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From Clouds to Calendars: Wilson Adopts Abstraction

By Mario Naves

How much experience can be embodied in a rectangular patch of color? If we're to believe Helen Miranda Wilson, whose recent paintings are on display at the DC Moore Gallery, quite a lot. Each of Ms. Wilson's smallish panels (the biggest is 16 by 20 inches) is an accumulation of smaller rectangles of various hues. A solitary monochrome, it turns out, isn't an option given the aesthetic and biographical imperatives informing the work.

In the press release for the exhibition, DC Moore refers to Ms. Wilson's new body of work as "calendar paintings." Certainly, reliance on a grid—albeit one that's loose-limbed and prone to fluctuations in proportion and rhythm—will recall the layout of a typical calendar. Ms. Wilson's appointment book, in fact, serves as a recurring point of reference.

Yet this association has as much to do with painterly process as with determining composition. The steady accretion of colored rectangles can be likened to a series of diary entries, with each color signifying an event or an emotion specific to a given day. Given the unhurried, meditative character of Ms. Wilson's jewel-like panels, one can assume that they are the cumulative result of weeks, and perhaps months, of sustained painting. Indeed, the passage of time seems to be a primary concern for Ms. Wilson, as indicated by titles like *Year*, *Two Years*, *Winter* and several listing specific dates. Other pictures are named for people (*Rembrandt, for Pat Lipsky*), places (*Brooklyn*) and things (*Lunch, Cupcake*).

Best known as a representational painter—for many, her 1995 exhibition of cloud paintings at Jason McCoy Gallery remains a high-water mark for contemporary art—Ms. Wilson has adopted abstraction in response to recent changes in her life. Her duties as an elected official in Wellfleet, Mass., as well as the responsibilities attendant to her livelihood as a beekeeper, have prompted Ms. Wilson to rethink her priorities as an artist.

"I spend many long hours at meetings I absorb relevant data in the same way I used to paint objects or skies. This has diminished my desire to work from observation." An abstraction of purposefully limited means has become, for Ms. Wilson, an agent for tempering the demands—often unpredictable, sometimes humdrum—of day-to-day life.

Notwithstanding the turn away from representation, much remains the same: Ms. Wilson's approach is, as ever, meticulous; the surfaces are lustrous and dense; and her colors are absorbing in their gentle shifts of tone and temperature. How much the viewer, coming in cold off the street, will take away from the pictures is a potentially vexing question. Is a back-story necessary to connect with and take pleasure in them?

In the hands of a lesser artist, probably. But Ms. Wilson is one of our best painters; she knows well enough that a painting lives or dies by the qualities inherent in its crafting. While it's too early to take a full measure of the recent work—Ms. Wilson's abstractions still seem a bit unsteady, as if they weren't quite sure of their place in the world—the DC Moore exhibition, in its beauty and poise, must nonetheless count as one of the season's happiest events.