



What's It All Mean?

Joann Moser

IN 1968 WILLIAM T. WILEY FOUND HIMSELF AT a crossroads in his young career. From the beginning, his work had been well received. His art was included in group exhibitions in California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and New York. Prominent publications took note. Less than a decade after completing art school, Wiley had a teaching job he enjoyed, and his work was nationally recognized. What more could a young artist want?

Wiley, however, was not satisfied. A year earlier, with his wife and two sons, he had spent several months traveling around Europe, looking at art. In the fall, he moved with his family to the small town of Ringwood, New Jersey, and spent much of his time visiting museums and galleries in New York City. Wiley recalled: "A whole lot of material and information had sifted between me and making art. That winter in New Jersey I sort of hacked back to the source. . . . I'd go to New York and look at a lot of art. If it made sense to me, okay. If not, okay."¹ Wiley even had the satisfaction of seeing one of his paintings shown in the *1967 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Painting* at the Whitney Museum and purchased by the museum. Still, for a while he made no art.

He lost confidence in his ability as an artist and experienced what New York art critic John Perreault characterized, after St. John of the Cross, as a "kind of dark night of the soul." In an interview Wiley confided in him: "That was the longest period I spent without working. Five, six months. That was the first time I thought maybe I'm not supposed to be an artist. It was sure bleak at that point. I think it's in there, but it won't come out. Maybe I've got to give up, just stop. It's okay. Now what's going to happen?"

Well, I still have my teaching job. I'll go back and hang on until they sling me out."²

Working in a modest-sized studio and with limited materials, Wiley began making clear, delicate watercolors with a box of paints he had purchased in England. He could focus his attention on a small area, rather than on the large spaces of abstract expressionist painting or monumental minimalist sculpture in vogue at the time. He relied on his fluent drawing skills and could complete a work relatively quickly.

Watercolors were not in fashion in the contemporary art world, so he could do whatever he wanted without the pressure of comparison. The experience was liberating. Wiley recollected: "When I finally did get back to work, I just really simplified the whole problem of making art. I kind of let go of any expectations or hopes or thoughts of success. I just went back to the idea of making art because it was something I loved doing, and that was enough. And at that point I connected with watercolor."³

During the next few months, after this breakthrough, he went on to create a new and significant body of work in various media, but watercolor would remain especially important to him.

Posing the question, "What's It All Mean," in *A Sign from the Country Painter* (fig. 1), which he created after his crisis while still living in New Jersey, he presciently acknowledged the public response to much of his work throughout his long career. Characterized by contradictions, puns, enigmatic texts, curious juxtapositions, and references as varied as current events, personal experiences, cartoons, and moral dilemmas, his art simultaneously intrigued and frustrated viewers who could not readily understand his imagery.

After Wiley returned to California in 1968, he continued to exhibit across the country and achieved national recognition for his distinctive work. By the late 1970s, however, his reputation became more regional. Even today he is considered one of the leading California artists of his generation. His importance and influence, however, extend well beyond the West Coast. Over the past fifty years, Wiley has created a body of work that anticipated such important developments as installation art, audience participation, a revival of interest in drawing, as well as the use of humor and language as significant aspects of contemporary art. The last comprehensive exhibition of his work was shown in 1979. This retrospective overview will provide an opportunity to introduce the breadth and timeliness of Wiley's art to a broader audience.

FIG. 1

A Sign from the Country Painter
1968
wooden artist's palette
with acrylic, plastic
letters, and paintbrush,
18 3/4 x 21 1/2 in.
Private Collection



STUDENT YEARS AND EARLY WORK

William Wiley was born in Bedford, Indiana, in 1937, and lived with his family in small towns in Texas and Washington during his early years. He attended high school in Richland, Washington. Interested in drawing, he was encouraged by his art teacher, James McGrath, whom he considers one of his most important influences. McGrath took him to Seattle to meet Mark Tobey, Sam Francis, and Morris Graves and see their work. They also visited the Asian collection at the Seattle Art Museum. In art classes the students often used watercolor, inspired by Tobey and Graves. McGrath instilled in these young art students an attitude of openness about how art could be made. He encouraged experiments with various materials, techniques, and tools and introduced students to poetry and music.⁴

McGrath took a special interest not only in Wiley but also in his two friends Robert Hudson and William Allan and helped them obtain scholarships to the San Francisco Art Institute (then the California School of Fine Arts). When Wiley faced a crisis of confidence, his early experience with McGrath helped him find a path.

Wiley began to attend the San Francisco Art Institute in the fall of 1956. He studied with Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell, Ralph Du Casse, Nathan Oliveira, and Ralph Putzker, but he had informal contact with other teachers, such as Richard Diebenkorn, Jack Jefferson, James Weeks, Fred Martin, and Jeremy Anderson. Equally important for him were fellow students Manuel Neri, Joan Brown, Alvin Light, and Bill Geis. Allan had preceded Wiley by a year, and Hudson joined them the following year, cementing a friendship among the three that has lasted to this day.⁵

Also critical for Wiley was the move to San Francisco, his first experience living in a

stimulating urban environment. "I was just in heaven. I loved the city and the changing atmospheres all the time—rain and fog and sunshine, the bay, and the ocean. School was exciting—big canvases and people painting with oil, lots of oil paint."⁶

Abstract expressionism and Bay Area figurative painting dominated the teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. Clyfford Still's formalist approach to abstract expressionism remained a strong influence at the Art Institute, even after he left the school for New York in 1950. Surrealism was a strong secondary interest among many San Francisco artists, since the work of Giorgio di Chirico had been shown at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1931, and work by Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Gordon Onslow-Ford was shown later in California. What appealed to the Bay Area artists was not the ideology and literary rhetoric of European surrealism, but the freedom of expression promoted by automatism and the use of figurative imagery to explore aspects of myth and psychology.⁷ Even more important for Wiley's subsequent practice was the use of words as images by Anderson, Martin, and several other artists at the school, as well as their irreverent attitudes and personal idiosyncrasies.

Outside school, he saw the work of Bruce Connor, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, Wallace Berman, and Jess (Collins), part of the first generation of California assemblage artists who assaulted the boundaries between one art form and another, between high art and the detritus of life and popular culture. Their multimedia work incorporated found objects and debris and introduced an element of social protest. San Francisco was the center for artists, writers, and

musicians of the Beat movement, whose poetry, films, and performances intrigued the young, impressionable Wiley.⁸

Wiley had ready access to art magazines and books on Zen Buddhism. To supplement his scholarship from the Art Institute, he worked at the Duncan Vail Art Supply store in San Francisco. Nearby was Paul Elder's bookstore, which made available the latest art magazines, through which Wiley became familiar with the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and other East Coast artists long before he saw it in person. One day he picked up Paul Repp's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, published in 1957, which introduced him to Zen. One year later, D. T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism* was published and immediately became popular among American artists. Wiley was already acquainted with Asian art and ideas from his trips to the Asian Art Museum in Seattle. He knew that Tobey and Graves had incorporated aspects of Asian design and philosophy into their work. The American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, where Alan Watts had taught since 1951, offered classes and lectures. Wiley never studied Zen in a structured way, but its philosophy was seminal for him, and he continued to explore its possibilities, especially through translations of Zen poetry and stories. San Francisco in the late 1950s and 1960s was a place of great ferment, and the young William T. Wiley was exposed to more art, music, film, and information than he could readily assimilate.



As a student, Wiley painted in a modified abstract expressionist style, the dominant mode of expression at the Art Institute. He admired the

work of Oliveira, one of the leading artists of the Bay Area figurative movement, an outgrowth of the abstract expressionist tradition. In another painting, *Flag Song* (fig. 2), Wiley incorporated references to everyday life and popular culture. His choice of colors and the red-and-white striped motif suggests an American flag. After the sensational success of Jasper Johns's first exhibition at the Leo Costelli Gallery in 1958, Wiley saw numerous examples in art magazines of Johns's use of flags, targets, and alphabets in his early paintings.

Flag Song can be read as a figure on a white ground with arms outstretched, a white head-shaped area in the upper torso, and flag stripes in place of a head. The painting can also be read as a top hat with vertical stripes instead of a head. More likely it was conceived as neither; instead, it skirted the boundary between abstraction and representation, allowing the viewer to interpret it as he or she chose.

Wiley's talent was recognized early. By 1959, he began to receive awards. In 1960, before he had even graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute later that year, he was given a two-artist show at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) with Seymour Locks, an artist who had been teaching at San Francisco State College since 1947. Although Wiley was satisfied for the *Young America* exhibition at the V.M.W. Museum of American Art in 1960, he was not satisfied with his work. The strong influence of abstract expressionism at the San Francisco Art Institute became oppressive: "Abstract Expressionism was revolutionary in its work; it became a heavy moral trip... If you define a line it had to be grounded to God's tongue at the core of the earth to justify putting it there

FIG. 2

Flag Song
1959
oil on canvas
61 1/2 x 65 1/2 in.
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco,
Gift of Charles Rand Penney,
2003.154



In the early 1960s, Wiley created three large paintings on the theme of *Columbus Rerouted* (figs. 3, 4, and 5). He considered these works to be a breakthrough: "Suddenly things that I'd been working with and struggling with became very clear . . . that image came to me all at the same time . . . and the painting just went from start to finish."¹⁰ Significantly, he found inspiration in an event of his everyday life.

While he was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, Columbus Avenue, a main thoroughfare near the school, was torn up, and traffic was rerouted. Every day he attended school he coped with the inconveniences of the massive construction project. The idea of Christopher Columbus taking another route, or being rerouted, sprang to mind, and he wondered what would have happened if Columbus had sailed in a different direction and not landed on Hispaniola.

Instead of a literal representation of Columbus Avenue or Christopher Columbus, Wiley invented almost cartoonlike forms, somewhat reminiscent of the abstract shapes in the paintings of Frank Lobdell. In all three versions, he used the diptych format to create the large size and horizontal proportions of a landscape. (For *Columbus Rerouted* #2 only half the diptych is shown, since the location of the other half is unknown). There is a sense of a large body of water abutting a land mass, although there is no specific representation. Some shapes resemble serpents and sexual organs, and the large triangular areas are reminiscent of sails. A jagged, lightning-like form suggests that stormy weather might have sent Columbus off course.

The theme of a voyage became important for Wiley and reappeared in future work, as did the lightning flash and references to Columbus. The pictorial elements combine organic and

man-made forms, a black-and-white-striped motif, and triangular spaces, which mark the beginning of a personal vocabulary of form that Wiley developed in subsequent years. Just as he called upon free association to create his compositions and themes, he invited viewers to use their imaginations to give meaning to them.

When he received his MFA degree in 1962, Wiley was beginning to attract attention outside the San Francisco Bay Area. He was included in the 1961 and 1962 annual exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and was awarded the painting prize. He was also chosen for the *Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* at the Carnegie Institute.

The year Wiley received his master's degree, Richard L. Nelson hired him to teach art at the University of California, Davis. Together with Wayne Thiebaud, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, and Robert Arneson, they were considered the founding artists of the art department. Peter Saul was hired to teach in the department four years later. The quality of the art teachers attracted such outstanding students as Bruce Nauman, David Gilhooley, John Buck, and Deborah Butterfield, and transformed a college formerly known for agriculture into one of the leading art schools of the 1960s and 1970s.

Nelson determined to have as great a variety of approaches as possible among the art faculty. Because the artists were hired to teach within a few years of each other, there was no hierarchy. Thiebaud was the most traditional of the teachers, and Wiley, the most experimental, but the relationship among the faculty members was one of mutual respect and noncompetitive support. The atmosphere was informal, and Wiley was known to start singing blues and folk songs and playing his harmonica in the middle of class.

FIG. 3

Columbus Rerouted #1
1961
oil on canvas, two panels
each 73 1/2 x 68 in.
Zane J. Wiley
Photograph by Bruce Damonte



FIG. 4

Columbus Rerouted #2
about 1960
oil on canvas
68 x 77 in.
David and Jeanne Carlson,
Carmel, California

FIG. 5

Columbus Rerouted #3
1962
oil on canvas, two panels:
each 71 ¾ x 70 ½ in.
Crocker Art Museum Purchase
with support from the National
Endowment for the Arts





Wiley began to experiment more actively with a variety of media after he received his advanced degree. The following year he created sets, props, and costumes for the San Francisco Mime Troupe's production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (fig. 6).¹¹ Wiley interpreted Jarry's Dada creation with grotesquely sexual forms. The costumes featured oversized breasts, tongues, and testicles, and even the food resembled genitalia.

Of all the art movements to which Wiley was exposed as a student, assemblage was probably the most influential. It appealed to his interest in the humble objects of everyday life and fed his desire to transform ordinary materials into works of art. Surprising juxtapositions created unusual relationships with poetic possibilities. He liked working with mixed media to create objects that were neither painting, sculpture, nor collage, but had elements of each. Assemblage represented a clean break with the seriousness and introspection of abstract expressionism.

In one of his first completed assemblages, *Enigma Doggy* (fig. 7), Wiley rolled up an abstract painting, wrapped it in tape, and attached it with a chain, feathers, and other materials to a cartoonlike painting of a dog vomiting. He transformed the cute dog and emphasized the inscrutability of the image by the title of the piece. Freed from the compromises of the marketplace by his teaching job at Davis and leavened by his sense of humor, Wiley transgressed the boundaries of polite taste. This art was not a precious object to be sold. He gave the piece to his friend Bill Allan.



In 1965 Wiley took his student and friend Bruce Nauman to see an object that had intrigued him at the Mt. Carmel Salvage Shop near his



FIG. 6

Pere Ubu (Kai Spiegel) in the San Francisco Mime Troupe's production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (sets, props, and costumes by William T. Wiley) 1963
black-and-white photograph

FIG. 7

Enigma Doggy
1966
wood, lead, canvas, latex,
chain, and paint
23 1/2 x 26 x 6 in.
Sue Sproule

studio in Mill Valley. It was wooden, about eighteen inches tall, and looked like an armless chair covered with ugly green linoleum suggesting it might be something to step on but the steep angle of the platform seemed to negate any usefulness (fig. 8). It appeared more utilitarian than decorative, but neither Wiley nor Nauman could determine its use. Several days later, Nauman urged Wiley to bring it to Davis. Wiley purchased it for fifty cents and gave it to Nauman, who used it as a footstool in his studio. They called it the SL Step, and it became something of a cult object among the artists at Davis.

When Wiley met with a group of friends to discuss an exhibition for the Berkeley Gallery, a cooperative gallery in San Francisco, the





FIG. 8

ANONYMOUS
The original "Slant Step"
wood, linoleum, and rubber
18 7/8 x 15 x 12 1/4 in.
New York Society for the
Preservation of the Slant Step

FIG. 9

*Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino
Becomes Slant Step*
1966
plaster, acrylic, paint, and chain
22 x 12 x 12 in.
Bonnie Ruder and Ron Wagner

decided on a theme based on the Slant Step.¹² Each of the artists made one or more works for the 1966 show, and poet William Witherspoon wrote "Slant Chant" for the occasion.¹³ The artists made slant steps from jelly beans and bread. There were inflatable slant steps and a slant step puppet.

After the pieces were installed, Wiley and a few friends returned to the gallery before the opening, took all the pieces down and piled them in a corner, leaving only the original Slant Step on display. They left it that way for the show's duration, and people poked around the pile.¹⁴ During the exhibition, sculptor Richard Serra stole the Slant Step and took it with him to New York. It found its way back to California, but then finally found refuge in upstate New York under the auspices of the New York Society for the Preservation of the Slant Step.¹⁵

One of the more intriguing variations on the Slant Step that Wiley made was *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step* (fig. 9), with a rhinoceros horn penetrating the tilted platform. Clearly a phallic symbol, the horn adds a menacing aspect, especially since everyone assumed that a foot should be placed on the step. The artists did not know it at the time, but their assumption was correct. After many years and much research, Wiley discovered that the original Slant Step was used at the turn of the twentieth century to elevate one's feet to facilitate bowel movements.¹⁶ This conflation of playfulness and danger is a hallmark of Wiley's work, whether he contemplates such serious subjects as pollution, radiation, torture, and war or simply juxtaposes disparate elements to create a more abstract statement.

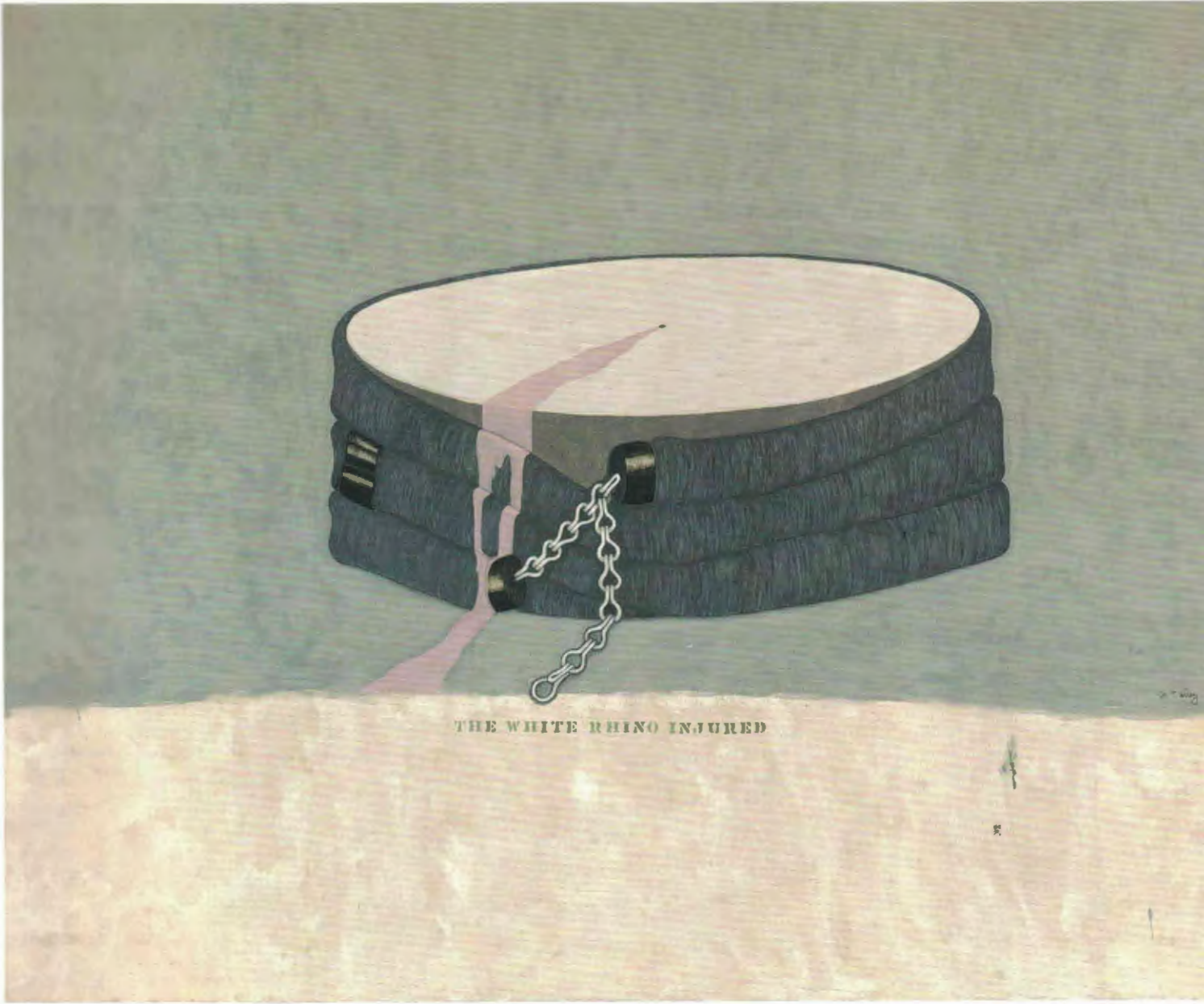
Shortly after the Slant Step show, the *FUNK* art exhibition opened at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. The director, Peter Selz, explained that he wished to document a particular attitude toward art in the Bay Area that he had noticed while writing an article on West Coast art for the March 1967 issue of *Art in America*. Borrowing a term from New Orleans blues, he applied "funk" to describe this attitude:

Funk is at the opposite extreme of such manifestations as New York "primary structures" or the "Fetish Finish" sculpture which prevails in Southern California. Funk art is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly and ungainly. Although usually three-dimensional, it is non-sculptural in any traditional way, and irreverent in attitude and symbolic in content and evocative in feeling.



Slant Step
becomes
Rhino

Rhino becomes
Slant Step
Wm. T. Wiley
1902



THE WHITE RHINO INJURED

many contemporary novels, films, and plays, funk art looks at things which traditionally were not meant to be looked at. Although never precise or illustrative, its subliminal post-Freudian imagery often suggests erotic and scatological forms or relationships; but often when these images are examined more closely, they do not read in a traditional or recognizable manner and are open to a multiplicity of interpretations.¹⁷

Wiley was represented in the exhibition by three works, including *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step*. His work fit Selz's definition of funk more closely than the work of many other artists, who resented being categorized this way. The exhibition was not well received by the artists who were included, because they felt that Selz had defined a movement that did not exist. Nonetheless, the word stuck and has been used to describe much of Bay Area art from the late 1960s and 1970s. Although some saw the term as denigrating, others found it useful and descriptive, as when Perreault, who greatly admired Wiley's art, described him as a "Metaphysical Funk Monk."¹⁸

At the same time that Wiley experimented with various approaches to making art, he continued to paint. In the mid-1960s he switched from oil paint to acrylics, a final move away from the abstract expressionist aesthetic of gesturally applied oil paint. Moreover, acrylic dried more quickly than oil, was easier to work with, and produced a more impersonal, flat finish, evident in *The White Rhino Injured* (fig. 10).

In this painting the mysterious object was based on an image in an old medical book of an ace bandage and a padded chain used to apply a tourniquet above a severed limb. The white circle in the center represents the white

rhino, or more specifically, a cross-section of a rhino horn, for which poachers were killing the animal to the point of extinction.¹⁹ The wedge cut into the circle oozes a pinkish liquid that suggests blood. Wiley recalled that the specific combination of grays and pink alluded to the recent production by his friend Ronnie Davis of a play by Samuel Beckett, in which the pink of the actors' mouths contrasted with the gray stage set.²⁰

Wiley's fascination with the rhino probably stems from a story about this endangered species on the radio, which he listened to continuously as he worked. Radio news programs, especially those on his local National Public Radio station and KPFA, were his primary source of information on national and world events.²¹ The stories drifted in and out of his consciousness. Those that captured his attention often found their way into his work, either as the primary subject or as miscellaneous details. Wiley paid tribute to one of the largest beasts in Africa by asking the viewer to contemplate what the strange image represented, what the title meant, and what destruction of this species portended. Because the plight of the white rhino was not a major issue at that time, the implied message of *The White Rhino Injured* is secondary to the strangeness of the image. Its presentation on a blank background with the title beneath it alludes to the startling disjuncture of form in surrealist art and to the paintings of René Magritte in particular.



The 1960s saw a renewed interest in surrealism in the United States. *Artforum* published an entire issue devoted to surrealism in September

FIG. 10

The White Rhino Injured
1966
acrylic on canvas
73 1/2 x 95 3/4 in.
University of California,
Wiley Art Museum and
Pacific Film Archive,
Brenda Richardson,
Wiley
Photograph by
Benjamin Blackwell

1966, and the Museum of Modern Art organized the major exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* two years later. Much interest focused on Magritte, whose work had been shown in a retrospective exhibition at the Walker Art Center in 1962, another retrospective at the Arkansas Art Center two years later, and still another retrospective shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, which traveled to four additional museums across the country, with its final stop at the University Art Museum in Berkeley in late 1966.²²

The influence of surrealism is even more evident in a similar painting from the following year, *Shark's Dream* (fig. 11). Perreault described it succinctly: "Wiley's *Shark's Dream* is in some sense a key to his methodology and his concerns. It is a smoothly illusionistic painting of a shark-like 'minimal' work of sculpture, oozing blood. A cartoon-balloon floating above the 'sculpture' contains a reversed view. It is a painting of a work of art dreaming about itself."²³ Earlier in the article, he observed: "Wiley's art is about art." Is it a surrealist dream image or is he mocking this surrealist trope? The imaginary sculpture was probably a discarded piece of wood that reminded the artist of a shark. In his mind he transformed it into a work of art, simultaneously a sculpture and a painting. The fuzzy edges of the thought-balloon emphasize that it is a painted form.

Perhaps the shark dreams of itself before it was injured or perhaps the "sculpture" in the balloon is its mate, as another critic suggested. He was perplexed by the imagery, and criticized Wiley's paintings as being too derivative, but admired the painting nonetheless: "What this sardonic joke means—'means' within an

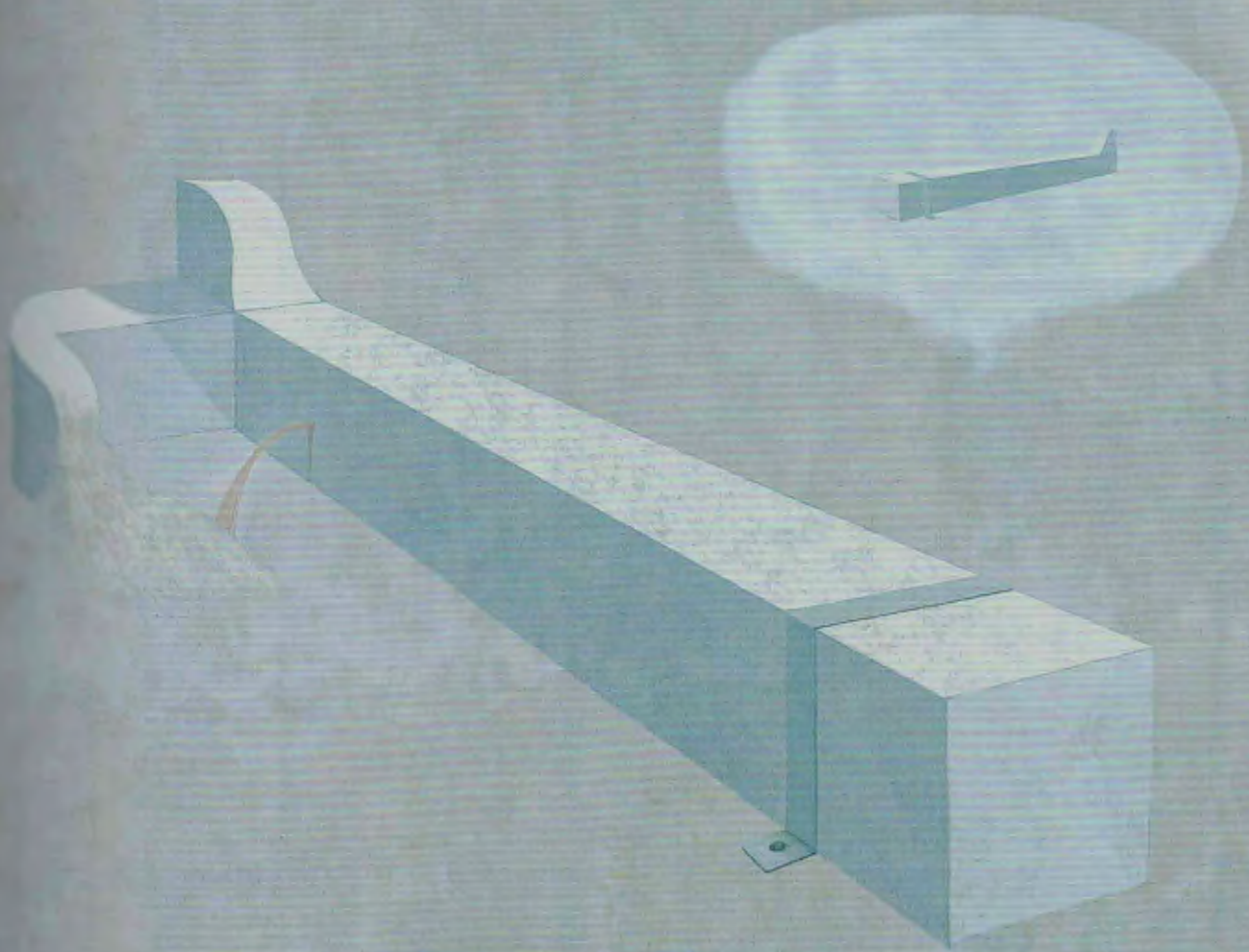
empirical cause-effect sequence out of Real Life—I cannot say, nor do I care. But I know I like it."²⁴ *Shark's Dream* was shown in 1967 in a group exhibition at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York. The painting remained in New York and was later shown in the Whitney Museum's 1967 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Painting* and was purchased for the museum. The response of these reviewers is typical of many of Wiley's admirers, indeed of the artist himself, who does not fully understand the imagery, but appreciates its engaging implications and its visual energy.

In addition to Magritte, Wiley was interested in the work of Marcel Duchamp. Wiley did not study his work in depth, but knew it primarily through reproductions and writings, hence his greater familiarity with Duchamp's ideas than with his objects. Johns and Rauschenberg had revived interest in Duchamp, in large part as an alternative to abstract expressionism. In 1963 Walter Hopps had organized a retrospective exhibition of Duchamp at the Pasadena Museum.

Intrigued by Duchamp's incorporation of everyday materials such as a bicycle wheel into his art as well as the neo-Dada practice of mail art, Wiley initiated a "dust exchange" in 1967.²⁵ He wrote to sculptor Martial Westburg, asking him to make a dust relief with dust from the Whitney Museum and place it in the Museum of Modern Art. Westburg replied that he couldn't get the dust, so Wiley made the same request of mail artist Ray Johnson and enclosed dust from his studio in the envelope. Johnson wrote back and confessed that he had eaten the dust. Wiley then sent a packet of dust from his studio to fellow artist Terry Fox in Paris and asked him to collect and send dust from the Egyptian section of the Louvre.

FIG. 11

Shark's Dream
1967
acrylic on canvas
72 × 84 in.
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York,
Purchase, with funds from the
Neysa McMein Purchase Award
68.17
Photograph by
Sheldan C. Collins



SHARK'S DREAM

Another piece that Wiley created that year, *Mona Lisa Wipe Out* or “*Three Wishes*” (fig. 12), refers to Duchamp. He purchased a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and pinned it to plywood. He began to scrape down the surface, layer by layer, with a piece of canvas that he nailed to the bottom of the composition. He then wrote three wishes, stamped them into tinfoil, and wrapped them in white bandage tape, which he attached to the mouth of the image with wire. Although this piece recalled Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* on which the artist drew a beard and moustache, it more closely refers to his 1965 work called *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*, a playing card with an image of the *Mona Lisa* shorn of her beard and moustache, which he used as an invitation to an exhibition in New York.

The witty and risqué message Duchamp conveyed when the viewer pronounced the initials in French (*Elle a chaud au cul*, meaning “she has a hot ass”) was an important precedent for Wiley’s own epigrammatic titles, written beneath the image in many of his later works, as well as his conflation of high and low art. The “wipe out” aspect of the piece alludes to Rauschenberg’s action in the early 1950s of erasing a drawing by Willem de Kooning and exhibiting the erased image as his own work of art. “Wipe out” is also a term for a fall from a surf board, a nod toward the popular California sport of surfing.

Another artist whom Wiley admired was H. C. Westermann. He and Nauman wrote a note to Westermann about a piece by Man Ray. Nauman suggested they include some oblong strips of carbon paper in the envelope on which to record the note’s travel, a variation

on Dada mail art. To their surprise, they received a response from Westermann, who thought they were putting him on. When he first met Westermann, Wiley assured him that Nauman and he highly respected his work. Westermann visited Wiley’s studio, and Wiley saw him in Connecticut during his stay on the East Coast. Both artists showed at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, and Westermann came to Wiley’s first exhibition there. They continued to have intermittent contact with each other, and Westermann’s art remained an important inspiration for the younger artist. In appreciation of Westermann, Wiley said: “Cliff’s vision...and mind and methods and craft and dedication...opinions passion...heart! Soul! All right there...war ghosts, environmental concerns, craft...quality.”²⁶



Throughout the 1960s, Wiley continued to experiment with new media and techniques such as the painting *The Great Blondino (Self-Portrait)* (fig. 13) and the related film, *The Great Blondino*. Wiley became fascinated with the story of a nineteenth-century French acrobat named Jean François Gravelet (aka Blondin) whom he read about in an old issue of *National Geographic* magazine. One of his most remarkable feats was to push a wheelbarrow on a tightrope suspended above Niagara Falls.

Wiley transmuted the image in the magazine into *The Great Blondino (Self-Portrait)*, a blindfolded man dressed like a comic book hero or jester in stars and stripes, pushing an overloaded wheelbarrow on a tightrope. The absurdity of the feat appealed to him, and he admired Blondin’s madcap spirit, adopting his

FIG. 12

Mona Lisa Wipe Out or
“*Three Wishes*”
1967
paper, wire, canvas, and tape
24 × 17 1/8 in.
Yale University Art Gallery,
The Janet and Simeon
Braguin Fund





It was
Wonderful
Mom!

FIG. 13

Blondino (Self-Portrait)
1965
oil on canvas
84 x 84 in.
Collection: Art & Nature,
Napa, California

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, while the written message—"It was wonderful Mom!"—changes the composition into an absurdly oversized postcard from Niagara Falls.

FIG. 14

Chuck Wiley on buoy
during the filming of
The Great Blondino, directed by
William T. Wiley and
Robert Nelson)
1965
color photograph
photo by Jack Fulton

Wiley transformed the idea of the painting into a film made in collaboration with his friend the underground filmmaker Robert Nelson. Wiley enlisted his brother to portray Blondino (fig. 14), who wanders about dreaming and fantasizing while being observed by a plainclothes policeman known as "The Cop," played by the beat poet Lou Welch. The narrative is fragmentary, reminiscent of surrealist collages by Max Ernst. Wiley identified with Blondino as a performer and an outsider, and *The Great Blondino* features the first of many alter egos he created. In 1963 he had made a short film, *Plastic Haircut*, in collaboration with Nelson, R. G. Davis, Robert Hudson, and Steven Reich. In 1967 he again collaborated with Nelson to make *The Off-Handed Jape... & How to Pull It Off* and with William Allan to make *Iron into Wax*.



Wiley spent the early years of his career trying to make sense of all the art and ideas to which he had been introduced during his student years. He received a year's grant from the University of California at Davis in 1967 and traveled to Europe for the first time. Settling in New Jersey with his family in the fall, he commuted to Manhattan to visit museums, but he had stopped making art, unsure of his direction.

When he tentatively began painting watercolors, Wiley recaptured the joy of making



art. Watercolor appealed to his transgressive nature. He liked the small scale and intimacy of the medium. His watercolor technique—black outlines filled in with delicate color—was more akin to coloring book drawings or comics than to traditional watercolor. He introduced small, jewel-like watercolors, most with the text below the image. By painting watercolors, he freed himself from the onus of seeking the approval of others. He regained the self-confidence to begin making art again. During the next few months, he began to create a new body of work.

He also began teaching again. By spring of 1968, he had accepted a teaching job at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He had enjoyed teaching at Davis, and word spread that he was a popular teacher as well as an accomplished artist. When he first began teaching, he carried over some of the methods he had

learned at the Art Institute, but he soon adopted the more open approach he had inherited from McGrath. Wiley recalled: "I would occasionally use assignments or non-assignments or readings or music or any number of things to try and stimulate ideas or activity. Think up different ways to break up the thinking and keep it fresh for me, fresh for them."²⁷

A writer who observed Wiley interact with students said: "Wiley's gentleness is impressive. He reminded me of what you said about the Eskimos' attitude about their children—that they don't mold them or shape them to some predetermined form; they just smooth off the rough exterior and let them reveal themselves from within."²⁸

In May 1968 he had the first solo exhibition of his new work at the Allan Frumkin Gallery. A *Sign from the Country Painter* (see fig. 1) hung from two wires in the exhibition, like a handmade sign by a folk artist. A palette cut from a piece of plywood, it has images on both sides. Black plastic letters hammered into one side create the words "WHATS IT ALL MEAN," as much a meditation as a question.²⁹ Wiley recalled that he had heard this question from fellow artist Joseph Raffael, who visited him in New Jersey. The phrase stuck with Wiley and seemed appropriate for a work that ponders the relationship between art and life. The title of the piece is also painted in cursive letters on the verso, and in the center are large dabs of paint, emphasizing that it is a palette. But who has ever heard of a two-sided palette? Is it a free-hanging painting or a two-dimensional sculpture?

Wiley's construction broke the rules established for minimalist "primary structures," or geometric sculptures that aspire to be free of narrative or referential content. Minimalist sculpture dominated the New York art galleries in the

1960s. His work is simultaneously a painting, sculpture, and an assemblage. The hard-edged letters on one side contrast with the loosely painted colorful letters of the title on the verso. The yellow, red, and orange words seem to hover in front of the blue ones, suggesting space and shadow. The commercial paint bristling with dripping primary colors, firmly immobilized by a metal brace, refers directly to the action painting of Jackson Pollock. The words add a narrative element, challenging the formal principles of modernism. The outline and presentation of the palette suggest an abstract head with the thumb hole resembling an eye.

Wiley made this piece while he was living in rural New Jersey, hence a "country painter," but this appellation also acknowledged his own small-town background and relaxed San Francisco mentality, which contrasted dramatically with the urban setting of New York and the major European cities he had just seen. In contrast to the sophisticated urbanites of the New York art world, Wiley presented himself as an untrained bumpkin. In her review of the exhibition, critic Grace Glueck described him as "a booted, blue-denimed Californian whose appearance suggests a riverboat gambler going straight."³⁰ She also noted that many of the works in the exhibition were about art, a major theme for Wiley throughout his career.

Another piece that Wiley worked on in his New Jersey studio and would complete later in California that broke the rules of minimalist art was *The Big Drag* (fig. 15), a good-natured challenge to formalism and its ostensible purpose. Teaching earlier in the year at the University of California, Davis, meant that Wiley had had to commute of several hours twice a week from his house in Mill Valley. William Allan was tea-



FIG. 15

The Big Drag
1968

wood, rope, metal, and
ink on canvas
13 × 48 × 72 in.
Dan and Nancy Eiler

there as well, and the two of them drove together, sometimes with a model from the Bay Area.³¹ During one of their commutes, the model told a dramatic story that inspired this object.

She recounted setting out to sail around the world in a boat that she and her husband had built. Bound for New Zealand from California, they were caught in a horrendous storm, which her husband battled until he was exhausted. He went below to get some rest, and she was left to fend for herself on deck. They had thrown all available lines into the water to act as a drag to slow them down. She thought of jumping overboard because it was terrifying to be on the edge of disaster

for such an extended time. She then glanced toward the stern and saw blue dolphins playing in the lines roiling behind her. She became calm and rode out the storm with absolute equanimity.

Wiley wrote the narrative on a piece of canvas hidden by a rectangular hatch and visible only when opened. The large triangular form, constructed with plywood, hinges, and wooden dowels, refers to the handmade sailboat or perhaps the sails. The title refers to the lines thrown overboard to provide drag, but also to the tedium (“What a big drag!”) of the commute made bearable by Allan’s company and the model’s story.

In the Frumkin exhibition, Wiley showed a sculpture he called *Movement to Blackball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)* (fig. 16). As he was removing black electrician's tape from a square of latticed Masonite strips, he rolled the black tape into a ball. During this process, he learned of the assassination of Martin Luther King and transformed the ball into a sculpture honoring him. Next to the ball of black tape he included a paper that read: "Movement to Blackball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King) murdered in Memphis, Tenn, April 4, 1968. This is a piece in progress, those who wish to participate may do so by buying black friction tape and adding it to the ball. Those who wish to participate but feel they don't have the time could buy the tape and then hire people in need of some work to put the tape on for them. After you have added a minimum of 150 feet leave your name. I would like the process to continue for a year or until the anniversary of Mr. King's death. At this time the results of the piece will be donated to an appropriate person or place. Sincerely, William T. Wiley 1968."³²

When the work was shown at the Eugenia Butler Gallery in Los Angeles in 1969, Wiley added two pieces of adhesive tape below his signature on the accompanying paper and wrote: "The length of the project has been changed. The process will continue until the ball achieves proper proportions. William T. Wiley 1969." The installation was accompanied by a music tape by his friend Steve Reich, which sounded like a truncated drum roll. When he showed the sculpture in 1999 at the Oakland Museum, he embellished the black ball with lead, wax, gold leaf, a feather, a blackboard, a fan, and other miscellaneous objects, and placed it on a stool [see the painting of the object (fig. 70)].

The Frumkin exhibition received mixed reviews. One critic, Gregory Battcock, seemed nonplussed, but intrigued. Focusing on the watercolors and drawings in the show, he wrote, "[T]here is something medieval about them, the pictures are too absurd and the captions are utterly stupid. . . . The artist possesses a sense of humor that is sometimes macabre and always provocative."³³ Writer Dore Ashton referred to Wiley as a "grinning diddler" whose written legends at the bottom of his watercolors are "put-ons." She compared him to Max Ernst and "the true spirit of Surrealism, to set the mind's eye adrift in a sea of seeming absurdities," judging Wiley's efforts to be less successful than other surrealists.³⁴

Perrault, however, saw in Wiley "an important new artist who re-introduced qualities of subjectivity, complexity and wit and makes them viable by the use of new extremes and by his resourcefulness, his playfulness, his inventiveness. At a time when simplicity is too often a disguise for simple-mindedness and has become not only a cliché, but a dogma, Wiley dared to be complex. At a time when 'meaning' is held to be vulgar, Wiley dared to create works that are all meaning. . . . contradictory, dream-like and violently poetic."³⁵

In these works and others at the Frumkin Gallery, Wiley established themes and practices that would characterize his work from that time forward. Combining humble materials, found objects, personal symbols, enigmatic texts, and references to art, popular culture, and current events, Wiley created a means of expression that assimilated his cumulative experience of various artists and art movements into a distinctive style. He introduced the idea of a work of art that changed over time and invited audience participation in the work's evolution.

FIG. 16

*Movement to Blackball Violence
(Homage to Martin Luther King)*
1968–2006
black friction tape ball,
wooden stool, lead, wax,
gold leaf, feather, and
miscellaneous objects
50 × 24 × 24 in.
Collection of the Artist

RETURN TO EDEN

After an absence of more than a year, Wiley returned to California in the fall of 1968. During the summer, he spent several months as a guest artist at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He spent most of that time working on two performances. The first was *Over Evident Falls*, with music by Reich.³⁶ For the second performance, *Parachutes, Dumbbells, and Me: The Space Opera*, he collaborated with fellow instructors and students at the University of Colorado.

Wiley was glad to return to California. He had enjoyed traveling around Europe and seeing art in New York, but he recognized that the intense, competitive nature of the New York art world was not for him. He understood that this stimulation was important for some artists, and he appreciated the value of what New York had to offer, both the more formal approach to art that was favored there and the substantial support for art among critics and collectors. Shortly after he returned to California, he mused:

One thing that hit me the first time I was in New York was when you ran into someone who was up for whatever you were offering, the sensibility was honed right up and needed that information—it was just soaked right up like a sponge. Then I saw why art existed in New York the way it did, the place it had in the culture, why it was needed and how much it was needed, and that it was like any other power in the world. It had its good and its corrupt aspects, but it was a total part of the cosmos, just as everything is.³⁷

Wiley preferred the informal camaraderie and spontaneous interactions among artists in the Bay Area. His teaching job at Davis provided a steady income, and his representation by the Frumkin Gallery and the Hansen–Fuller

Gallery in San Francisco gave him the security to pursue whatever interested him.

What Wiley liked most about teaching was his interaction with the students. Older than they were, he related to them more as peers and often felt that he learned as much from them as they did from him. He especially admired the work of Bill Nauman, a graduate student at Davis who shared his early background in Indiana, and they have remained lifelong friends.

Wiley was intrigued by Nauman's conceptual approach to art. Feeding off each other's ideas, they came to regard process as more important than craftsmanship and valued both permanent and temporary works of art as much as large and permanent ones. They shared an interest in music and paradox, as well as a love of words not only for their look and shape but also for their sound and meaning. Nauman had played an important part in the Slant Step project, and he had even begun to make a film about it. He called that Wiley was the "strongest influence I had. It was in being rigorous, being honest with yourself—trying to be clear—taking a moral position... Bill was one of the first that gave me an idea about moral commitment, the word being an artist... that art is an ethic."³⁸

Nauman also admired the work of Marcel Duchamp. He and Wiley were less interested in his individual works than in the questions he raised about art: What is its function? Can it have social value? What makes it worth creating and preserving? Duchamp's declaration that everyday objects, such as a urinal or a bicycle rack, to be works of art questioned whether functional objects could be transformed into art. Wiley and Nauman's fascination with the Slant Step and the resulting exhibition w

FIG. 17



Wiley, 1887–1968,
Tool and Die Maker
1968
stainless steel
10 ft. pyramid and
1.5-meter sphere with
5 ft.-long chain
University of Pittsburgh and Mrs. Ed
Wiley, Pennsylvania

directly inspired by Duchamp's philosophical questions.

Although he was interested in the work of Duchamp before he traveled to Europe and New York, it was not until he spent several months looking at art in New York that Wiley felt he understood Duchamp's concept of art. "At that point Duchamp started to make sense and a whole lot of things started falling into place. I just felt so happy getting my work together."³⁹ When Duchamp died in late 1968, Wiley was working on a large metal sculpture of a ball and chain attached to a pyramid that he dedicated to Duchamp upon news of his death and titled *To Marcel Duchamp, 1887-1968, Tool and Die Maker* (fig. 17).

Wiley explained his thoughts on Duchamp in the catalogue for an exhibition of his own work at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. "What we can learn from Marcel Duchamp is the same message from any artist who has made his presence manifest in the form of personal achievement: is essentially that we do not have to follow his example. . . . If you accept Duchamp's example as an ultimate limit or universe you miss a facet of his existence I deem essential. His universe is ultimate only in relation to him. We must use his example of mobility and flexibility as an imperfect but well intentioned model of existence."⁴⁰