HYPERALLERGIC

Beer with a Painter: Helen Miranda Wilson

Jennifer Samet | February 2, 2018

Wilson warns me that her studio never looks impressive — a hazard of making meticulous, intimately scaled work.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "Guidon" (2017), oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches

Helen Miranda Wilson greets me at her house in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, with a sandwich (she's arranged my order in advance) and homemade kombucha tea. She has as many considered observations and questions for me as I have for her. We talk at the kitchen table. She warns me that her studio never looks impressive — a hazard of making meticulous, intimately-scaled work. However, there is a striking harmony to her studio wall: a group of about 20 small paintings and works on paper, all blue-and-white abstractions, along with a postcard of an earlier sky painting — and, a plastic robin's-egg-blue fly swatter. Other utilitarian objects can be found among the reproductions and art: feathers, political protest pins, a striped beach towel prized as inspiration.

It happens to be an unexpectedly, unseasonably warm day, and Wilson announces that she must go for a swim, and I can do as I like. I'm not about to turn down a rare invitation to one of the remote ponds in the back woods of Wellfleet, so we drive through narrow dirt roads, and skinny dip in the cool water together.

As we make our way back, Wilson tells me the story she finds most meaningful: rescuing a chicken she found abandoned and wandering on Boundbrook Island, henpecked and bloody. Wilson scooped her up, held her, and put her on the seat of her truck. Before arriving home, the chicken had laid a pale blue egg. Wilson realized she had to keep her; it was the beginning of managing a small flock of chickens in her back yard — which she still does.

When we return, I sit in the sun while Wilson attends to chores: the chickens and the bees and her vegetable garden. It is clear there is no separation between life and art, between routine and a loving devotion to what is around her, which manifests in the work as a clear-eyed, unflinching gaze. Her paintings hide nothing; she uses no medium in her oil paint; they lack all affectation. This is as true of the

representational work she made in the 1970s through the 1990s, as it is of her more recent abstractions. In Wilson's early paintings, perfectly demarcated figures are silhouetted in their environments, with just enough elements to suggest a symbolic narrative. In her abstract painting series, she employs a single vocabulary of forms with often-unusual palettes: rectangles, stripes, waves, and circles of color. Despite, or perhaps because of this reductive vocabulary of forms, her paintings radiate with an earthy, open intensity.

Wilson was born in 1948 in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and studied at Barnard College, the New York Studio School, and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Over the years, she has been represented by several dealers in New York City, including Jeffrey Hoffeld, Inc. and the DC Moore and Jason McCoy galleries. She is currently represented by Albert Merola Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Bookstein Projects, New York. After living for decades in New York City, she returned, in 1999, to her hometown of Wellfleet, where she now lives.

* * *

Jennifer Samet: *You went to the New York Studio School from 1969 through 1971, soon after it was founded. What led you there?*

Helen Miranda Wilson: I made pictures almost before I could talk. I knew it was me, in the way that you know what you like to eat, and your favorite color, and what you are attracted to. But I always did it on the side; I didn't really capitalize on it. I flunked out of Barnard College and worked some shit jobs, and hung out with friends in my hometown. It began to feel like I was on a dead-end street, so I asked myself, "What can I learn to do better, well enough to have it be a job, that I already like to do?" And I applied to the New York Studio School.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "Francesca's Box" (1983), oil on panel, 8 3/16 x 12 inches

The tuition was very low then — about $600 or $700. I asked my father to pay it. Back then, you brought in a portfolio of actual works and a group of faculty would interview you. Leland Bell and Nicolas Carone were there, but by chance, Mercedes Matter, the head of the school, was not in that day. I told them, "I really want to come here and learn to paint and draw from life." Of course, the thing that was not said was, "And I can pay full tuition." If I had asked for a scholarship, I probably would not have been accepted.

A month into the first term, I had been trying to learn how to use oil paint. At the first critique review, Mercedes was there. My drawings were in better shape than the paintings — which were mostly small, as they still are by the way, because that's what I like to do. I am hard-wired for it. Mercedes looked at them, and she looked at me, and her lip curled. She said, "How did you get into this school?" And, turning to the other faculty, said, "Where was I when she was interviewed?"

60 East 66th Street, 3rd Fl | New York, NY 10065
(212) 750-0949 | www.booksteinprojects.com

60 East 66th Street, 3rd Fl | New York, NY 10065
(212) 750-0949 | www.bookseinprojects.com

I had a mother who was very supportive and I didn't have an inflated ego. So Mercedes' words did nothing to me. I looked at her and said, "I'm here to learn how to paint." She fell silent. She was totally disgusted. But by the end of my second year, she offered to buy one of my paintings, which she didn't usually do for anybody.

JS: *Are there specific things your teachers discussed that you still think about?*

HMW: We had an eight-hour studio day, which is a lot. It was great. I got just what I needed. When Mercedes was teaching drawing, she was completely immersed in it. She believed in teaching people to see. I *can* see, because I went to that school. It is like being able to taste, hear, and feel things by touching them.

One day, I was drawing from the model, and the model's body was very foreshortened. I was struggling with it, and Carone came over to me and said, "The feet are closer to you than the head." That was the light bulb. He wasn't being condescending. You can look at it and measure distances, but, conceptually, you have to think about what you're working from in three dimensions, and I wasn't doing that. That was the beginning of really being able to draw from life.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "The Center of the Earth Argyle, NY" (September 22, 1992), oil on panel, 14 x 15 15/16 inches

If I'm working outside, for example, I'm trying to get all the different elements down in relation to each other. But, I'm also trying to think about how it all feels, and, if I looked up, how deep it would be up into the sky. That's the same thing as realizing that the feet are in front of the hip. You have to understand that your eye is reaching through deep space and you have to translate it. I've always flattened things. I have an astigmatism. That's one of the reasons it was so physically sexy for my brain to draw and look into deep space.

JS: *Your early work included landscapes, still lifes and the paintings you called "diary paintings." Then you began to make landscapes that were much more detailed and specific. Can you talk about what inspired these transitions?*

HMW: In the 1970s, I was mainly making still life paintings. My partner, Timothy Woodman, won a prize in his last year at Cornell to go to Italy for six months, and I went with him. Tim's uncle George, and his aunt Betty Woodman, the ceramicist, had lived part of the year in Italy for years, so we sublet a place in Florence to be near them. The Sienese altarpiece paintings and the predella panels I saw while we were there knocked me out. When I returned, I was thinking about the primitive, defined lines and stylized beauty of this work. During that time, I was also looking at Persian and Indian miniatures. A few years later, I started doing a series of what I called diary paintings, all in my usual small format.

Then, in 1981, I got very sick. It took me a year and a half to recover. It was a watershed. I had absolutely hit bottom. I rebuilt my life after that, and I started doing that series of landscape paintings — as always, working from observation and then memory, never from photographs. Doing those paintings saved my life.

The landscape paintings were about absolutely opening myself to everything that was before me. So, if I was looking at an expanse of trees in the distance, I was thinking, "What is the shade like under there?" — but I was not thinking in words. I was making gestural notations to get the color of the light on the leaves, and the color of the light in the shade on the leaves, as well as the spatial relationships and the *Everything*. When I went back to the studio, I would have memorized what I saw, and could work from that first layer of painting, and those memories. I could play it over again in my head, like a piece of music.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "Over Red Hook, February Thaw New York City" (1988), oil on panel, 7 x 12 1/8 inches

It was a good way to learn about not being able to control things. Everything you're looking at is in constant motion, changing. And there are insects, breezes, lookers-on… it's wild!

I have two landscape paintings by Edwin Dickinson that my father gave my mother. They were painted the year they got married: 1946. They're *premier coup*. I grew up looking at them, and I still look at them a lot. Dickinson was prolific; I refer to this kind of work as calligraphic painting. You make a lot of attempts and two out of ten are great. The others are not, but it doesn't matter, because it's like writing an Asian character over and over again, until it comes to be what it should be.

JS: *You have been a public servant in your hometown for the last 19 years. You've said that doing this work changed the course of your painting. Why is that?*

HMW: I was in my late 40s, living in New York, budgeting in my sleep and showing and selling. I could live on that, without a second job. We didn't have a big lifestyle; I had found a great loft where we could both have studios. It was very cheap and later, rent-stabilized. It had heat! I could be in my ivory tower all day, which was wonderful, but after about 30 years, my life began to feel like everything had been so chosen. There were no wild cards, it was all very much under my control, and for me, control is a dirty word. It suffocates me. It's the opposite of being alive and it's certainly the opposite of love if you are in a relationship.

I began to get itchy and to lose my appetite for painting. Then, we lost our loft. The landlord decided to move into it and he did. We certainly could not afford anything in the New York area at that point. So, we decided to move here, to Wellfleet, to the house I grew up in. That was in 1999.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "Month of May" (2006), oil on panel, 12 x 9 inches

60 East 66th Street, 3rd Fl | New York, NY 10065
(212) 750-0949 | www.booksteinprojects.com

The minute I got here I realized there were two things I had wanted to do my whole adult life. I wanted to keep bees. I have now been beekeeping for going on 19 years, as a committed hobbyist. I've had as many as seven hives; now that I'm older, with less energy, I only have three or four.

Helen Miranda Wilson, "Month of May" (2006), oil on panel, 12 x 9 inches

The other thing I wanted to do was participate in town government. Both of my parents were very politically aware, socially minded, and humanitarian. Having a life in art is beyond making things to look at and sell. It's an approach to things that involves an ethical response. At least in my case, it's also about having a thirst for understanding. It's a bit like certain aspects of Judaism, where you ask questions and consider life deeply, with a sense of wonder. There are no absolutes, just a process of inquiry and participation.

So, we moved to where I grew up on Cape Cod and I started serving on the Town's boards and committees. It turned out that I had a passion for land use, who knew? My appetite for painting came back to me. It was as if suddenly my art was the lover that I thought about all the time. And the town work was my day job. It put my life back in order.

But when I started doing the public service work, I stopping wanting to work from observation. Public government meetings are like working from life. There may be some structure to them, but really, it's like improvisational theater every time. It is like going out to paint a landscape, and suddenly there's a downpour or even a tornado. I started moving away from recognizable subject matter that was drawn from direct observation.

JS: *Can you tell me more about this transition and how the different series of abstractions, like the stripe paintings and the calendar paintings, came into being?*

HMW: I remember Tom Nozkowski and Joyce Robins were here on the Cape, right after we left New York in 1999. I took both of them out to walk "on the moon" — the dunes in Provincetown. Joyce is also a landscape architect. On the walk I said, "I've stopped using recognizable subject matter." Tom whipped around and said, "Well, it's about time!"

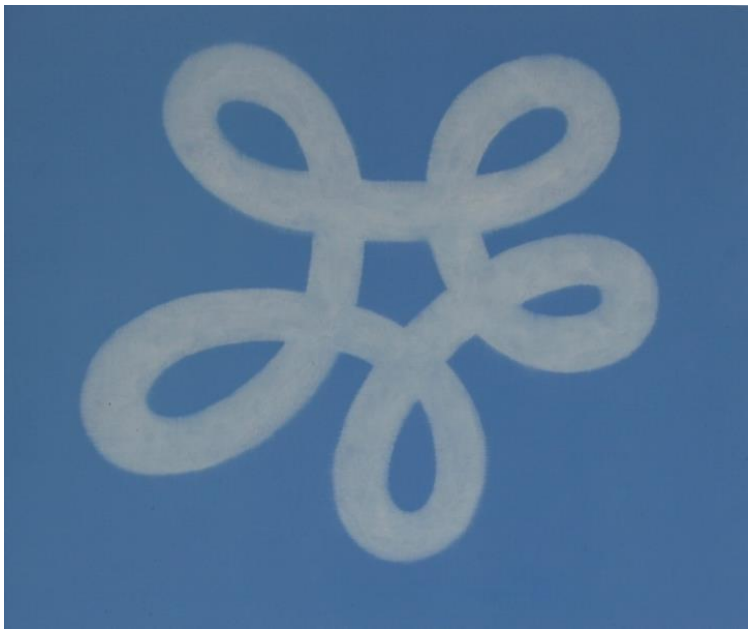
Every year I send valentines to many people — none of whom (except Tim) are lovers. Very often they form the beginning of a series. I started my calendar paintings — the first of these nonrepresentational paintings after I had made valentines with a bunch of squares and with a heart in them. The series of pencil drawings, some of which were in my recent winter show at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, included a valentine heart I made for Tim that year.

60 East 66th Street, 3rd Fl | New York, NY 10065
(212) 750-0949 | www.bookseinprojects.com

I've made stripe paintings inspired by things like a towel that I bought from a girl at the local gym. Pat de Groot gave me my first Kuba cloth, which helped jump-start my Kuba Cuneiform Quilt series. I love repeating elements that have small variations from each other. Maybe I really want to be a fabric designer.

I refer to my current work as having no recognizable subject matter, rather than being non-objective. For instance, there is a stripe painting that was based on Route 203 in upstate New York. It runs through Valatie, where I visited Robert Bordo and Donald Mouton. It was towards the end of summer, and the chlorophyll had started leaving the leaves. There were all these red barns — that special red, and parched grass, and the dusty, gray-black of macadam asphalt. I came home and made a stripe painting. The subject matter is clear to me, but others can't tell what it is; it's a secret.

JS: *You employ a reductive set of elements to make your recent work. What are you thinking about as you pare them down?*



Helen Miranda Wilson, "Dervish" (2017), oil on panel, 6 3/4 x 8 1/8 inches

HMW: The new paintings are about leaving out more and more, and having what remains be given more importance. I've always been given to defining shapes and using a deliberate line to make that happen. And if there are only a few colors, those colors take on more responsibility than if I use the wide array that would be necessary to make a landscape. The first time I thought about this in words — as opposed to just doing it — was in relation to Myron Stout. I was very fortunate because in the 1970s, Myron was living year around in Provincetown, two towns over.

I became close with Myron, meeting him through two mutual friends, Pat de Groot, and Sanford Schwartz, who later on was instrumental in getting the Whitney Museum to give Myron a retrospective.

Myron helped me a lot. I loved him a lot. When I started really looking at his work, I realized that there are artists who tend always to close a line and define a shape very vehemently, like Ingres. It's a hard-wired thing. Brancusi is a very good example of someone like that, a sculptor who wants to have a clearly established, continuous surface. Other artists, like Soutine, or de Kooning, or Paul Resika, are gestural and break things up, and that is marvelous too. I just wasn't born that way.

I love detail. But I love a cloudless blue sky. Or a blank, white sky in March. The emptiness is handsome. It's similar to a modernist house, where you don't have lots of trim and embellishments. All the proportions must be just right for it to be beautiful. What is not there is almost more important than

what is. I am making blue and white paintings, which are like this, right now. They may come out of my sky paintings, like the ones I showed at Jason McCoy in the 1990s. There is almost nothing in them.

In my 20s, the thing I could do most easily was to find a line. That's what I was good at. I realized that I needed to have a larger vocabulary or set of skills. So for a while, I stopped using lines. When I was drawing, I used the side of my pencil, so that I was just using light and dark. I started using my finger, and later, a fan brush in my oil paintings to lessen the line definitions — so that you'd almost see the air, but not the strict volumes of forms.

I've drawn a lot in my life, but not shown my drawings as much as I've shown my paintings. They are more private. A while back, I did a series of ink drawings using a Sumi brush. No erasing possible! I couldn't have even the illusion of control with that technique, and I liked that. It was like riding a running horse bareback. I would try to go with it, using all my skill, hoping to get somewhere, hoping to stay on.

Samet, Jennifer. "Beer with a Painter: Helen Miranda Wilson," *Hyperallergic*. February 2, 2018. https://hyperallergic.com/424785/beer-with-a-painter-helen-miranda-wilson/

60 East 66th Street, 3rd Fl | New York, NY 10065
(212) 750-0949 | www.bookseinprojects.com