



What's It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect **Wall Text and Extended Labels**

For over fifty years William T. Wiley (b. 1937) has created a distinctive body of work that embraces popular culture as well as fine art. He is best known as a leading California artist whose importance in the San Francisco Bay Area is well established. He enjoyed international success early in his career in the 1960s and early '70s. On the East Coast, he was often referred to as a California "funk" regionalist, yet his work has stood the test of time, resisting passing fashion. Wiley has emerged as an artist of national stature with more relevance than ever.

Art, politics, war, global warming, and foolishness and ambition, love and anger are summoned by Wiley's fertile imagination and recorded in the personal vocabulary of symbols, puns, and images that crowd his objects. His work demands close attention, but his wit and sense of the absurd make it accessible even to those who do not immediately discern the ambiguous allusions and layers of meaning. Wiley seeks to engage us in the exploration in which he himself engages to create his art.

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Columbus Rerouted #1

1961

oil on canvas

Zane J. Wiley

The title of this painting questions what would have happened if Christopher Columbus had taken another route, or had been “rerouted” and had not landed on Hispaniola, present-day Haiti. Columbus’s voyage foreshadowed European colonization of the “New World” and the resulting destruction of Native American culture. If he had taken another route, Wiley wonders, would indigenous American culture be preserved?

The initial inspiration for the painting arose when Wiley was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, and a main thoroughfare near the school—Columbus Avenue—was torn up. While traffic was rerouted, he was forced to cope with the inconveniences of the massive construction project.

In this painting, Wiley introduced the theme of a voyage, which reappears frequently in his work. The black-and-white striped motif reminiscent of a surveyor’s staff and triangular forms resembling sails mark the beginning of a personal vocabulary that he developed in subsequent years.

The Great Blondino (Self-Portrait)

1965

oil on canvas

di Rosa Preserve: Art & Nature, Napa, California

Wiley was fascinated by the story of a nineteenth-century French acrobat named Henri Blondin whom he read about in an old issue of *National Geographic* magazine. Blondin’s most remarkable feat was to push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope suspended above Niagara Falls. Wiley transformed the image in the magazine into the painting *The Great Blondino (Self-Portrait)*, a blindfolded man dressed like a comic-book hero, pushing an overloaded wheelbarrow on a tightrope. He admired Blondin’s madcap spirit and adopted him as an audacious alter ego.

The elaborate easel at the lower right inserts the artist into the composition, at once the observer and the observed. The written message—“It was wonderful Mom!”—changes the painting into a ridiculously oversized postcard from Niagara Falls. Wiley later transformed the idea of the painting into a film in collaboration with his friend, the underground filmmaker Robert Nelson.

Art Official Peace Plan

1970

wood, slingshots, sign, lead plaque, and watercolor

Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida,

Purchase, the R. H. Norton Trust, 94.14

Art Official Peace Plan was inspired by Wiley’s opposition to the Vietnam War. The construction’s vertical element is the trunk of Wiley’s Christmas tree stripped bare of branches, held upright by its X-shaped stand. He bent the top of the tree to form a peace symbol made of vines, twine, and rawhide, which also created a slingshot. At the base he scattered wooden slingshots with “peace” lettered on the straps, evoking David’s victory over Goliath. The title, a pun on the phrase “artificial peace plan,” appears on an official-looking plaque that forms a crossbar with the trunk—a cross that might mark a war victim’s grave. The denuded tree trunk alludes to the destruction of nature by Agent Orange, while its reuse as the spine of this piece fulfills the artist’s ecological ethic of recycling.

Random Remarks and Digs

1971

acrylic on canvas painting; wood, metal, and cloth construction
The John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation

Wiley conceived the surface of this canvas as a mirror reflecting the construction in front of it. One triangle is the reflection of the other, just as the painted pole is the reflection of the actual one. Shadows and painted shadows complicate the space even further. If we accept the conceit of the mirror, then the one hundred circles scattered across the canvas are reflections of objects in the viewer's own space. Wiley thought of them as atoms visible to the naked eye, but they also resemble marbles, cannonballs, and billiard balls. The stick resembles a pool cue, and the triangular frame looks like a rack used to align billiard balls. Is it a game after all?

When the painting was first shown in 1971, thirty-three balls were painted blue to signify the artist's age at the time. He intended to paint in the rest at the rate of one ball a year for his entire life, regardless of who owned the painting. The idea of a work being completed over a long period intrigued him and raises the question of whether anything is ever finished.

Mr. Unatural Eyes the Ape Run Ledge

1975

charcoal, colored pencil, and wax on paper
Nancy and Robert Mollers

Wiley invented the character Mr. Unatural as an alter ego through whom he could both express and disguise his own awkwardness. His inspiration for Mr. Unatural was cartoonist R. Crumb's Mr. Natural, a short, fat, bearded, and bald figure who became popular as one of the mainstays of Zap comics in the late 1960s. Both a wise man and a con man, Mr. Natural is a worldly guru who makes Zen-like pronouncements and lives off his disciples.

In contrast, Wiley made Mr. Unatural tall and lanky with a fake nose with wire rims attached to simulate glasses. The black-and-white boxer's robe and trunks he wears over his half-naked body call to mind both Merlin the magician and a Buddhist monk. His belt is tied into an infinity sign. His Japanese platform clogs, difficult to walk in without practice, exaggerate his awkwardness. While Crumb's Mr. Natural spouts aphorisms, Wiley's Mr. Unatural is mute and communicates his sayings on a child's slate worn around his neck.

Portrait of Radon

1982

watercolor, felt-tipped pen, and ink on paper
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wiley's humorous and quirky parody of a map of the United States in *Portrait of Radon* refers to darker meanings beneath the cartoonlike surface. Wiley grew up in Richland, Washington, site of the U.S. government's Hanford Atomic Works, a plutonium production plant that released significant amounts of radioactive waste into the surrounding area. The dark diagonal stretching from New York to Los Angeles represents a highway twelve lanes wide and one foot deep that Wiley calculated could be constructed with radioactive tailings from the country's nuclear power plants.

Radon, a colorless, odorless radioactive gas exuded by these tailings was also in the news in the early 1980s as a naturally occurring gas that could seep into houses through cracks in the foundation. Wiley's verbal pun on the title, in the lower-left corner, "poor trait of radon," reinforces the irony of drawing a portrait of something invisible. While his enigmatic image and commentary are not overtly political, they express his concern for the environment with an irreverent sense of humor.

Boo Dada Bar BQ

1982

wood, steel, brass, lead, nylon, and stainless steel
Courtesy of the Artist and Lippincott, Inc.

Wiley placed a wooden form that suggests a Buddha seated in a lotus position on top of a barbeque grill with a house-shaped opening at the bottom. The figure also alludes to a Hindu ascetic who walks on hot coals, while the red and green ribbons around its waist evoke Christmas wrapping. By conflating references to the three religions with an all-American barbeque, Wiley pokes good-natured fun at the contemporary interest of Americans in Eastern religions and practices based on a superficial understanding. A casual adherent of Zen Buddhism, Wiley “roasts” the popular American search for spirituality in Asian religions. The Dada of the title recalls Marcel Duchamp, who transformed everyday objects into works of art.

El Salvador

1986

wood, metal, paint, string, shell, and ink
The John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation, Kansas City, Missouri

Wiley's first foray into relief printmaking was a series of large woodblocks in the shape of a guitar. Several were dedicated to his some of his favorite singers, such as Muddy Waters and Marvin Gaye, while others, like *El Salvador*, refer to disturbing political issues. The image on the head and neck of the guitar are a nod to José Guadalupe Posada, the renowned Mexican printmaker whose *calaveras* (skulls) satirized political leaders and the life of the upper classes during the reign of Porfirio Diaz. The symbols on the body of the instrument can be interpreted as a crying face, a tribute to the suffering of the people of El Salvador during the bloody political conflict in the early 1980s.

After looking at the woodblocks in his studio for several years, Wiley began to see them as independent sculptures. He added strings, paint, and other objects to enhance their presence. Wiley writes songs, plays the guitar, and sings, and musical imagery recurs throughout his work.

Hinge

1992

acrylic, pencil, and charcoal on canvas
Crocker Art Museum

Ever since his early collaborations with composer Steve Reich, music and musical references have been persistent features of Wiley's work. In *Hinge* he wrote the chorus for a song near an image of Mickey Mouse. He later completed the verses and titled the song “Blind Mickey Blues.” It was inspired by the news that Walt Disney's family sought to have his body preserved through cryogenics. Wiley used Disney's most successful creation, Mickey Mouse, to express both his amusement and dismay at the prospect.

Wiley was fascinated by the concept of a hinge down the center, dividing the composition into two sections that could swing back and forth if the hinge were real. He liked the idea of moving freely between areas of painting and drawing, the abstract and the literal. He loved to squirt the paint directly out of the tube, then to work with the palette knife and let the images form themselves.

Grebeny--The Burning Village after Bosch

1994

acrylic, charcoal, and graphite on canvas

Goodman-Duffy Trust

Wiley's interest in the work of other artists is eclectic and wide ranging. In *Grebeny--The Burning Village after Bosch*, he looked to the art of Hieronymous Bosch to express his outrage at the consequences of the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl in 1986. His friend Holbrook Teter visited the town of Grebeny in Belarus with a group of health professionals several years after the incident and shared his notes with Wiley. Grebeny was a village located inside the zone contaminated by radiation. People who had fled the area returned because they had nowhere else to settle. The devastation of deformed animals and of people breathing poisonous air was so overwhelming to Wiley that his first attempts to capture it felt inadequate. In this painting he enlarged the detail of a village in flames from the central panel of Bosch's *Temptation of St. Anthony* to convey his horror at the nuclear accident. The beauty of the painting belies its disturbing message, a paradox typical of Wiley's finest work.

Rocks Keeping Our Secrets--With Abstract Colors

1999

acrylic, charcoal, and graphite on canvas

Drummond and Liza Pike

Among the many writers who have been important for Wiley, Elias Canetti has been one of the most influential. Canetti was a Bulgarian-born novelist who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1981. In the text on the top-left stone, the painting cites Canetti's *The Human Province* as the inspiration. In one chapter of the book, Canetti describes an ancient Celtic tradition in which each man going off to war threw an identifiable rock onto a heap. After the war, the men retrieved their stones—those that remained were monuments to the dead. The colored circles strewn across the field evoke the rocks taken away by the living.

Columbus Revisited by D.V.D.

2005

acrylic and charcoal on canvas

Barry Berkus and Family

Wiley has invented a language of forms, symbols, characters, abbreviations, and concerns that accumulate meaning and complexity as they reappear throughout his work. In *Columbus Revisited by D.V.D.*, for example, the Columbus theme recalls some of his earliest paintings. The tents of CLUE US and LARK (Lewis and Clark) recall the triangular forms that allude to Columbus's ships in *Columbus Rerouted #1*. In *Columbus Revisited*, the ships are depicted on the canvases the artist is carrying. Wiley created the artist figure for an earlier painting in which he called him Seedy Rom (CD Rom), an outsider rejected by the postmodern art world. In this painting, Wiley calls him D.V.D., acknowledging the newer technology. The flying hourglass, ampersand, and globe dripping red, white, and blue paint appear in earlier works as well. This jumble of images, references, and themes presents fragments of a narrative that the viewer must construct for himself. Just as Wiley allows his imagination free rein as he works, he encourages viewers to creatively assemble meanings from the disparate elements.

Meridian Moons Overwhatarewē

2006

mixed media on canvas

Anonymous San Francisco Collectors

Wiley's narrative takes the form of a grid in which the full moon changes expression from square to square, like the repeated frames of a comic book. The moon resembles both the one in the early twentieth-century comic-strip series *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and the ubiquitous happy face of popular contemporary culture.

The grid format in this painting is based on a portolan chart, a navigational map that emphasizes coastal features and ports. The reference recalls Wiley's longstanding interest in maps, voyages, and exploration. The chart is a metaphor for exploring the mind as it flits from thought to thought, touching on memories, experience, and current events in no rational order.