



**Media only:** Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494

Oct. 2, 2009

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## **Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents Retrospective of William T. Wiley**

William T. Wiley (b. 1937) has created a distinctive body of work during a 50-year career that addresses critical issues of our time. The exhibition “What’s It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Oct. 2 through Jan. 24, 2010. This retrospective, which features 88 works from the 1960s to the present, is the first full-scale look at Wiley’s long career and explores important themes and ideas expressed in his work. Many artworks in the exhibition are on public display for the first time, and the installation includes several of Wiley’s avant-garde films of the 1970s, which are rarely screened.

Art, politics, war, global warming, foolishness, ambition, hypocrisy and irony are summoned by Wiley’s fertile imagination and recorded in the personal vocabulary of symbols, puns and images that crowd his objects. His wit and sense of the absurd make his art accessible to all with multiple layers of meaning revealed through careful examination. Joann Moser, senior curator at the museum, organized the exhibition.

“In a world where Twitter allows us only 140 characters, William Wiley’s art demands close attention and patient looking to decipher each coded reference, pun and scenario of his imagery,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the museum. “In this exhibition, Wiley emerges anew as a universal commentator with more relevance than ever. We are proud to present this great American artist.”

“Wiley’s influence and importance in California are well established,” said Moser. “This exhibition and accompanying publication affirm his significance as an artist of national and international stature whose accomplishment has meaning for us all.”

Wiley’s extensive body of work challenges the principles of mainstream art. His work ranges from traditional drawing, watercolor, acrylic painting, sculpture and printmaking to performances, constructions of assorted materials and, more recently, printed pins, tapestries and a pinball machine. He has developed a distinctive style and masterful drawing skills that are recognizable in all his work, yet allow for variety, invention and subtlety. Wiley has refined wordplay into a distinctive mode of expression and has established a vocabulary of forms and symbols, such as an anvil or the sign for

infinity, which have accumulated meanings and nuance as he repeats and transforms them. Wiley's imagery is personal and idiosyncratic. He is aware that some people do not take his work seriously because of the many puns, cartoons and double entendres, but whimsy and irreverence draw viewers to his work, and his use of language challenges viewers to consider multiple layers of meaning.

Wiley studied at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1956 to 1962, where he first encountered the broad array of art, music, film, books and Asian philosophies that inform his work. Wiley abandoned the formalism that dominated the art world at the time and introduced language, narrative and figurative imagery into his work. He was exposed to assemblage artists who blurred the boundaries between high art and popular culture.

Bruce Nauman, a student of Wiley's at the University of California at Davis in the late 1960s, became a close friend and collaborator. Both admired Marcel Duchamp's work and shared an interest in the process of making art and in incorporating words into their work. Around this time, Wiley began to introduce a regular cast of alter egos into his performance pieces and paintings, including Mr. Unnatural who was a response to cartoonist R. Crumb's Mr. Natural. Wiley uses Mr. Unnatural, a tall, lanky figure who wears a long fake nose and a dunce cap, to both express and disguise his own awkwardness.

From the 1990s to the present, Wiley has found inspiration in medieval art, such as alchemical texts with woodblock images, and 16th-century painters Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The centrality of symbols and narratives in their work attracts Wiley, as well as their engagement with the contemporary events of their own time. Wiley in turn addresses topical issues, including the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the Abu Ghraib scandal.

"Wiley's art has been described as eccentric, hermetic, idiosyncratic, irreverent, enigmatic, paradoxical, wacky, whimsical, childlike, cryptic, burlesque, ironic, folksy, bewildering—and all these terms fit," said Moser. "But he is not purposefully obscure. Wiley seeks to engage us in exploring pressing concerns, leaving us to make our own connections and draw our own conclusions."

### **Online Features**

The museum has published annotated films by the artist on its Web site as well as on ArtBabble and selected music, written and performed by Wiley, on iTunes. A slideshow of selected works included in the exhibition is available on the museum's Web site. An interview with the artist will be available online later this fall.

## **Publication**

The accompanying book, co-published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and University of California Press, includes essays by Moser; John Hanhardt, consulting senior curator for film and media arts; and John Yau, poet and critic. The book gives an overview of the artist's 50-year career, reflects on Wiley's films of the 1970s and assesses his distinctive use of language. It is available in the museum's store and online for \$65 (hardcover) or \$39.95 (paperback).

## **Free Public Programs**

Wiley presented the 2009 Clarice Smith Distinguished Lecture Wednesday, Sept. 30, at 7 p.m.; an archived version is available online at [americanart.si.edu/calendar/lectures/smith/wiley](http://americanart.si.edu/calendar/lectures/smith/wiley). Opening weekend features a Family Day program, Saturday, Oct. 3, from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., which includes a musical performance by Wiley. Additional exhibition-related programs include a gallery talk with Moser, Tuesday, Oct. 20, at 6 p.m.; a selection of Wiley's experimental films, Thursday, Oct. 29, at 6:30 p.m.; "Tilt!," a lecture and demonstration with David Silverman, pinball machine collector and historian, Saturday, Oct. 31, from 3 to 6 p.m.; a screening of two short films celebrating Wiley's 75-foot bronze sculpture "Tower," Thursday, Nov. 12, at 6:30 p.m.; a performance by Improv Now!, "All Wiley—No Coyote," Saturday, Nov. 21, at 3 p.m.; and a printmaking session with George Mason University's art and visual technology department, Saturday, Jan. 23, from 1 to 3 p.m. The Wiley exhibition will be included in walk-in docent-led special exhibition tours Sundays at 4 p.m. beginning Oct. 11.

Visitors will have a rare opportunity to play Wiley's "Punball: Only One Earth," which is on view in the exhibition, Thursdays, Oct. 15 and 16, Nov. 12 and Dec. 3 and 17, from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Details and complete program descriptions are available online at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

## **Tour**

After closing in Washington, the exhibition will travel to the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, Calif. (March 17, 2010, to July 18, 2010).

## **Credit**

Generous support for "What's It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect" was provided by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation, Gretchen and John Berggruen, Charles Cowles, the Cowles Charitable Trust, Sheila Duignan and Mike Wilkins, Electric Works, Sakurako and William Fisher, the Lipman Family Foundation, James and Marsha Mateyka, Arnold and Oriana McKinnon, Rita J. Pynoos, Betty and Jack Schafer, Laura

and Joe Sweeney, Roselyne C. Swig and the Tides Foundation: Art 4 Moore Fund. The exhibition is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The C.F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum's traveling exhibition program, "Treasures to Go."

### **About the Smithsonian American Art Museum**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Follow the museum on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, ArtBabble, iTunes and YouTube. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

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