The Wilcox Space
Art History, Regional Art, and Documentation

Rick Brettell

Founding Director, Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History
Margaret McDermott Distinguished Chair of Aesthetic Studies
University of Texas at Dallas

When the discipline of art history got started in the late Renaissance with Giorgio Vasari, it dealt seriously with what was then "contemporary art" and its position in larger art historical narratives of late Medieval and Renaissance Italy. Yet, when the discipline professionalized in the 18th and 19th centuries, its narratives were firmly located in the human past—in the art of museums, which in their great founding century, the 19th, eschewed art of the historical moment of their founding, preferring narratives of stylistic development in the past—arranged by nation and region.

Today, the discipline of art history is engaged more than ever with the art of our own time, and faculty often complain that it is all but impossible to convince our current students to take the human past seriously. Indeed, at the internationally known Master's program at the Clark Art Institute (where our own Sarah Kozlowski trained before doing her Ph.D. at Yale, and where I work in the summer), I surveyed the second-year students' carrels this past summer to find ten of the twelve students writing about art after 1945. So much for "Art History."

And, if the discipline-wide preference for the present is true, there is a corollary—the preference for the cosmopolitan and international over the regional. To study locally produced art is almost tantamount to excommunication from the larger worlds of contemporary discourse, which are determined by capitals and markets and, of course, art critics in New York, Tokyo, Los Angeles, London, etc.

So, in the face of all of this, how does the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History deal with locally produced "contemporary art?" The answer lies in our fascination with the nature of documentation and of the physical and intellectual properties of the work of art itself. Five years ago, we entered into a partnership with the Ioannes Project, created by the artist's younger brother, David, to document and preserve the work

Fifth Installation at The Wilcox Space, *Relinquishing Time: Selected Works of John Wilcox*, curated by David Wilcox, on view November 2016 to October 2017.

of an important Dallas artist, John Wilcox, who died in 2012 after two decades of struggle with HIV at the age of 57.

Although admired by collectors, curators, and the small community of Dallas-based artists in his lifetime, John Wilcox was a supremely private person, whose actual production was scarcely known outside his immediate family. Yet, his importance as an artist was clear to everyone with a serious knowledge of post-World War II art, and a small group consisting of his dealer, Barry Whistler, his brother David, his friend the El Paso artist James Magee, the collector/architect Gary Cunningham, and myself met in his Exposition Park-area studio to discuss ways of dealing with his oeuvre after his death.

Our first inclination was to find a museum to mount an important retrospective of his work. Yet, in considering the real possibilities of that, it became clear that the work was too little known to justify the institutional expense required for a large exhibition and publication. As we sat in the space, James Magee and Gary Cunningham said that, if the space was simply and cheaply transformed into a gallery-like space with drywall and new track lighting, we might create what would be called The Wilcox Space and embark on an open-ended series of small, strictly non-commercial exhibitions from the large core of his work, each with its own publication.

We didn't, at first, know what they would be, but decided as a first step to do a simple exhibition curated by Wilcox's old friend and dealer, Barry Whistler, which could be quickly mounted without a good deal of research, and which would allow us to open the space quickly and to buy time for the complete digital photography and assessment of condition for all of John's work on canvas, panel, and paper. David was also able to catalogue and assess Wilcox's personal art collection and library, and to begin the slow process of reading his journals and letters, which were so personal and private that only David, as executor of the artistic estate, had initial access to them.

Our continued conversations with David also coincided with the founding of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas. Within a matter of months in early 2014, a partnership was established between David and The Wilcox Space, and the Edith O'Donnell Institute. As we continued our conversations with David, we developed a plan for a curatorial process that would result in comprehensive and well-documented exhibitions, accompanied by scholarly catalogues.

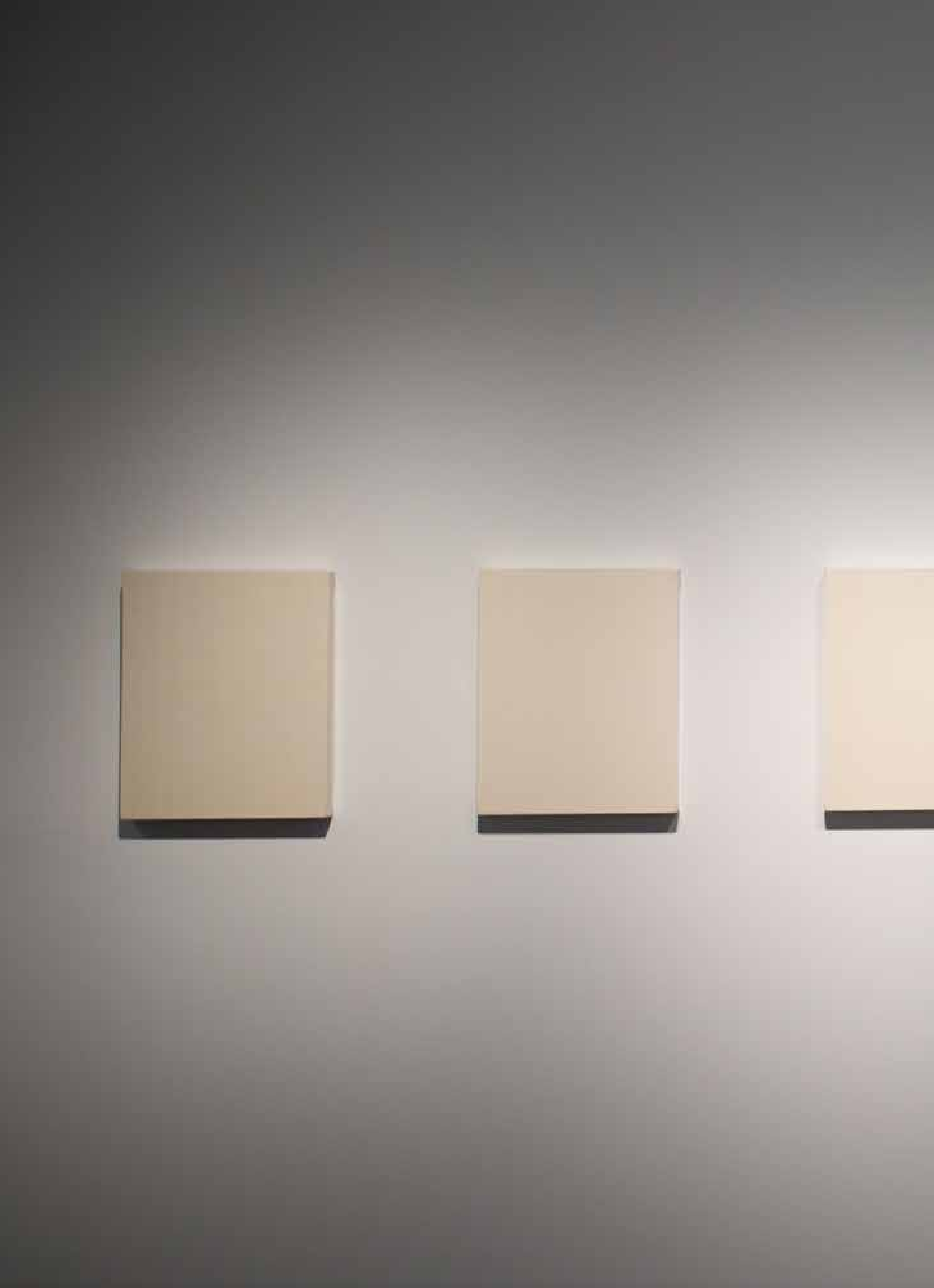
The idea for the initial exhibition in this new partnership came from me and from my own fascination with the earliest works of Wilcox, which were made in California, New York, and Texas as he struggled to define himself. These works were virtually unknown to his dealer, Barry Whistler, and to the larger community in Texas because, when Wilcox made them, he was not yet part of the local art scene.

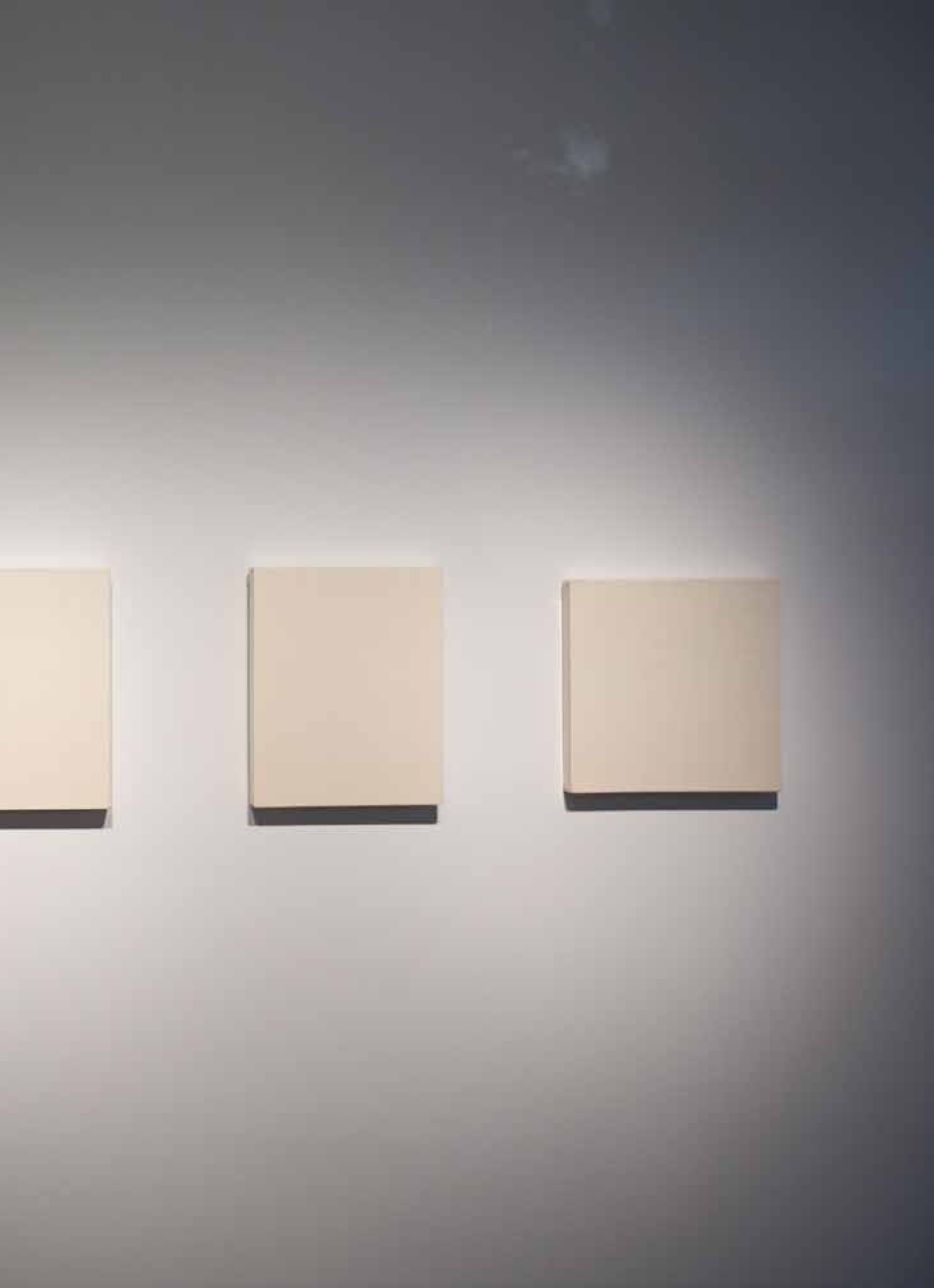
I was fascinated with this group of works, but felt strongly that, although I *am* a professional art historian, my own field of expertise lies with earlier modernist European art, and that for this and all future exhibitions, we ought to recruit an outside scholar-curator who could bring fresh eyes and more focused contemporary experience to the project. We also decided—with a combination of boldness and of the desire to buy time—to publish the book *after* the opening of the exhibition, so that it would also document the exhibition itself with a floor plan and installation photographs, in addition to professional photographs of the work included in it.

We approached the Seattle-based firm of Lucia/Marquand to be our publisher and, after careful deliberation, decided to make the books as a standardized series that would have an eventual collective impact. What was most important in our early decisions is that we didn't foresee the entire series at once, but rather allowed it to develop gradually as his work became known to a widening circle of collectors, critics, curators, and artists.

The book, *John Wilcox: The works from 1980-83, California to Texas*, was the result of the exhibition I curated, and helped bring our thinking for future volumes into form. I selected the fifteen works of art and curated their installation in The Wilcox Space. We recruited Gabriel Ritter, then the Nancy and Tim Hanley Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art, to write a second essay after spending considerable time with the works selected. We also worked closely with Wilcox's brother David to collect material for an illustrated chronology of the period, and asked the important Dallas-based photographer Allison V. Smith to document the installation. The natural linen-bound hardback with a jaunty red linen binder strip made its debut after the exhibition closed, as a permanent scholarly record of Wilcox's early work.

The spare, utterly non-commercial installation had tremendous success for the large groups who came to the opening and to subsequent events at the space. It





brought the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History into the heart of the creative community in Exposition Park, and was clear evidence of our commitment to both contemporary and locally produced art. It launched another important aspect of the Wilcox Space, which had served as Wilcox's loft and studio for ten years. Because it has a bathroom and a kitchen as well as a sleeping loft, it could not only house visiting curators *in* the space, but also be a place for meals, conversations, casual gatherings, and lectures, each of which brought a different small audience into direct contact with the works.

All of us know that we look differently at works of art at differing times of the day, in different groups, and when seated during a meal or a discussion. The multiplicity of *ways* of viewing make The Wilcox Space all but unique because it has both a domestic and an institutional character. It also brought a widely diverse audience to confront and then to study the work, as well as to read the critical prose and documentation about it. One important Dallas-based collector was so taken by a particular work at one event that they inquired about its availability from Wilcox's dealer and were able to acquire it privately for their collection, thus providing the estate with an income stream that could support the costs of the space.

In curating my exhibition of Wilcox's work, I wanted to focus on Wilcox's origins as an artist. Although a native of Denison, Texas, and Dallas, he attended St. Stephen's School in Austin, where he already showed interest in the visual arts and won an arts prize as a high school student. Wilcox decided that he was interested in the liberal arts and elected to go the experimental—one course at a time—private college in Colorado Springs, Colorado College. Here, he made several close friends of both genders and began to experiment even more ambitiously with his ideas and his art practice.

To start professionally as an artist, he needed an MFA degree, and, rather than go to New York, he applied to and was accepted by the graduate program at Pomona College, outside of Los Angeles. Yet, after matriculating, he quickly realized that his decision was incorrect and returned to Texas, where he worked, like many other artists, as an art handler and preparator at the Fort Worth Museum of Art. Here, he met lifelong friends and began to understand the complex aesthetic politics of institutional museum culture.

Yet, California—*not* New York—beckoned, and, not only did he have a close friend in the theater world in L.A., but he also knew that he needed a quiet place distant from urban pressure to develop as an artist. Through other friends, he found a studio and living place in Carpinteria, just southwest of Santa Barbara. Here he worked and lived in an abandoned bunk house with two others: a Japanese Buddhist, who chanted much of the day, and an organist. It was, seemingly a kind of hippy paradise—cheap, open-minded, and spiritual—and here Wilcox developed as an artist.

The work from this period is confounding to a conventional art historian, who wants to root the work of the artist being studied in the cultural context of southern California of the late 1970's and early 1980's. Gabriel Ritter, a native Californian who brought his intellectual energy and knowledge of the arts traditions of Southern California to the project, was unable to find any compelling origins for the highly original and accomplished paintings made there by Wilcox.

So, how did they happen? A Texas-raised, Colorado-educated, artist in rural

Previous page John Wilcox, *Prayer No. 1*, 1990. In the fourth Installation at The Wilcox Space. *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, an exhibition curated by Sarah Kozlowski and Ben Lima, on view November 2015 to November 2016.

Second Installation at The Wilcox Space, *John Wilcox Selected Works: 1980 to 1983*, curated by Rick Brettell, on view November 2013 to October 2014.

California was not destined to follow regional norms and, thus, developed a profound originality largely because he was *not* part of a regional aesthetic tradition. He could never have made the works he made there in Texas or Colorado (and certainly not in New York), and this very situation produced work of a stubborn originality. The aim of the exhibition and its publication was not to find the origins of Wilcox's aesthetic, but, instead, to understand his need for originality.

In my essay for the catalogue, I wrote of certain resonances between particular works by Wilcox and those from the late 1970's by California based artists like Ron Davis and Robert Therrien. And to those, I would now add the wonderful experimental work from the 70's by Mary Corse, whose work is now coming to prominence. The whole issue of the elusive relationship between figure and ground in illusionistic painting, of the discovery of geometric shapes that have a multi-dimensional character, and of the complex chromatic and light-based issues involved with the positioning of a shape on a ground—all of these fascinated Wilcox in ways that have a good deal to do with what he saw in southern California.

What one learns from this is that artists can teach art historians to look beyond their established canons—both at the work of neglected artists and at visual relationships among artists from different art historically defined groups. This is what happened for those of us who thought we knew the art produced in southern California in its greatest decades—the 1960s through the 1980s—as codified by the Getty-financed regional art historical project called Pacific Standard Time. Wilcox realized before *any* art historians or museum professionals in Texas the incredible fecundity of formal invention and material experimentation in the art produced in and around L.A.

The work I did on the exhibition and the subsequent volume in the series devoted to the oeuvre of John Wilcox taught me to look at regional art in completely new ways, and to have courage to get beyond established art historical forms that are, fundamentally, established by the art market. We learned that documentation is only the beginning of critical and historical understanding and that we all learn *from* the work ordered and discussed in new ways. This is not possible in museums, which need external verification and established knowledge before they can be experimental. The Wilcox Space brought art produced just decades ago into the realm of "art history."

From this beginning, it would have made sense to divide the oeuvre of Wilcox into chronological groups defined by place—the New York years, the return to Texas, etc. But, as soon as we began to confront this kind of historically minded structure, we realized how formulaic and boring it was. So, we gathered the larger group of curators, scholars, and artists and began to discuss what to do next. Leigh Arnold, the UT Dallas Ph.D. who is a curator at the Nasher Sculpture Center, realized that Wilcox had done a large series of works that dealt with words, and that this body of work was in need of real study. So, we jettisoned chronology for a serious examination of Wilcox's works involving words from 1988 to 2002.

This exhibition was curated by Arnold and had the same number of works, fifteen, that had been in the California exhibition. These included works on paper that can easily be classified as "drawings" and works on linen or canvas that are "paintings." All involved words—sometimes one or two in fascinating word plays and other times long passages of biblical texts patiently rewritten on linen or canvas.

All the works were made after Wilcox's devastating diagnosis of HIV which, in the late 1980s, was in effect a death sentence. In this way, they fulfilled personal and aesthetic needs very different than the California work in the first exhibition. Death weighed heavily over this body of work, as light and seemingly easy as many of the works seem at first glance. And Wilcox's intense involvement with Christianity also entered into the world of his art.

At the opening, people wept openly at the realization of his struggles, which had never before been laid bare in exhibition form. Something known only to closest friends and family was shared posthumously with others in a way that made the exhibition a cathartic experience. Memorial works for his L.A.-based friend Frank Wilson (*Untitled: in Memory of FOW, 1992*) and his lifelong friend and helper Willa Mae Runelds (*Untitled: In Memory of WMR, 1992*) were shown along with works entitled *Prayers* or *Sin* or *Revelation*.

The spiritual quest of abstract artists, which has been studied extensively for earlier and mid-20th century art, was then evident in ways that no one who had seen Wilcox's work at Barry Whistler's gallery could ever have expected. Leigh Arnold's frankly memorial essay was joined by another by Darren Jones, a New York and Florida based artist and critic, who had become familiar with Wilcox's work when he was in Dallas at the CentralTRAK artists' residency. Both essays fearlessly confront the issues of art and mortality with which Wilcox struggled, and placed his wordplay and religious words into the larger context of word art of the postwar period in America.

The *Private Words* exhibition led us to realize that the devotional and, in some cases, overtly religious nature of Wilcox's art had only begun to be recognized. Dr. Sarah Kozlowski, the associate director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, and a scholar of multi-part works of devotional and narrative art created for the Catholic Church in late medieval Europe, suggested that Wilcox too had a career-long interest in diptychs and polyptychs—paintings in two panels or in multiple panels—placing his work in a long European tradition. Because she approached the work with such a deeply rooted art historical perspective, we all thought that a project on these multi-part works would benefit from the critical perspective of a scholar of 20th century art, and we approached Dr. Ben Lima, then at the University of Texas at Arlington, about a curatorial collaboration.

When Sarah and Ben began to delve into Wilcox's work of this type, they found so much that they proposed mounting two completely different installations of the works that would both result in a single publication. Called *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, each of the two installations included nine works of art, the first pair of which, *Drawing for Transmission Tower (Father)* and *Drawing for Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)*, instigated each.

What they learned is that Wilcox was uninterested in the traditional diptych and triptych forms, in which the work has both a "closed" and an "open" position. Indeed, in each case, he wanted the various parts to be seen at once, and, in certain cases, such as the work on paper entitled *Paradise*, the "two-part" aspect of the work is not at all obvious from a superficial glance or from a reproduction. The sole "triptych," entitled *Grief (Child's Grave)* of 2000, is actually the opposite of a traditional triptych, in which the central panel is covered by the two wings when closed. Instead, the three panels are stacked to form a pyramid of three differently sized panels touching, the largest and lowest appearing almost to support the smaller two on top of it.

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Among the initial three books in our series, the *Diptychs and Polyptychs* volume had the deepest art historical resonance, bringing the imagination of the art historian to the task of interpreting contemporary art, and, it led directly to the fifth installation, which was curated by the artist's brother, David Wilcox. David is a clinical psychologist and associate at the Harvard Medical School in Boston who has a deep personal understanding of his brother's work and has spent the past five years since John's death cataloguing the works of art, letters, and ephemera from his estate. At the onset of our collaboration, he felt ill-equipped to curate the work of his brother and, thus, allowed others to do so. Yet, as he witnessed the process of selection, participated in the installations, and oversaw the production of the books, his confidence increased, and all of us who had worked with him encouraged him to curate the next installation in the space.

Entitled *Relinquishing Time: Selected Works of John Wilcox*, the installation included nine works by Wilcox, each of which resulted from mantra-like repetitive process of mark making. Indeed, the sheer discipline and control of process in these works is extraordinary, and David Wilcox laid bare one important aspect of his brother's artistic process. He also commissioned an essay from artist and curator Terri Thornton, of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, as well as an introduction from the important scholar of monochrome and other varieties of pure abstraction, Dr. Frances Colpitt, Rose Professor of Art History at Texas Christian University. The book on this installation, the fifth in the series, will appear within the year.

The final installation resulted from a fascinating dialogue that had taken place during the past five years, first with the Dallas Museum of Art's esteemed chief conservator, Mark Leonard, and, in the end, with his successor, Laura Hartman. She elected to collaborate with Arthur Peña, an artist who had long admired John's works and was fascinated by his varied processes of painting and drawing. The two made a selection of nine works, each of which was technically different than the others, revealing the fascination with process that is, in the end, part of all art making.

Their work resulted directly from an intensive examination of particularly important works by Wilcox that had been damaged in a storage flood and were in need of conservation. This practical problem resulted in a detailed analysis of the ways the artist made each work. The most important of these, a four-panel work entitled *Crucifix*, necessitated a complex plan for its eventual restoration, which reveals a good deal about the artist's methods of work.

The co-curators of the final installation are preparing their texts for what will be the sixth of the books on aspects of Wilcox's work envisioned by the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History in collaboration with the Ioannes Project and David Wilcox. When the delayed first volume of this series appears with a full chronology of John Wilcox's life and art and its interview with his friend and dealer, Barry Whistler, the six volumes will be packaged and given to important art libraries throughout the U.S. and Europe.

I know of no artist with such a richly varied project of documentation produced in the decades after his or her death. It is proof of the commitment of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History to the very nature of art historical documentation. It also has been so successful within the tightly knit arts community of greater Dallas that the Institute has decided to take over the space for a three-year period and to devote it to the same kind of close art historical and conservation documentation of artists whose work is centered in North Texas and who, at least in the initial year, have made contributions to abstraction (variously defined).

Hence, the Wilcox space will have a life beyond John Wilcox, enabling us at the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History to make serious contributions to the careful study of serious regional art. We plan to do two major installations per year, coinciding with the two academic terms of UT Dallas, and one summer group exhibition, each of which will be documented on our website and, if possible, in an annual print publication. It will be our small, but serious regional variant of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time, which has done so much to document locally produced 20th and 21st century art in Southern California. A