

On the Multipart Works of John Wilcox

A Report from the Artist's Archive

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AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH IN Dallas in June 2012, the Texas-based painter John Wilcox left two unfinished canvases: *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)* and *Transmission Tower (Father)* (Figures 1 and 2).¹ Begun in 2009, the paintings measure 50 x 40 x 1 inches each, and bear layer upon layer of white and deep blue acrylic, with each coat left to dry and then sanded before the application of the next. Wilcox had begun to engrave the painted surfaces with an awl, working from almost forty sketches and preparatory drawings that he had made for the compositions, but the paint had so hardened, and in the last years of his life the peripheral neuropathy that resulted from multiple medical conditions had so advanced, that he could no longer apply enough pressure to the tool. Although the canvases remain unfinished, the drawings reveal carefully proportioned, diagrammatic reimaginations of these monumental structures, at once fragile and totemic.²

¹ John Wilcox Archive (hereafter JWA), cat. nos C.085.2012 and C.086.2012. I am grateful to David Wilcox for generously making this material available for study.

² The sketches and preparatory drawings consist of a wire bound sketchbook with several loose sheets (JWA cat. no. PB38), as well as individual sheets (cat. nos 4009.1-6, PL.153.2010, and PL.154.2010).

Radio/Cell Tower (Mother) and *Transmission Tower (Father)* are portraits of industrial architecture that Wilcox knew well from his north Texas childhood. His father had once owned a radio station, and later headed a company that built transmission towers. But the paintings also portray two modes of social relation that Wilcox associated with roles of the archetypal Mother and Father: to receive and relay signals, and to harness and channel power.³ Lines and angles echo across the two compositions; white and blue reflect and absorb light to create a pulse or flash that is not sequential but simultaneous. Together, *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)* and *Transmission Tower (Father)* form a diptych: a work of two parts related in form and subject to make an integral whole whose meaning is constituted by this bipartite structure.

From fall 2015 through spring 2016, Ben Lima and I curated a two-part installation called *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, the fourth in a series of six exhibitions at The Wilcox Space, the painter's former loft and studio on Exposition Avenue in Dallas. In these

³ See Wilcox's remarks on the subjects of the paintings in his personal correspondence (JWA cat. no. 4008), as well as David Wilcox's notes in the catalogue of his brother's work.

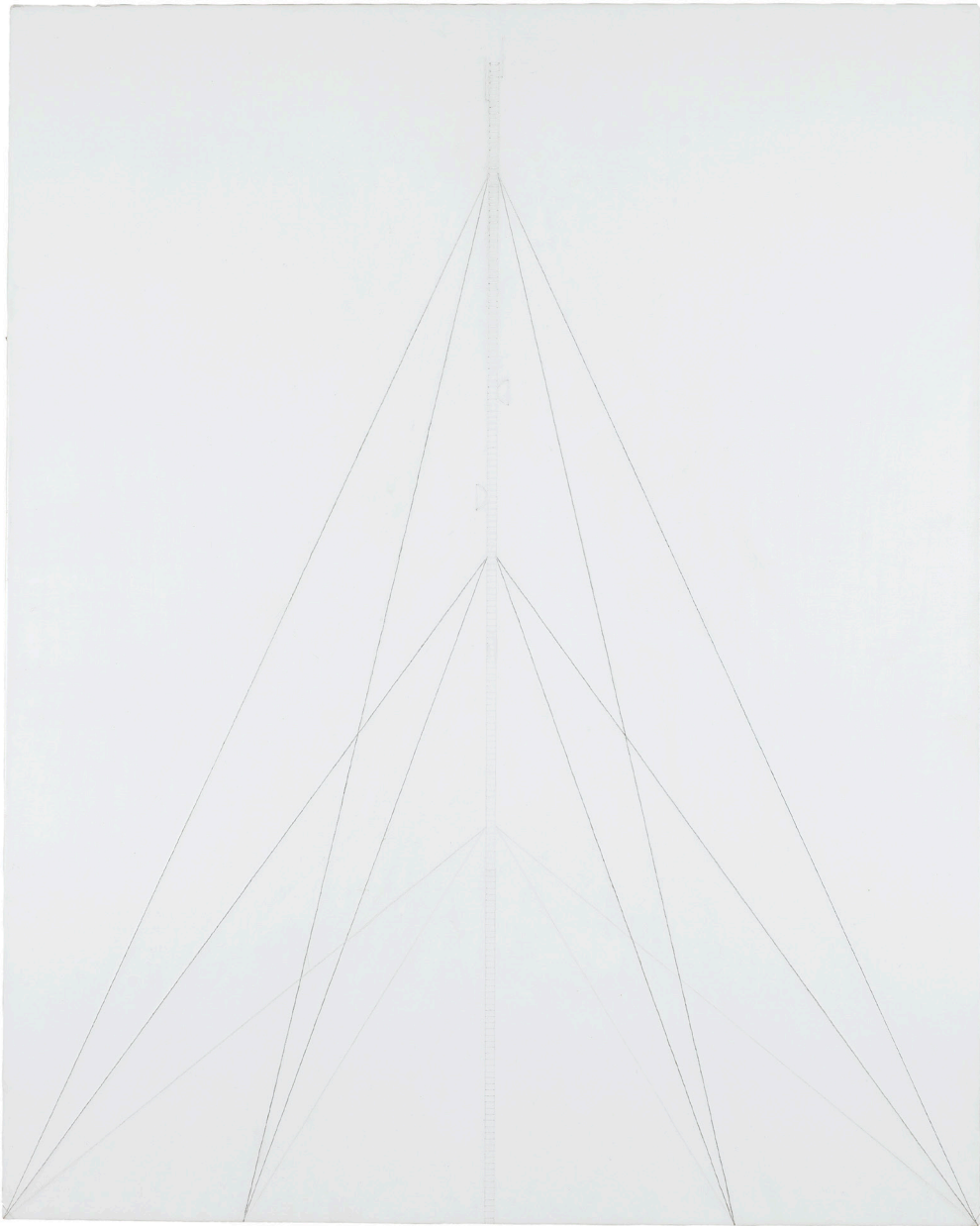


Figure 1. John Wilcox, *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)*, 2012 (unfinished), acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 x 1 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project



Figure 2. John Wilcox, *Transmission Tower (Father)*, 2012 (unfinished), acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 x 1 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

installations and their accompanying catalogue, we traced Wilcox's engagement with multipart formats over the course of thirty years: from the early, tentative diptychs he made in California in the 1980s; through crucial periods of intensive work in New York in the late 1980s and in Texas in the early 1990s, when he pressed the diptych and polyptych formats to their visual and conceptual limits; to the *Mother and Father* diptych he left unfinished at his death in Dallas in 2012.⁴ Formally, technically, and in the ways in which they create meaning, we showed, John Wilcox's multipart paintings and works on paper were at the heart of his work and practice.

In the time since that exhibition took place, the project to organize, document, and study Wilcox's work has continued, and the formation of the artist's archive has shed new light on his multipart works. Headed by David Wilcox, the archive comprises the paintings and works on paper still held by the artist's estate; material including notebooks, loose notes and sketches, photographs (prints, slides, transparencies, and negatives), correspondence, and ephemera; digital images of artworks and archival material; and a database in which all artworks and archival material are catalogued. Together, the John Wilcox Archive and the recently completed series of six catalogues published in connection with the exhibitions at the Wilcox Space are the foundational sources for Wilcox's life and work.⁵

Recent research in the archive has yielded new information about the

paintings and works on paper that we had studied for the exhibition and catalogue, as well as the discovery of multipart paintings that we had not known at all. Just as significantly, materials in the archive reveal the ways in which making multipart works—and remaking them in new configurations and assemblages—was central to John Wilcox's artistic practice. In this essay I report on findings in the archive related to the multipart works, drawing on several kinds of evidence: formal and informal photographic documentation of exhibition installations, as well as exhibition checklists; gallery documentation including inventory notes, slides of works, and records of sales, payments, and artist invoices; Wilcox's notes, artist statements, and correspondence; and photographs that he took in the studio as he experimented with reconfigurations and assemblages of individual multipart works. In particular, a set of photographs from spring and summer 1992 shows how he brought together several multipart works to make a series of altogether new compositions. Together, this material allows us to understand the artist's practice of making—and making meaning—as both dedicated to formal integrity and rigor, and, at the same time, relational and open to change.

FIVE MULTIPART WORKS HAVE COME to light through study of documentation in Wilcox's archive.

Seven canvases from 1989, which Wilcox made with black oil paint that he then sanded or washed to develop tone and texture, represent the days of the week: *Sunday* measures 28 1/4 x 24 x 1 3/4 inches, and *Monday* through *Saturday* each measures 16 x 18 inches.⁶ As early as 1986, in the two-part *Phoenix*, he had begun to

4 David Wilcox, ed., *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, with essays by Sarah K. Kozlowski and Benjamin J. Lima (Boston: The Ioannes Project and Dallas: The Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, 2017).

5 The archive is held in Massachusetts and Texas; for more information visit <https://arthistory.utdallas.edu/wilcox/>. David Wilcox et al., *John Wilcox*, 6 volumes (Boston: The Ioannes Project and Dallas: The Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, 2015-2022).

6 JWA cat. nos C.012.1989 and C.196-201.1989.

experiment with modulating the dimensions of individual parts within a multipart work, a direction he would explore further in the early 1990s in paintings like *Healing* (1993).⁷ In that work, by refining the dimensions and proportions of the four canvases, as well as the distance of the intervals between them, Wilcox created a visual rhythm both complex and unified.⁸ Although the series dedicated to the days of the week was most likely conceived as a single work, the relationship between the *Sunday* canvas and the *Monday* through *Saturday* canvases remained flexible. All seven were shown and listed as a single work at 416 West Gallery in Denison in winter 2005; the next year, in winter 2006, the six *Monday* through *Saturday* canvases were shown at Brazos Gallery and Lago Vista Gallery at Richland College.⁹ A set of slides recently discovered at Barry Whistler Gallery shows each of the seven canvases hung individually, and *Monday* through *Saturday* hung together.¹⁰ Only *Sunday* remains in the collection of the artist's estate. The other six canvases are untraced after 2006, and no records of sale or gift have been found.¹¹

Skulls (1991), consisting of twenty-one white canvases ranging from 10 x 8 inches to 9 x 6 inches and arranged in a row in gradually diminishing sizes from left to

7 JWA cat. nos C.096.1986 and C.098.1986 (*Phoenix*), cat. nos C.70-73.1993 (*Healing*).

8 See JWA cat. no. 2018b2.1993 (and Figure 8) for Wilcox's diagram of the dimensions and spacing of the four canvases in *Healing*.

9 For materials related to the show at 416 West Gallery (January 8-February 4, 2005), including the checklist and informal photographs (prints), see JWA cat. no. 2047.2005. For materials related to the show at Brazos Gallery (January 5-March 3, 2006), including the checklist and Wilcox's informal notes, see cat. no. 2050.2006.

10 JWA cat. nos 4316.13-20.

11 According to a conversation between David Wilcox and the owners of 416 West Gallery, the canvases were not sold during the show in 2005 (personal communication with David Wilcox, 20 August 2022).

right, was shown in spring 1992 in Wilcox's first solo exhibition, held in New York at the SoHo gallery of his friend and fellow Texan, Joe Fawbush (Figure 3).¹² There, the work hung with several multipart paintings including *Prayer No. 1* and *Prayer No. 2*, both from 1990, in which Wilcox reduced his palette to white and gray, layered and sanded the painted surfaces to a subtle, absorptive sheen, and created relationships between parts and whole through refinements of dimension, proportion, number, and interval.¹³ *Skulls* is last documented in 1993, when it was sold to collectors Joel and Zoë Dictrow.¹⁴

Wilcox's second solo exhibition at Fawbush, in fall 1993, in which the works he showed included *Land(Scape)* (1993), *Crucifix* (1992), and *Crucifix* (1993) (all discussed below), included another work that has only recently resurfaced.¹⁵ *Catechism* (1993) is made up of two tall, narrow canvases, hung vertically, with the larger above the smaller.¹⁶ As an instance of the painter's use of a vertical diptych format, the work falls chronologically between *Phoenix* and *Drain* from the later 1980s, and *Grief (Child's Grave)* from 2000.¹⁷ *Catechism* is currently

12 JWA cat. no. C.152.1991. For materials related to the 1992 Fawbush show (March 7-April 2, 1992), including professional photographs (prints and transparencies) of the installation and individual works, see cat. nos 2013.1992 and 4308. Fawbush ran the gallery along with his companion and business partner Thomas Jones. Wilcox had shared a loft with Fawbush and Jones when he first moved to New York in 1985.

13 JWA cat. nos C.005-009.1990 (*Prayer No. 1*), cat. nos C.039-040.1990 (*Prayer No. 2*).

14 For records of the sale see JWA cat. nos 1009.4a-b.

15 For materials related to the 1993 Fawbush show (October 16-November 13, 1993), including Wilcox's diagrams for the hanging of individual works and the installation as a whole, as well as formal and informal photographs (prints, negatives, and digital files), see JWA cat. no. 2018.1993; for the diagrams see also cat. nos 4401 and 4010.

16 JWA cat. no. C.154.1993.

17 JWA cat. nos C.096.1986 and C.098.1986 (*Phoenix*), cat. nos C.112-113.1988 (*Drain*), cat. no. C.115.2000 (*Grief*).

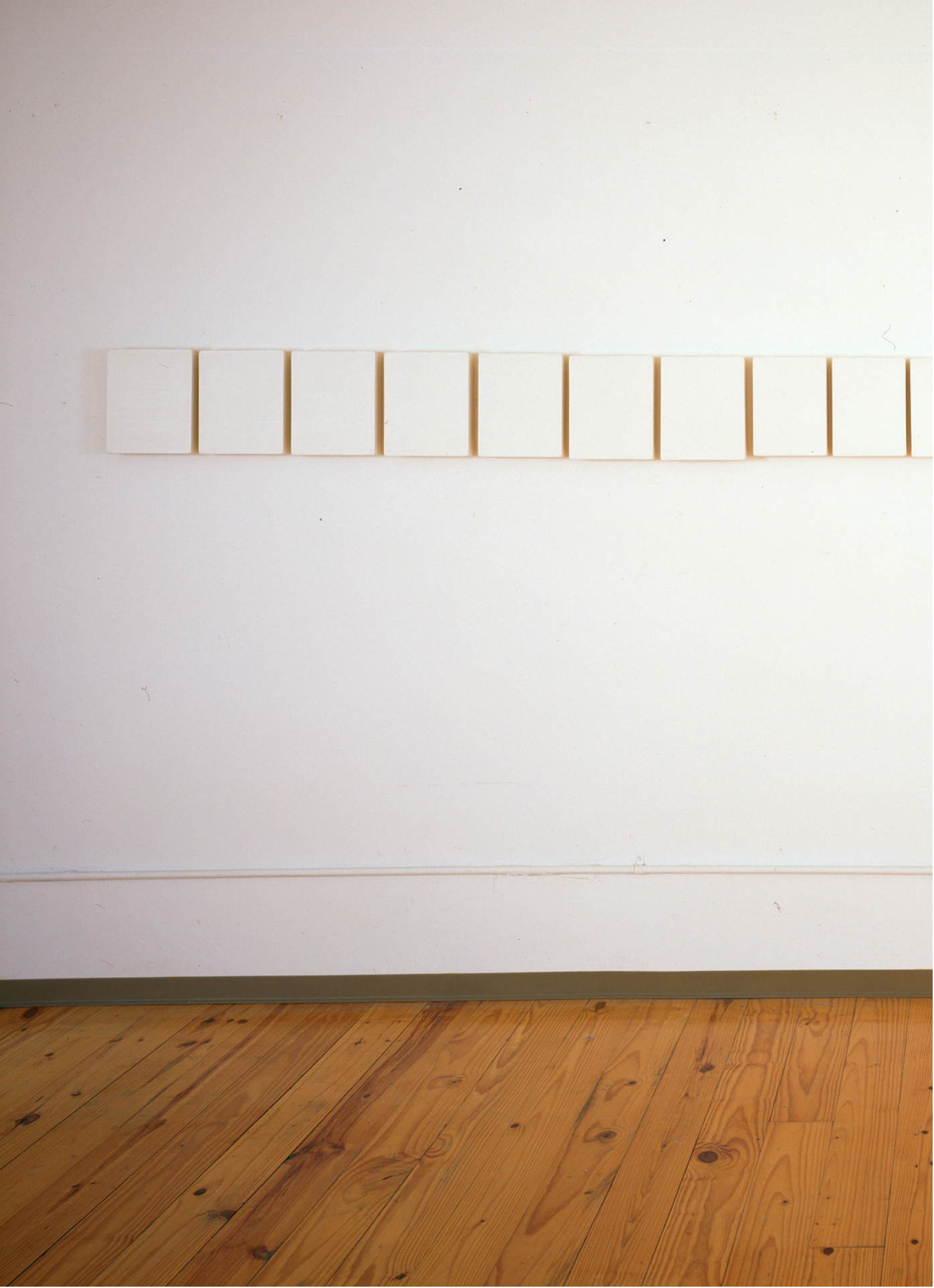




Figure 3. John Wilcox, *Skulls*, 1991, oil on twenty-one canvases, overall 10 x 162 in., as shown in photograph taken by Fawbush Gallery in 1992, image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

in the collection of Hilary and David Neidhart, who acquired the work from Fawbush in 1993.¹⁸

Two more multipart works, both diptychs, are now known only through photographs. *A.M.* (1996), which comprises two canvases of brilliant orange and deep blue, appeared in Wilcox's first solo show at Barry Whistler Gallery in Dallas in fall 1996.¹⁹ Its current location is unknown. *Spire* and *Spires* (1992) appear in a series of informal photographs that Wilcox took in his loft and studio on Commerce Street in Dallas in spring and summer 1992.²⁰ Here, the two canvases, which Wilcox painted in yellow and blue and then washed to reveal tonal compositions resembling pointed towers, form part of a series of experimental assemblages of individual works to make new wholes, in a practice to which I will return below.

To this archival evidence for unknown or untraced multipart works, I would add new evidence related to a diptych that we did not show in the installations in 2015 and 2016 (it was being restored at the time). *Sea*, which Wilcox painted in 1988 around the same time as a painting called *Land*, is a long, horizontal diptych formed by two canvases measuring 18 1/4 x 22 x 1 inches (left) and 18 1/4 x 40 x 1 inches (right) (Figure 4).²¹ Both *Sea* and *Land* were shown in a group exhibition at Barry Whistler

Gallery in summer 1988.²² After Wilcox's death, two unstretched canvases were found among his painting materials (Figure 5).²³ These appear to have served as working samples, in which the painter developed a process of layering and interweaving brushstrokes that he then used in the final paintings to create an intricate texture of hue and tone. Thematically but also technically, then, *Sea* and *Land* are closely related, and it is worth asking whether and how Wilcox intended to hang them together. His choice to use two canvases—and two canvases of different widths—to form the horizontal composition of *Sea* also calls for further consideration. David Wilcox has suggested that this compositional choice refers to force or movement in the formation of waves.²⁴

Throughout his career, Wilcox reoriented or reconfigured both single canvases and multipart works, sometimes as he was working on a painting but sometimes long after it was finished. This practice spanned his career: from *Enigma*, which he made in California in 1982, and which, in an informal photograph from 1992 at the family's lake house in Denison, is hung not horizontally but vertically; to *Eternal Rest from a World of Damages*, which Wilcox completed in early 2001 and which, before it appeared in a solo exhibition at Barry Whistler Gallery that summer, he photographed in the studio in different orientations and with various lighting.²⁵

18 See notes on correspondence between David Wilcox and Hilary Neidhart in the catalogue entry for the work.

19 JWA cat. no. C.167.1996. For materials related to the show at Barry Whistler Gallery (September 7–October 12, 1996), including the checklist, a review in *Art in America* in which Charles Dee Mitchell discusses and illustrates *A.M.*, and the only known photograph (a slide) of the work, see cat. nos 2027.1996 and 4301.34.

20 JWA cat. nos C.170–171.1992. For the photographs (prints) from spring and summer 1992, see cat. no. 4307 as well as the discussion below.

21 JWA cat. nos C.088–089.1988 (*Sea*), cat. no. C.097.1988 (*Land*).

22 For materials related to the 1988 show at Barry Whistler Gallery (July 2–August 27, 1988), including the checklist, see JWA cat. no. 2006.1988.

23 JWA cat. nos C.147.1985–1989 (for *Sea*) and C.142.1985–1989 (for *Land*).

24 Personal communication with David Wilcox, 26 August 2022.

25 JWA cat. no. C056.1982 (*Enigma*), cat. no. C.109.2001 (*Eternal Rest from a World of Damages...*). For the photographs (prints) of *Eternal Rest*, see cat. no. 4311. For materials related to the show at Barry Whistler Gallery (June 16 to July 28, 2001), see cat. no. 2038.2001.



Figure 4. John Wilcox, *Sea*, 1988, oil and acrylic on two canvases, 18 1/4 x 22 x 1 in. and 18 1/4 x 40 x 1 in. (overall 18 1/4 x 124 x 1 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

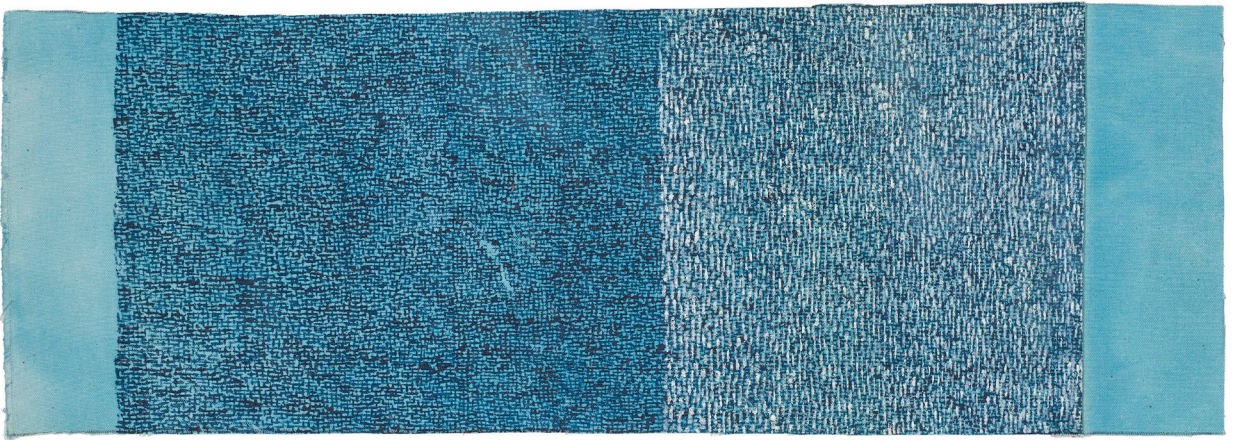


Figure 5. John Wilcox, *Preparatory canvas for Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 9 1/4 x 26 3/4 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

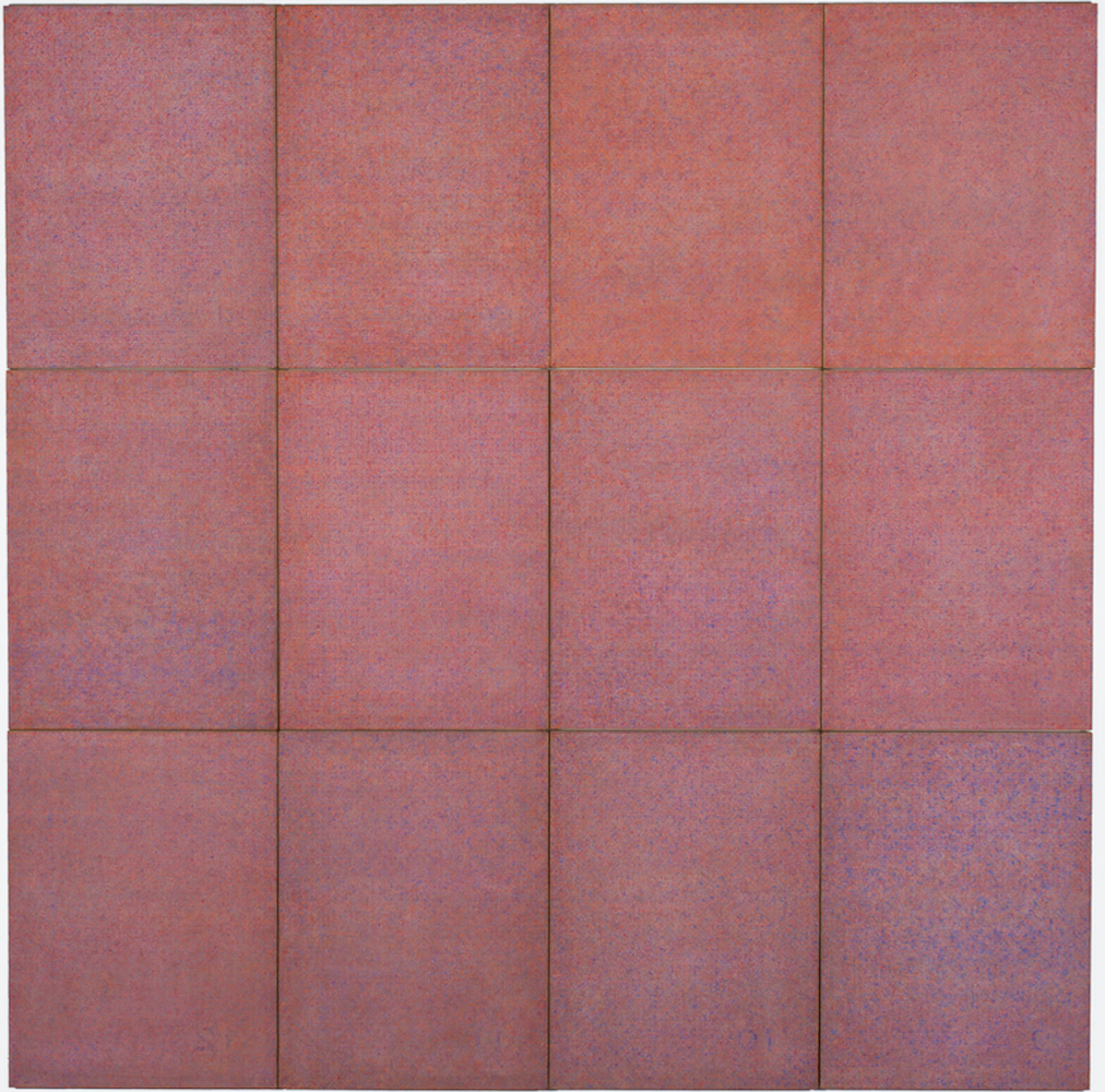


Figure 6. John Wilcox, *Paradise*, 1989, acrylic on twelve canvases, each 32 x 24 in. (overall 96 x 96 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project



Figure 7. John Wilcox, *Paradise*, 1989, as shown in photograph of installation at Fawbush Gallery in 1992, image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

He played with the orientations of canvases in multipart works, too: the diptych *Make Time Kill Time* (1980) appears in an early slide with the left canvas rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise; and the top canvas of the diptych *Phoenix*, mentioned above, was hung both vertically and horizontally.²⁶

Sometimes, the individual elements of multipart works were not reoriented but reconfigured entirely. The twelve-part *Untitled: Paradise*, finished in 1989, is made up of twelve canvases measuring 32 x 24 inches each, configured in three rows of four to make a perfect square of 96 x 96 inches (Figure 6).²⁷ In the 1992 show at

26 JWA cat. nos C.015–016.1980 (*Make Time Kill Time*); for the slide showing the alternative orientation of the left canvas, see cat. no. 4300.2e. For the slide of *Phoenix* showing the top canvas oriented horizontally, see cat. no. 4301.17.

27 JWA cat. nos C.020–031.1989.

Fawbush, however, Wilcox rearranged the twelve canvases into two rows of six (Figure 7).²⁸ New evidence from the archive also shows that the four canvases of *Crucifix*, which he showed at Fawbush in 1993 in a carefully spaced configuration he had calculated down to the inch (Figure 8), were installed at 416 West in 2005 with the edges of the canvases joined together in a tightly compressed composition.²⁹ In each case, Wilcox might have been responding to the givens of the gallery space, but he was also working with what were essentially modular units that could be adapted from installation to

28 For the photographs (prints) of the work installed at Fawbush in 1992, see JWA cat. nos 2013j3.1992 and 2013j19.1992.

29 JWA cat. nos C.001–004.1993. For the diagram that Wilcox made for the installation of *Crucifix* at Fawbush in 1993, see cat. no. 2018b2.1993; for photographs (prints and negatives) of the installation, see cat. nos 2018d2.1993, 2018e8.1993, and 2018e9.1993. For an informal photograph (a print) of *Crucifix* at 416 West in 2005, see cat. no. 2047g2.2005.

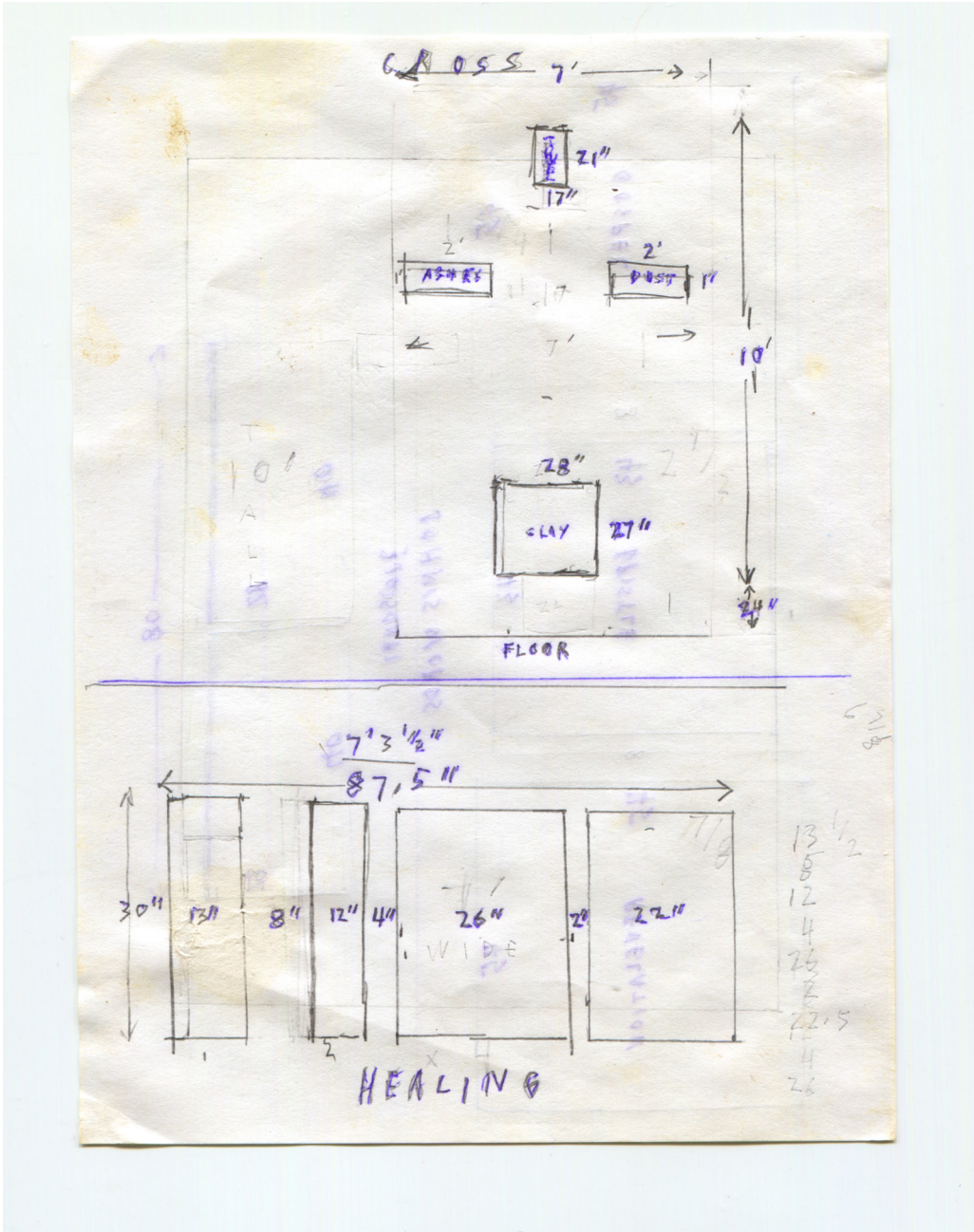


Figure 8. John Wilcox, Diagram for installation of *Crucifix* and *Healing* at Fawbush Gallery in 1993, pencil and pen on paper, 7 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

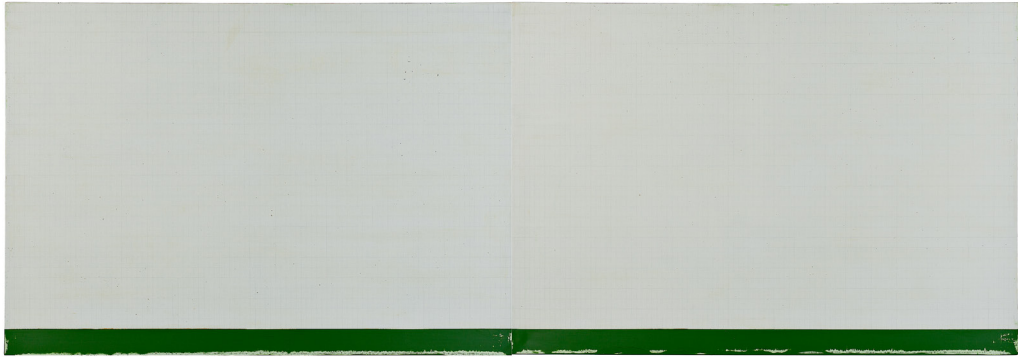


Figure 9. John Wilcox, *Land(Scape)*, 1992, enamel, alkyd, and graphite on two linen canvases, each 27 1/4 x 39 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (overall 27 1/4 x 79 x 2 1/4 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

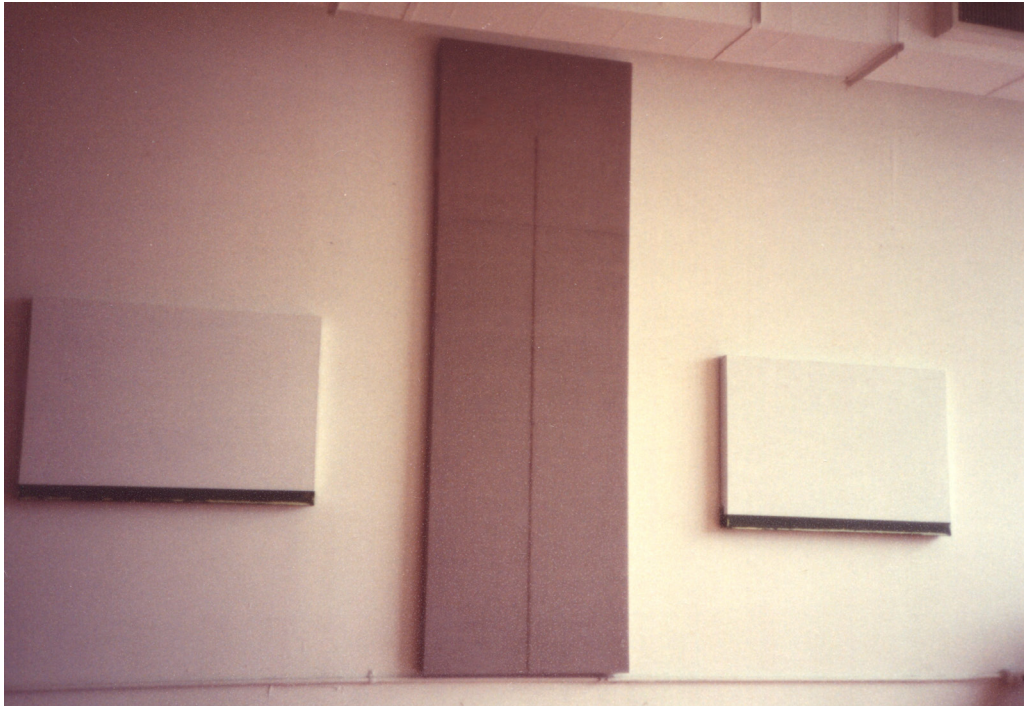


Figure 10. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Crucifix* and *Land(Scape)* taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

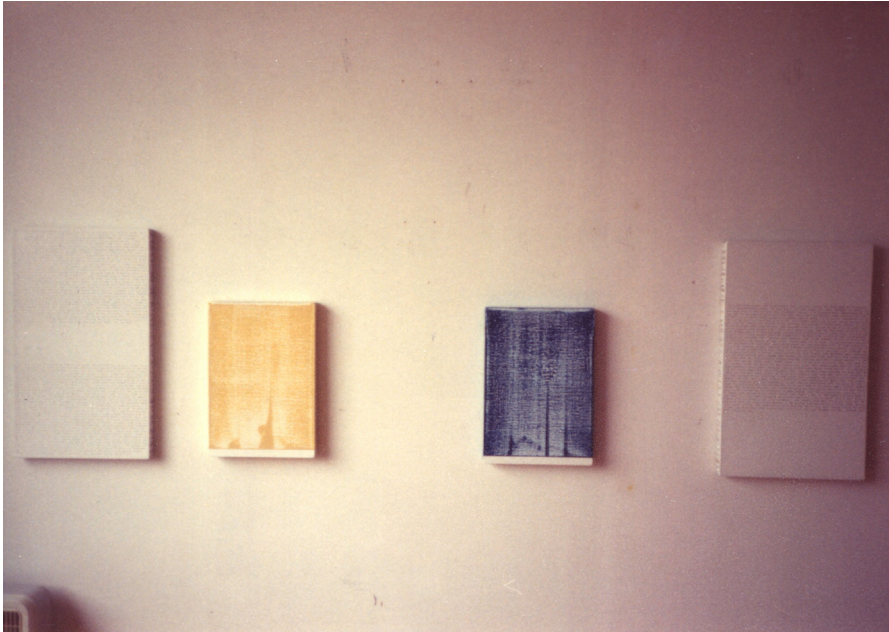


Figure 11. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Spire, Spires, Untitled: In Memory of WMR*, and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW*, taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

Figure 12. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Crucifix, Land(Scape), Spire, Spires, Untitled: In Memory of WMR*, and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW*, taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

installation. In each case, however, he observed the integrity of the overall work, not reducing the constituent parts in number but reconfiguring them in a new whole.

In the pattern of making and remaking that emerges from documentation in Wilcox's archive, most salient is a practice of bringing together individual multipart works to make a series of new assemblages. It's on a particularly vivid instance of this practice that I'll focus the remaining pages of this essay. March 1992 marked the opening of the artist's first solo show at Fawbush Gallery in New York; this event coincided with the deaths of Willa Mae Runelds, who had worked for Wilcox's family and became an important figure for him after the death of his mother, and Frank Owen Wilson, his close friend. Later that spring and into the summer, back in Dallas, Wilcox worked on new paintings that would appear the following year in a second solo show at Fawbush. It was during this period of endings and beginnings in his life and work that he took a series of informal photographs in his loft and studio on Commerce Street.

In the archive is a series of eighteen 3 1/2 x 5 inch photographic prints, which he kept in an envelope he labeled in his familiar uppercase lettering.³⁰

SPRING / SUMMER 1992

CRUCIFIX / NO TITLE IN MEMORY OF WMR
+ FOW

NO TITLE (LANDSCAPES) / SPIRE (YELLOW)
& SPIRES (BLUE)

Twelve of the photographs in this envelope show three assemblages of individual works, all dated to 1992, that he hung together on the walls of his studio to

30 JWA cat. no. 4307.

make variations on a new composition.³¹ A first assemblage consists of two works: *Crucifix*, a stretched linen canvas stitched along vertical and horizontal axes to form the shaft and crossbeam of a cross; and *Land(Scape)* (Figure 9), a diptych, here divided to flank *Crucifix* at left and right (Figure 10).³² The deep green band along the lower edge of *Land(Scape)*—like a wide north Texas horizon—is positioned a quarter of the way up from the bottom edge of *Crucifix*. In a second assemblage, Wilcox brought together two two-part works: a pair of canvases prepared with gesso and inscribed with passages from the Old and New Testaments, dedicated to Willa Mae Runelds and Frank Owen Wilson; and the now-untraced yellow and blue canvases called *Spire* and *Spires*, mentioned above (Figure 11).³³ Here, *Spire* and *Spires* are paired together, with *Untitled: In Memory of WMR* and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW* bookending them at outside left and right, to make a four-part composition that unfolds from an interval of empty space at center. Finally, in the photographs of a third assemblage, we find *Crucifix* flanked by three pairs of canvases in three registers: *Land(Scape)* at bottom, then the gessoed and inscribed canvases for Willa Mae and Frank, and *Spire* and *Spires* at top (Figure 12).

Wilcox had experimented with and then photographed arrangements of canvases and works on paper at least twice in the preceding few years: in 1988 in his studio and loft on Chambers Street in New York, he hung the word drawings *Sake*, *Drain*, and *Blacks* in a triptych (Figure 13) along with the corresponding canvases, for which they served as colophons, on the lateral walls; in 1990 on Commerce Street,

31 JWA cat. nos 4307.1a-d, 4307.1k-n, and 4307.10-r.

32 JWA cat. no. C.074.1992 (*Crucifix*), cat nos C.044-045.1992 (*Land(Scape)*).

33 JWA cat. nos C.011.1992 (*Untitled: In Memory of WMR*) and C.010.1992 (*Untitled: In Memory of FOW*); cat. nos C.170.1992 (*Spire*) and C.171.1992 (*Spires*).



Figure 13. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Drain*, *Sake*, and *Blacks* taken by the artist in his studio in New York in 1988, photographic print, 4 x 6 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

he tacked the unstretched canvases *Soul* and *Shroud* to the wall, first individually and then with *Soul* laid against *Shroud* at center.³⁴ What is remarkable about the series of photographs from spring and summer 1992, however, is that they show Wilcox selecting four individual works (three of them multipart paintings), bringing them together, and arranging and rearranging them to make at least three different assemblages. Moreover, the three assemblages move through

34 For the photographs (prints and negatives) taken in New York in 1988, see JWA cat. no. 4305; the photographed works are the word drawings cat. nos PL.157.1988 (*Sake*), PL.156.1988 (*Drain*), PL.145.1988 (*Blacks*), and the paintings cat. nos C.110.1988 (*Sake*), C.112-113.1988 (*Drain*), C.111.1988 (*Blacks*). For the photographs (prints) taken in Dallas in 1990, see cat. no. 4306; the photographed works are cat. nos C.106.1990 (*Shroud*) and C.105.1990 (*Soul*).

variations toward a formal and narrative theme that sets people and places of his own present within deep historical and art historical time: the third composition is structured like nothing so much as a Renaissance painting by Rogier van der Weyden or Antonello da Messina, in which Christ's cross stands against a sweeping landscape, attended by the figures of Mary and John the Evangelist at left and right, with hills or buildings in the distance.

It is not clear when, exactly, in the course of Wilcox's work on these individual canvases, the idea emerged to bring them together in the series of assemblages now documented in the archive. Nor is it clear whether he intended to test possible installations for

an exhibition, or whether he hung and rehung the canvases in the course of making and remaking the space in which he worked and lived. It might have been both. In his lofts in New York and Dallas, at the lake house in Denison, and even in his childhood bedroom, objects and artworks and even furniture were in constant motion as Wilcox collected, arranged and rearranged things from paintings to fossilized ammonites.³⁵ In the case of the assemblages from spring and summer 1992, the fact that he photographed them so methodically, taking (or at least saving) four snapshots of each of the three compositions and then filing them together in a labeled envelope, suggests that this practice was integral to his way of seeing and

making—and making meaning. For Wilcox, artworks as units or instances of meaning were not discrete, static, and finished; even as they retained their formal and semantic integrity, they existed as relational, fluid, and open to change. New work and new meaning were generated in a play between what he called “control and non-control.”³⁶ In this way, making did not end when a painting or a work on paper was finished; rather, an artwork became another object in Wilcox’s world—like a fossil picked up on a walk, a phrase clipped from a newspaper, or the shape of a radio or transmission tower—whose meaning could be made and remade through ever-shifting relations with other objects to form a new whole. ▸

³⁵ I am grateful to David Wilcox for his reflections on his brother’s practice of making and remaking the spaces in which he lived and worked (personal communication, 12 July 2022).

³⁶ See Wilcox’s (remarkably early) statement on his work from 1977, at the time of his graduation from Colorado College: JWA cat. no. 4013.