of pale red liquid like blood spouts from a small hole in its side. Minimalism's cold colorlessness has rarely been so neatly skewered.

In fall 1967 Mr. Wiley found his way out of a brief period of artist's block when he picked up watercolor, a medium that was then not taken seriously in the high-art world. In effect he was demanding less of himself, which freed his imagination. A watercolor may be small, but anything can happen in one, and the most surprising things occur in Mr. Wiley's seemingly modest efforts.

For hard-to-explain reasons, however, he creates his larger works in ways that defeat much of what makes his watercolors so fascinating. In many cases he uses charcoal as the main medium, which looks smudgy and murky on the canvas. Sometimes in addition to the charcoal he trowels on garishly colorful areas of painterly abstraction. His subjects are similar to those of his watercolors, but the pictures tend to be overworked and obscure.

He writes a lot on the canvases, too. On one piece he wrote, "Dude! No one has time to read all this stuff!" Sometimes he is his own best critic.

In recent works Mr. Wiley has been translating images from Hieronymus Bosch, medieval prints and other antique sources. In “Alchemical Lyon Tortured With Abstraction” (2005), a large drawing on canvas resembling an old engraving, a green, priapic lion rears up to bite the sun. It is hard to say what it means, but the esoteric imagery is mystically stirring.

Mr. Wiley’s three-dimensional works also lack the transformational magic of his watercolors. They are loose concatenations of found objects, and their self-consciously homespun humor and portentous symbolism wear thin. “Thank You Hide” (1970-71) features a piece of leather vaguely shaped like a map of the continental United States. Mr. Wiley cut block letters spelling “Thank You” into it and hung it from a shelf bearing bottles and fishing lures; the line of a fishing rod stretches to a pick ax on the floor. As an oblique, mordantly sardonic comment on the tragic history of Indians and the American West, it has poetic urgency. But its material literalism mutes its metaphorical vibe.

In some of Mr. Wiley’s paintings there appears a character named Mr. Unnatural, who was inspired by R. Crumb’s roly-poly savant, Mr. Natural. Mr. Wiley’s avatar is a tall, lanky fellow who wears a dunce cap, a long false nose, Japanese wooden sandals and a bathrobe that reaches his bare knees. He is a holy fool, a wily trickster whose behavior, which seems ridiculous, crazy or dumb to the unenlightened, is really in the service of higher consciousness.

He is an apt personification of Mr. Wiley’s enterprise, which, for all its flaws, remains a beacon of sanity in a crazy, mixed-up, modern world.

“What’s It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect” remains on view through Jan. 24 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Eighth and F Streets N.W., Washington; (202) 633-7970, americanart.si.edu.