

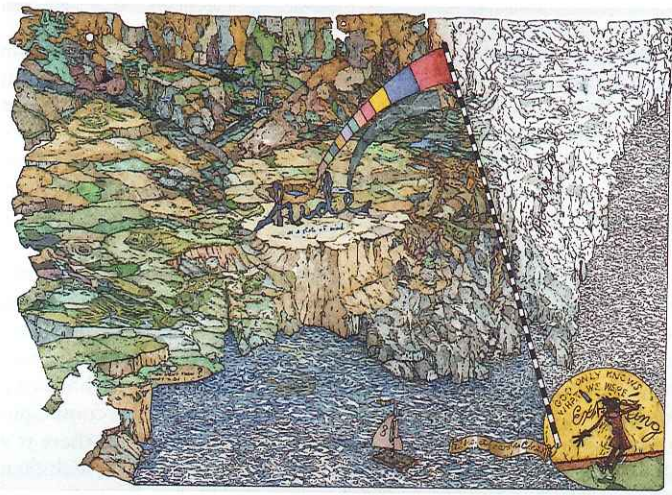
WASHINGTON, DC

William T. Wiley

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

If American culture had to be grouped into two camps, what neater divide could there be than between idealists and pragmatists? The Pilgrim fathers, Emersons, and Clyfford Stills of this world would then square off against the Ben Franklins, Hemingways, and Rauschenbergs. Of course, reality can't be pigeonholed so easily. Indeed, the going gets tough, and most interesting, when such opposites interact. Mergers of this kind are evident throughout William T. Wiley's art, and their aesthetic consequences may help explain his relative neglect since the 1980s. The current retrospective recuperates Wiley, revealing a visionary, albeit often wayward, figure. Like many visionaries, he has been both ahead of his time and at odds with it.

Wiley may pose difficulties for some critics because unlike most "ideas" artists—from Duchamp to Damien Hirst—he is an obsessively skillful draftsman and painter. *Columbus Rerouted #1*, 1961, which appeared at the Smithsonian exhibition's outset, showed how quickly Wiley had mastered Bay Area Abstract Expressionism, adding his own twists. The theme of voyaging, evident in this big canvas's cartoonish



William T. Wiley, *Hide as a State of Mind*, 1971, ink and watercolor on paper, 21 3/4 x 32".

cartography and title, would recur throughout his career. Likewise, the heterodox motifs—forms reminiscent of sails, a measuring rod, lightning, and so forth—anticipated Wiley's taste for assemblage. Within a few years, he was making quizzical constructions, such as the chairlike *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step*, 1966, and implanting words into these and their painted counterparts. *Shark's Dream*, 1967, pictures an industrial-looking shaft, seemingly strayed from the realm of "primary objects," dreaming of itself reversed in a thought balloon, with the title inscribed below. Here Wiley announced another major concern: language's maze—reversals (as in spoonerisms), homonyms, puns, and so forth. Scant surprise that Bruce Nauman was Wiley's student at the University of California, Davis, and that the two became lifelong friends. Nauman rose to lasting fame; Wiley resisted the various passing isms.

By the early '70s, Wiley had found his stride. Diverse paintings, constructions, artists' books, prints, films, and more proved that no medium escaped his reach. Perhaps fatally for Wiley's reception, though, he also began to favor smallish watercolors. Watercolor just wasn't the hip thing for the era of Minimalism, Conceptualism, Land art, video, and other new media, and the choice may have cost him much in terms of critical acclaim. Nevertheless, watercolor on paper was the perfect nexus where Wiley could fuse his artisanal miniaturist's touch with linguistic fireworks. After all, paper is the quintessential vehicle for words. To rephrase Wittgenstein's famous aphorism, the limits of Wiley's imagination look as endless as the possibilities of language itself. In an excellent catalogue essay, poet and critic John Yau explores the implications of the artist's manipulation of speech and seeing.

Certainly, it's easy to unravel Wiley's touchstones. They have ranged from Edward Kienholz, Jess, R. Crumb and Jasper Johns (not to mention sly swipes at Greenbergian formalists) to Bosch and Ensor—the latter two, like Wiley, were caustic and minutely detailed observers of human folly. However, the final mix feels altogether singular. Not only has the artist's long-standing concern for ecology predated the intensity of today's fashions by decades, but "What's It All Mean: William Wiley in Retrospect" provides some uncanny parallels with and flashes forward to European developments—among them, Anselm Kiefer's convoluted mythological zones, Sigmar Polke's antic stylistic hybridization, and even Jonas Burgert's blend of gothic and carnivalesque. Echoing a long tradition of American oddballs who merge the mind's ludic spaces with reality's pithy jumble—witness Whitman, Ives, Cornell, Saul Steinberg, Thomas Pynchon, and others—Wiley offers a remarkable artistic exemplar of the kind of metaphysical and moral masquerade epitomized in an earlier century by Herman Melville's, well, wily Confidence-Man.

—David Anfam

CHICAGO

James Welling

DONALD YOUNG GALLERY

"I picked up this wonderful word, 'ventriloquism,' and when I discovered photography, I realized that it was the perfect ventriloquist's medium," James Welling said in a 2003 interview with critic Jan Tumlir. "I could throw my voice into different sorts of pictures: I could speak in many different formal languages." After thirty years, however, even a practice predicated on difference can yield tautologies. Not so for Welling; he has remained diligently attentive to the structural variations possible within his medium, moving with admirable fluidity from one innovative investigation to the next.

To frame this overview exhibition, which samples eighteen of Welling's heterogeneous bodies of work, the artist seized on another concept: *hapax legomena*. The term—taken from philology by way of filmmaker Hollis Frampton—refers to words that only appear once in an author's oeuvre. Yet every work here is not singular. Rather, the show features an example or two from several of Welling's serial examinations. Installed in a loose chronological trajectory, the mostly small-scale pieces resemble a collection of curious thumbnail-like specimens from an unconventionally classified history of photography. Darkroom experiments brush up against documentary photographs, nonreferential abstractions mingle with images of modernist architecture, and early Polaroid studies hang adjacent to traditional studio photography. And unlike most in-depth surveys, which require copious amounts of real estate, this show fits comfortably in Donald Young Gallery's modest new space on Michigan Avenue.

Of the twenty-seven works ringing the gallery walls, Welling's early appropriations of Marlboro advertisements (predating Richard Prince's rephotographed cowboys by six years) appear first. The offset print *Untitled* (*Come to*

James Welling, *Untitled*, 1980, scorched silver-gelatin print with ink and craquelure, 4 3/4 x 3 3/4".

