

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Wiley theme in Hosfelt show reveals the brooding and the wit

Abstract black-and-white works by Bay Area master

What more is there to say about an artist who deserves to be a certified San Francisco Bay Area Living Treasure?

There is no such accreditation, alas, but if there were, William T. Wiley would be the visual artist at the top of almost anyone's list. At 78 and going strong, Wiley is revered by fellow artists, former students and a broad public audience. His career debut, in 1960 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was a coveted one-person exhibition mounted even before he graduated from art school (at the San Francisco Art Institute). Since then, his work has entered the collection of virtually every

William T. Wiley: & So... May Cuss Grate Again? 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday. Through Jan. 30. Hosfelt Gallery, 260 Utah Street, S.F. (415) 495-5454. www.hosfelt-gallery.com.

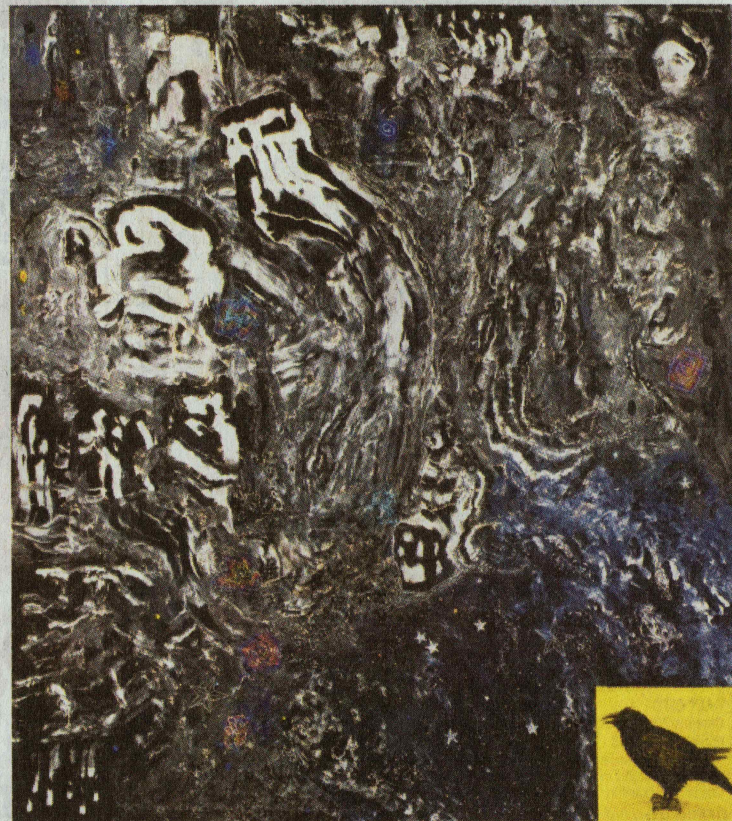
major American museum, has been assembled into more than 100 exhibitions — at least five of which were retrospectives that traveled widely — and has been the subject of more than a score of books and catalogs.

So it's no surprise that Hosfelt Gallery, Wiley's San Francisco dealer, looked for a new

hook when it determined to organize its second solo show with the artist (through Jan. 30). The choice of theme and the selection of objects included are instructive for what they tell us about Wiley's artistic concerns. They also reveal a lot about how exhibitions come about. After all, an exhibition reflects the organizer's state of mind as much as the artist's.

Any curator worth his or her salt will work closely with the artist in making choices for a show. We can assume that Todd Hosfelt — one of the region's best gallerists — and Wiley carefully went over the

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Hosfelt Gallery

William T. Wiley's "Facing Corvus Constellation" (2011).

Wiley selections' unusual focus

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exhibition checklist together. We don't know just what they discussed (and I make a policy of not asking for information not readily available to all), but the curator would not directly counter the artist's wishes. At the same time, an artist as experienced as Wiley would likely give the curator wide leeway in creating what amounts, after all, to the curator's visual essay on the artist's work.

For this exhibition, Hosfelt chose to focus, according to the exhibition introduction, "on two important and under-examined aspects of Wiley's oeuvre — his use of black and white and his interest in abstraction." It's a useful framework intellectually. Wiley is an extraordinary craftsman, and the formal implications of these choices — pictures that move easily between Abstract Expressionism, strong geometry, an idiosyncratic "comix" hand and boldly illustrative rendering — become obvious from the first works we see.

The show consists of 10 large paintings on canvas and 15 watercolors. Most of these also incorporate extensive drawing and annotation in graphite or ink. All but two of the works on canvas were made between 2009 and 2011. Commanding the center of the gallery, however, is a pair of striking paintings completed this year.

"Pacing the Feint" is an all-over eccentric patchwork of black-and-white marks; the whole thing has the kind of casual formalism of a home-made quilt (think Gee's Bend, if you know that African American style). The title, which I read as a scrambling of the phrase "facing the paint," is the kind of groaner

The decision to work in so dark and limited a palette as black and white carries with it a heavy symbolic weight.

pun Wiley uses liberally, both for titles and as elaborate verbal embellishments added into or around his pictures. It refers, I think, to the challenge posed to an artist at the start of any new work.

That work's pendant, a painting called "Thud Answer," is half made up of a similar patchwork pattern, but here the loose geometry dissolves into woozy, meandering lines and smears. At the canvas' lower right, in the kind of thought-box Wiley often employs, he muses, "I was losing patience..with this pain-ting.... I had been thinking..could be the world's 'ugliest' abstraction..& then I..thought..Is that too bold a claim?!"

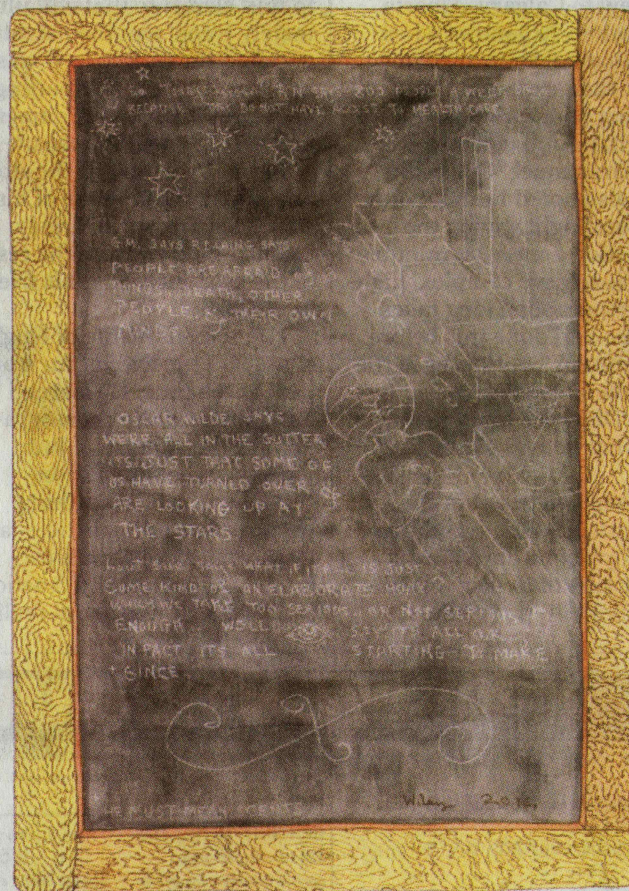
The rest of the works in the gallery revolve around the graphic pull of these two prominently placed works, and also around their intimations of uncertainty and hesitation. Some "paintings" are canvases filled nearly to unintelligibility with pencil scrawlings, their dark tones rivaled by darker themes: of war and torture; of drones, female genital mutilation, burning Buddhists and PTSD.

Other works, particularly the watercolors, at first appear more lighthearted, some even sporting the bright hues for which Wiley, an assured colorist, is renowned. But these are populated by pathetic creatures, notably a goat and a raven, frequent inhabitants of



William T. Wiley's "Unobjective Abstraction With Burning Buddhists" (2011), acrylic and charcoal on canvas.

Hosfelt Gallery photos



Wiley's "It's Starting to Make Since" (2012), a work in watercolor and ink on paper, is part of the Hosfelt show.

Wiley's fantasies and likely avatars of the artist himself. Wiley has always been self-effacing — the dunce cap is an attribute that appears often in self-portraits — but this exhibition highlights that aspect of his work and thought.

Which brings me to my one quibble with this otherwise smart exhibition. While the introductory text leans heavily to formal analysis, it would seem obvious to point out that the decision to work in so dark and limited a palette as black and white carries with it a heavy symbolic weight. Whether purposely or not, the show portrays a brooding artist in the fading light of his long career. It's an image so somber that it doesn't ring entirely true.

There's no doubt that worry over humanity's failures and foibles has long been an aspect of Wiley's complex view of the world. But his work, far from bleak, also reflects a Zen-like sense of humor, an acceptance of life as we find it. It is that essential element that enables him, and us, to go on.

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