HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Rainy Day Woman: Jane Wilson Re-Visions Reality

by **Tim Keane** on October 18, 2014

Jane Wilson in her studio, 2095 Broadway, New York. January 8, 1999. Photograph by John Jonas Gruen (all images courtesy the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York, except where noted)

Some sixty years ago, when she was a young artist involved in the downtown New York City scene, Jane Wilson stopped trying to be an Abstract Expressionist. Of course, Wilson was not alone in that mutiny. But what distinguishes Wilson is how effectively she negotiated a long career premised on a delicate balance between absolutely naturalistic subject matter and an abstractionist's care for the purity of color and form.

Jane Wilson at 90: East Village/East End at DC Moore Gallery epitomizes that

achievement. In her landscapes and cityscapes, atmosphere is, literally, everything. In diverse locations and ever-changing climates, sunlight is consistently active in these paintings, like a sovereign creative agent.

This show brings Wilson's rarely seen cityscapes from the mid-1960s into meaningful dialogue with her sky-and-landscape paintings completed over the last twenty-five years. Through supple brushwork and radiating, overlaid chromatic arrangements of paint, these mostly large oil paintings capture the gradual, scattered and tinctured nature of sunlight, the natural impressions and undulations caused by wind patterns, the brooding textures of storm fronts, and the wild effects of humidity on light. Most interestingly, the weather depicted in Wilson's paintings provides an immersive experience for the viewer, steeped in human vulnerability and anomie, an inspired tradition which extends back to epochal paintings like J.M. Turner's "Sunrise with Sea Monsters" (1845) and Gustave Caillebotte's "Rainy Day" (1877). Into the twentieth century, the same spirit also informs the moodier landscapes and portentous cityscapes of Wilson's like-minded New York School brethren, such as Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher. In Wilson's work, clouds and light appear so viscous and so tenuous that they carry self-referential weight. Her outdoor transformations point to the constant re-visioning of reality that is the very reason painters paint.

Fairfield Porter, "Jane Wilson" (1957), oil on canvas, 57 x 32 inches (© 2014 The Estate of Fairfield Porter / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Wilson's biography partly explains her preoccupation with arresting landscapes, animated skies and raw color. Born and raised on a farm in the Midwest, she traveled widely with her family during the Great Depression, coursing through the Dust Bowl on trips that took her to Big Sky Country in the Rockies and eventually to the mist-filled Californian coast, all of which left indelible impressions on her. So too did the iconoclastic painter Philip Guston, who was briefly on the faculty while Wilson studied at the University of Iowa in the 1940s. "What I got from Guston," Wilson once told interviewer Mimi Thompson, "was the importance of questioning the substance of the paint. Whether it's thick or thin, the paint has such a range of qualities, you can go strolling through it."

Jane Wilson. "Near Night, Tompkins Square" (1964), oil on canvas 40 x 35 inches

Jane Wilson, "Avenue B Bus" (1966), oil on canvas, 60 x 75 inches

In her description of the artist's medium, Wilson could just as well be speaking about the thick atmospheric conditions that her paintings depict. In an earlier interview with Thompson, Wilson declared a kinship with Mark Rothko. She credited her visit to the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 Rothko retrospective as inspiring her to work in — of all genres — *landscape*: "It [the Rothko retrospective] made me think about landscape in the sense that I felt I was looking into the density of air, differing densities layered and floating."

Few locales could be as inhospitable to starting a career as a landscape painter than the pedestrian corridors around Tompkins Square Park, where Wilson and her husband, the photographer, John Gruen, lived from the late 1950s through the 1960s. Yet she seems to have used the area's particular outlooks and corners as a frequent inspiration.

"Near Night, Tompkins Square" (1964) is an eerie, quasi-Gothic study of the park's shadows and silhouettes that lurk after a cloud-filled, city sundown, the bluish afterglow barely visible in the chalky ceiling of clouds. "Rain on Avenue B" (1965) takes as its main subject the vector created by the planes of sky and street during a rainstorm. The air's leaden tone is captured just as the sun begins to burn through the haze, spreading its wan light through the smooth cloud covering. Meanwhile in the lower half, the wide, slick street becomes an unevenly glazed mirror reflecting the park's bare trees, whose branches spike the brightening air with geometric precision, as if nature were imitating the painter's abrupt stabs of oil paint on the canvas.

In the breathtaking “Avenue B Bus” (1966), the gray streets and the browns of the buildings seem to dissolve skyward into the winter-white clouds. The climatological and terrestrial starkness is then humanized by the ordinary features of the city, details that exceed their practical functions with reassuring and surprising bursts of pure color within a mostly pallid winter scene. These include the yellow bands of the crosswalk, a rectangular green sign on a white lamppost, red paneling on the downtown bus and pick-up truck, and even in such miniature schemes as the rusty greenish fire hydrant and the blue, orange and russet-colored clothing of two pedestrians. In this somewhat contracted panorama, everything is at once mundane and mythic, palpably immediate yet abstract and distant.

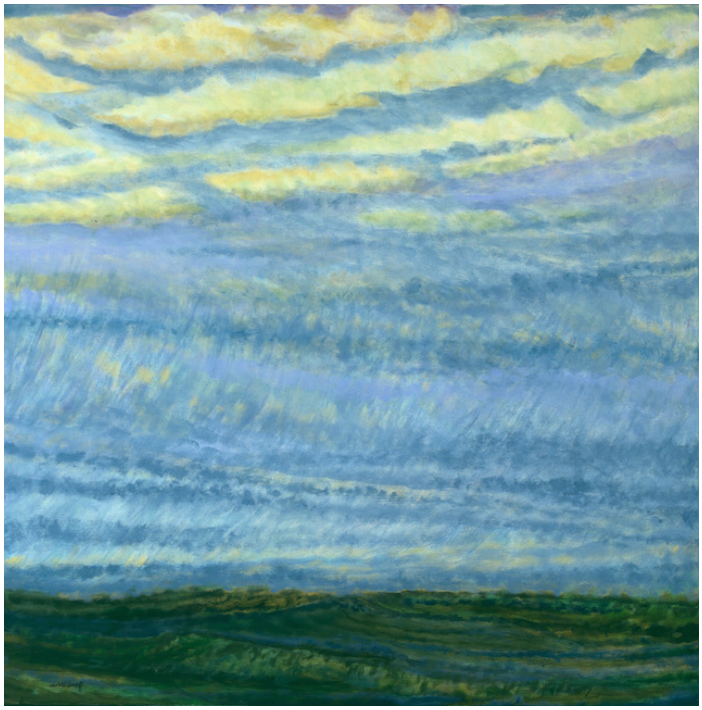
Jane Wilson, “Heat in Watermill” (1997), oil on linen, 42 x 34 inches

“Tree on the Hudson River” (1964) further exploits the uneasy coincidence of the urban and the natural. Stylistically, it shows Wilson drawing on some of the dramatics of action painting. A foregrounded tree with a zigzag trunk bisects the picture plane like an enormous crack or fantastic lightning bolt. The background river is present as an aura rather than a substance, outdone by the blue, white and yellow cadences of the winter sky. In a golden brown distance, the skyline of the New Jersey palisades flickers faintly.

Over the last couple of decades, Wilson’s passionate attention to the scattering of natural light has produced even larger, more ambitious, and more boldly colored paintings than the mid-1960s cityscapes. But the more recent results tend to be uneven.

“Sun After Rain” (1990) draws directly from the Color Field playbook to dramatize, in a realistic vocabulary, the visible spectrum and vibrating strata of colors created in the sky by receding heat, cloud layers, obscure ether, and fading sunlight. The colored bands of Wilson’s sky are undeniably arresting in their details. But in its straddling of severe abstraction and neo-realism, it never fully registers its content in either mode. A much more convincing portrait of the sky saturated by sunlight is the eye-pinching “Heat in Watermill” (1997), in which solar refractions and radiating bands find a subtly blended

representation in unrelentingly intense yellows and whites. The image is nothing less than mesmerizing.



Jane Wilson, "Sun and Rain" (2004), oil on linen, 70 x 70 inches

Enormous semi-abstract vistas of clouds and horizons dominate Wilson's work from in the 2000s. Each depicts the sky in jarring colors. "Green Sky in Autumn" (2004) traces the contours of tightly compacted decks of cumulus clouds. Wilson paints them so meticulously that, combined with the overall shocks of green, these long furrows protruding from the sky seem like land formations on some forbidden planet. The grandeur verges on surrealism.

"Sun and Rain" (2004) manages to render the intermingling tints and resonances of blue sky and yellowish white rain clouds with a subdued, astonishing delicacy. A top layer of brushwork produces translucent, watery downward streaks that sheen the entire landscape, as if the painting were the very sun shower it depicts.

At their most convincing, Wilson's scenes provoke the same emotional response that the kaleidoscopic sunlight has on our psyches, as it surrounds us, immerses us, and as it appears, disappears, reappears and generally oversees our landlocked busyness through pleasant and adverse seasons. These paintings also remind us that color is purely appearance and that sight itself is a strictly personal, embodied phenomenon. When we register new configurations of color in nature, or note how movingly the sky changes, Wilson's paintings seem to tell us that we are seeing and describing ourselves, even as we seem to be reflecting exclusively on the earth and clouds.

Jane Wilson at 90: East Village/East End *continues at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 1.*