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Jane Wilson, Artist of the Ethereal, Dies at 90

By BRUCE WEBER JAN. 19, 2015

Jane Wilson in 1960. John Jonas Gruen

Jane Wilson, a painter whose best-known works were landscapes that occupied a niche nestled between representation and abstraction, died on Jan. 13 in Manhattan. She was 90.

The cause was heart failure, Bridget Moore, the president of the DC Moore Gallery in Manhattan, where Ms. Wilson's work has been shown since 1999, said in an email.

Ms. Wilson, who grew up on an Iowa farm and moved to New York City in 1949, led a long and varied career as a painter. Her work, which might be generally characterized as an amalgam of expressionism and realism, included behind-the-scenes still lifes of an artist's studio, depictions of Manhattan street scenes — especially around Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, where she lived for several years — and occasional portraits.

But landscapes were her primary focus, and she is known especially for her later work, much of which is devoted to exploring the relationship among land, sea and sky and was inspired by the natural environment on the East End of Long Island, where she and her husband, the writer and photographer John Gruen, bought a house in 1960.

"American Horizon" (2000) is emblematic of Ms. Wilson's later focus on natural settings. DC Moore Gallery

The paintings seek to capture the ethereal, moments in a landscape or a seascape that are defined by the time of day, the time of year, the weather conditions, the clarity of the air. Horizons are often present but sometimes difficult to locate. Clouds often proliferate luxuriantly. Light is rendered with delicate specificity.

In “Blizzard” (1990), for example, a gathering storm over the ocean is pierced by a sun and the whorled colors of the sky suggest weather that is both gorgeous and ominous. In “Midnight Blue” (2002), the dark sea and the dark sky merge in a foam of what may be cloud or ocean spray. In “Early One Morning” (2006), a sand-colored sky meets a beach at a moment where the sun is invisible but seems nonetheless to be creating a striking after-dawn glare.

“The way she increasingly translated natural events — seasons of the year, times of day or night or conditions of weather — into barely representational, hovering substances of color and light is the miracle of the artist’s later work,” Elisabeth Sussman, a curator of photography at the Whitney Museum of American Art, wrote in the 2009 book “Jane Wilson Horizons.”

Ms. Sussman continued: “The intensity of color and light and the dematerialization of form into substance bring to mind work that was surely known to her: the late watercolors of J. M. W. Turner, like ‘The Burning of the Houses of Parliament’ (1834) or ‘The Lake of Zug’ (1843), where events and places are reduced to smudges, the barest marks of brushwork, thin washes of color. As Wilson has said: ‘For me it was all about the substance of things without substance.’ ”

Ms. Wilson was born on April 29, 1924, in the south central Iowa town of Seymour, and grew up on the family farm that had been given to her father, Wayne Wilson, by his father. Her mother, the former Cleone Margaret Marquis, was a published novelist and poet.

The open spaces of Ms. Wilson’s childhood were evident influences on her later work. As a child, she once said, the space surrounding her was overwhelming.

“The land was vast,” she said. “The sky was vast. Everything was vast. Growing up on a farm you were continually made aware of the weather. And the weather was continually changing.”

She was trained at the University of Iowa just after the departure of Grant Wood. The influence of his allegorical realism was beginning to give way to more contemporary styles; the Abstract Expressionists were just gaining traction.

She graduated in 1945, earned her master’s degree in painting in 1947 and after teaching for two years, moved with her husband to New York City. There she found herself often at the Cedar Tavern in the company of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other artists, and her early work in New York reflected their influence, though by the mid-1950s she had turned away from pure abstraction and was painting expressionist landscapes.

She was among the founding members of the Hansa Gallery, the noted artists’ cooperative, where she had three solo shows, and elsewhere participated in group shows that included Pollock, de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg and Helen Frankenthaler. In

1960, Andy Warhol commissioned her to paint his portrait, which she did; in the painting, “Andy and Lilacs,” he is a pale figure seated at a table, the darker purple flowers making it seem as though he is fading away.

Lithe and (in her younger years) dark-haired, Ms. Wilson was strikingly photogenic; she worked as a showroom model and photographs of her appeared in Life magazine and Harper’s Bazaar. Warhol chose her as a subject for one of his experimental films known as “Screen Tests,” in which the unmoving camera focused on the subject’s face for minutes at a time, and she was included in his 1964 compilation, “The 13 Most Beautiful Women.”

From 1968 until her death she lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In addition to her husband, she is survived by a daughter, Julia Gruen, who is the executive director of the Keith Haring Foundation.

Ms. Wilson’s works have been seen in dozens of solo and group shows in galleries and museums across the country, and her paintings are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington; the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others. She taught at Parsons School of Design and Columbia University.

“Everyone on a farm is observant of nature — though not consciously in an aesthetic sense,” Ms. Wilson said in a 2001 interview published in “Jane Wilson: Land/Sea/Sky,” the catalog to a 2001 exhibition. “On a farm you’re very aware of weather because so much of your life is dependent on it. And in a place like Iowa the weather can be so extreme. You learn to feel the weather coming. The animals do it as well. Weather is not just visual, you can feel it with all your senses. That’s what I’d like to get at in my paintings — that full-body feeling. You sniff the weather, and a complicated rush of feeling runs through you.”

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