

SOUTHWEST ART MAGAZINE

The Fragility of Nature

Nicholas Wilton juxtaposes the natural and manmade worlds in paintings full of pattern and depth by Virginia Campbell

A significant portion of art refrains from overtly pleasing the eye at first blush. In fact, plenty of art nowadays goes so far as to deliberately offend the eye, at least initially. This is all to the purpose of getting our attention (no easy task) in order to then engage our assumptions about art. Nicholas Wilton, who lives and makes art in Marin County, CA, knows a great deal about that kind of art and doesn't work that way. "I use beauty," he says, "as part of the seduction in the work." It sounds simple enough, and it should, since it is the more time-honored means of connecting art with its audience.

Wilton's commitment to the beauty-as-seduction strategy runs deep. His pieces put a welcoming dose of it right on the surface; they offer pleasure at first blush. But once his square-ish mixed media creations have drawn you in through sheer enjoyment of color and texture, they hang on to your eyeballs with impressive tenacity. The patterns and images- built up in layers of paint, plaster, and collage on wood and then partly effaced through sanding and scraping-provide physical symbols of the perplexing depths beneath a surface that dares to be eager to please.

Wilton's gift for creating compositions that possess a particularly graceful balance showed itself early on. Born in 1961 in San Francisco, he was earning thousands of dollars by age 15 from private commissions for stained-glass windows he'd learned to design and make in a sophisticated adult workshop. Wilton had, until then, excelled in drawing and nothing else, which had not put him in high esteem in his private-school milieu of academic overachievers. Still, the validation that came from being paid handsomely for art as a mere child was probably second to another confidence-building factor: He already had in his father, a highly successful advertising agency owner, an important example. "I knew from him that you could make art all day long, earn your living, and have freedom," Wilton explains. Then his father proclaimed, upon seeing his son's work in stained glass, "This is you." It was, says Wilton, "the beginning of my focus on art."

Years of artistic education followed, including four years at the College of Creative Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara and a full course of study at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. And behind his comprehensive study of technique, history and theory lay a deeply imprinted lesson in the importance of materials, discipline, and ingenuity. "There are limits to the shapes you can make in glass, because of the way glass breaks at thin places," says Wilton, "When glass breaks nature makes wonderful designs. I learned a lot about how to use the variety of shapes and manage scale." In the years afterward, he expanded this awareness in work that combined a command of realistic representation with knowledge of modernist abstractions to produce a personal style.

Wilton's painting entitled *Blue Stream* is, to a great extent, a painting about time. It hints at this meaning with lily-like flowers that float on tendrils and pods that stand on only partly visible stems, both seeming to either rain downward or drift upward on a vertical plane of almost Asian flatness. They glide as if on a stream of air, water, or, more likely, consciousness. Then, in the lower left, a photo of a man in a canoe creates a miniature reality that opposes the vertical plane with a small but potent nostalgia. There is the sense too, that the painting's elongated blue shapes could be the shadows of the canoes, as they might appear on the bottom of a stream. Behind and/or on top of all this is a faint grid dotted with tiny leaves that have been removed from their natural order and employed in this mechanized system. In our 21st-century sensor

overload, here is a de-overloading tactic: Acknowledge the multitude of stimuli and the stress of oppositions (technology and nature, pattern and chaos, Western and non-Western cultures, for example) in contemporary life, and offer an aesthetic emblem of transient reconciliation. The often glad intensity of Wilton's hues underscores a provisional optimism without denying contradiction an conflict.

"I feel as if I'm 'writing' a code addressing the fragility of nature today," says Wilton. The artist has a deep affinity for nature and daily interaction with the beautiful landscape of Marin County. "The forms and colors of the natural world are my inspiration," he says. "But the natural world feels like an artifact to me now. When I see giraffes lumbering along in a nature documentary, I can't believe they exist in the same world as downloads and search engines."

As much as Wilton's art may be about the collision of the natural and the mechanical, it is more fundamentally concerned with the process of creativity. You can look at just about any of his paintings and see in them the weavings, calculations, and juxtapositions that signify and enact creativity.

Wilton's knowledge of the creative process owes a lot to the years following his graduation from the Art Center, when he worked as an illustrator, first in New York and then back in Northern California. His loose, painterly illustration style quickly drew large commissions. Wilton's problem was that the creative force behind his commercial style was utterly stymied by the structures of big-ticket client demands.

"When my rep called and told me Toyota wanted me to do a picture of their car in my style, I just couldn't do it." Says the artist. "Whenever I found myself making a piece that I called a yawn, something I wasn't interested in, it would turn out not to sell. I needed to own what I did more personally. So I steered toward projects where I had the most freedom, which was often magazine work. In order to wrestle more freedom from art directors, I became more interested in abstraction and conception."

At the same time he was developing his commercial career, Wilton realized he needed to paint. And so he did. "For four years, every morning I'd get up and go to my studio and do a 6-inch square painting on wood. Then I'd email it to friends and see what response I go." He got lots of it, and he sold paintings. "The better the personal work go, the better the commercial work became."

Wilton and his wife, Jennie, whom he met in art school, now teach a workshop called ArtPlane that's geared to unleashing creativity, breaking through creative blocks, and fostering free-flowing art making. Their typical students aren't amateurs looking to discover their talent but artists who've hit a wall. The threads of experience and experimentation that allowed Wilton to tap into a more authentic and consistent creativity had never, he says, shown up in any course he'd taken. To a great degree, says Wilton, "The workshop is those threads codified."

Wilton has his students paint in acrylic on a 10-inch square wood panel every day. "We get people painting, making work and throwing it over their shoulders. Art making is a journey of discovering who you are and what you want to say. You learn the visual language to communicate what you want to, and you make decisions about composition, scale, and juxtaposition. And you learn that it's change within a painting that creates excitement and generates feeling. There are ideas I use to keep myself going. For example, I work on several pieces simultaneously, because in the first few hours of work you tend to make very strong marks, but then it's just not fresh anymore. That's when you move to a different piece."

Wilton's major piece called Cathedral, a 5-foot-square abstraction that incorporates his signature manmade/natural emblems with architectural shapes, makes a strong case for the

artist's successful practice of what he preaches. Its dynamic of repetition versus change-up, flatness versus three-dimensional space, organic versus mechanical, and exotic versus familiar is supported by a vibrant red and a compositional harmony that is both simple and elusive. And throughout the piece you feel you are seeing the remnants of other times and worlds along with the traces of all the marks that led to this final statement. The effect harks back to something Wilton loved about the drawings of the masters he studied in art school, and underscores his faith that creativity ultimately results in something beautiful: "In those drawings," he says, "you could see the perfect line right next to all the failed attempts."

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, has also written for *Elle Décor*, *Departures*, and *Traditional Home*.

Wilton is represented by Selby Fleetwood Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Gallatin River Gallery, Big Sky, MT; and www.nicholaswiltonpaintings.com.