# THE SOUL OF THE SKY

For decades, Jane Wilson has brought an abstractionist's eye to landscape painting.

By Edward M. Gomez

What is it about the ineffable, elusive essence of any color—what the American painter Jane Wilson has called "the color within a color"—that compels so many artists to want to figure it out and guard that precious knowledge, and to infuse each new work with a visible expression of that understanding? That quest, at once deliberate and unpredictable, scientific and, for some artists, even spiritual, lies at the heart of Wilson's most recent paintings of big skies hovering above blurry-elastic horizon lines. Some mark off the borders of stretches of bare or verdant earth. Others hint at out-of-sight, beyond-the-frame expanses of restless, unknowable seas.

Born in Iowa in 1924, Wilson grew up on her family's own farm. Her father was a civil engineer, her mother a teacher, novelist and poet. Jane studied studio art and art history at the University of Iowa, where Lester D. Longman had taken over as head of the art department after the departure of his predecessor, the Regionalist painter Grant Wood, in 1940. Under Longman's leadership, in the early 1940s, students like Wilson were exposed to cutting-edge, contemporary works of art the art department head would borrow from various New York sources, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In a 2007 published interview, Wilson recalled that, during her student years at the University of Iowa, she enjoyed remarkable opportunities to see works by Max Beckmann and Jackson Pollock, as well as other "real, live masterpieces."

In 1949, after honeymooning in Mexico with her husband, John Gruen, a fellow former University of Iowa student who would become known as a writer and photographer, Wilson moved to New York. There, Wilson and Gruen fell in with that band of now-legendary artists who frequented the Cedar Tavern and, separately and collectively developed a gestural, sometimes explosive, sometimes lyrical mode of painting that would be dubbed "abstract expressionism"; in time, their work and ideas would become canonized as those of the so-called New York School.

Wilson would become known as a member of the second generation of American abstract-expressionist painters, although, over the years since ab-ex's heyday, she has not exactly embraced that label. Similarly, critics and other artists alike have savored the fact that Wilson, who moved from painting more conventionally, academic-type, modernist works earlier in her career to producing well-balanced, muscular abstractions in the 1950s, eventually settled into making signature works that have defied easy classification. Instead, they have seamlessly blended the techniques of gestural abstract painting with unabashed, unmistakable references to the real, perceived world—to some of the most elemental aspects of nature.

"My paintings reflect my interest in the experience of light as the embodiment of color," Wilson observed during an interview at her home in Manhattan late last year, during the run of an exhibition of her newest works at New York's D.C. Moore Gallery, her longtime representative. It was the artist's 61st solo show in a career that has spanned six decades. Looking at her newest canvases, with their thickets of long, stringy brushstrokes here or their passages of broader, undulating strokes there, which shift through Wilson's broad expanses of sky in translucent layers with

Opening spread, from left: Jane Wilson, *Clouds and Rain*, 2005; *Hurricane Season*, 2011; This page, from top: *Cold Moon*, 2010; *Colorado Blue*, 2011; *Getting Colder*, 2011

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rhythmic movements, it is easy to believe the artist is painting with little more than colored air.

Speaking of these essays in the character of color in nature itself, Wilson said of her technical approach to making a painting: "Every time I squeeze color out on the palette, which for me is a sheet of glass, my first impulse is to take it and scrape it as thinly as possible so that the kind of color that's inside the color becomes apparent." From that initial, inquisitive action, Wilson moves on, advancing deeper into what fellow artists would call "her process." She said: "I know from experience that trying to match that with solid color is just about impossible, but I want to try to get at it." It's that ultra-thin essence of color—in effect, pure, pigment-laced translucence—that has become the raw material of Wilson's painting technique and one of the central subjects her art.

Earlier in her career, she noted, she knew less about color. "I worked instinctually," she recalled, as she sipped a glass of red wine and relaxed in the warmth of a high-ceilinged sitting room filled with books, artworks and a baby grand piano. Gruen worked quietly in an adjoining study, where one of Wilson's earlier canvases could be seen from a distance. As time passed, she added, she found her abiding artistic interests in the otherwise "thrown-away aspects" of what she was exploring and discovering, just like other young painters who, she said, often "try to find out what it is in what they're doing that interests them enough to want to keep doing it for a lifetime," even if "they're already doing it but just don't know it."

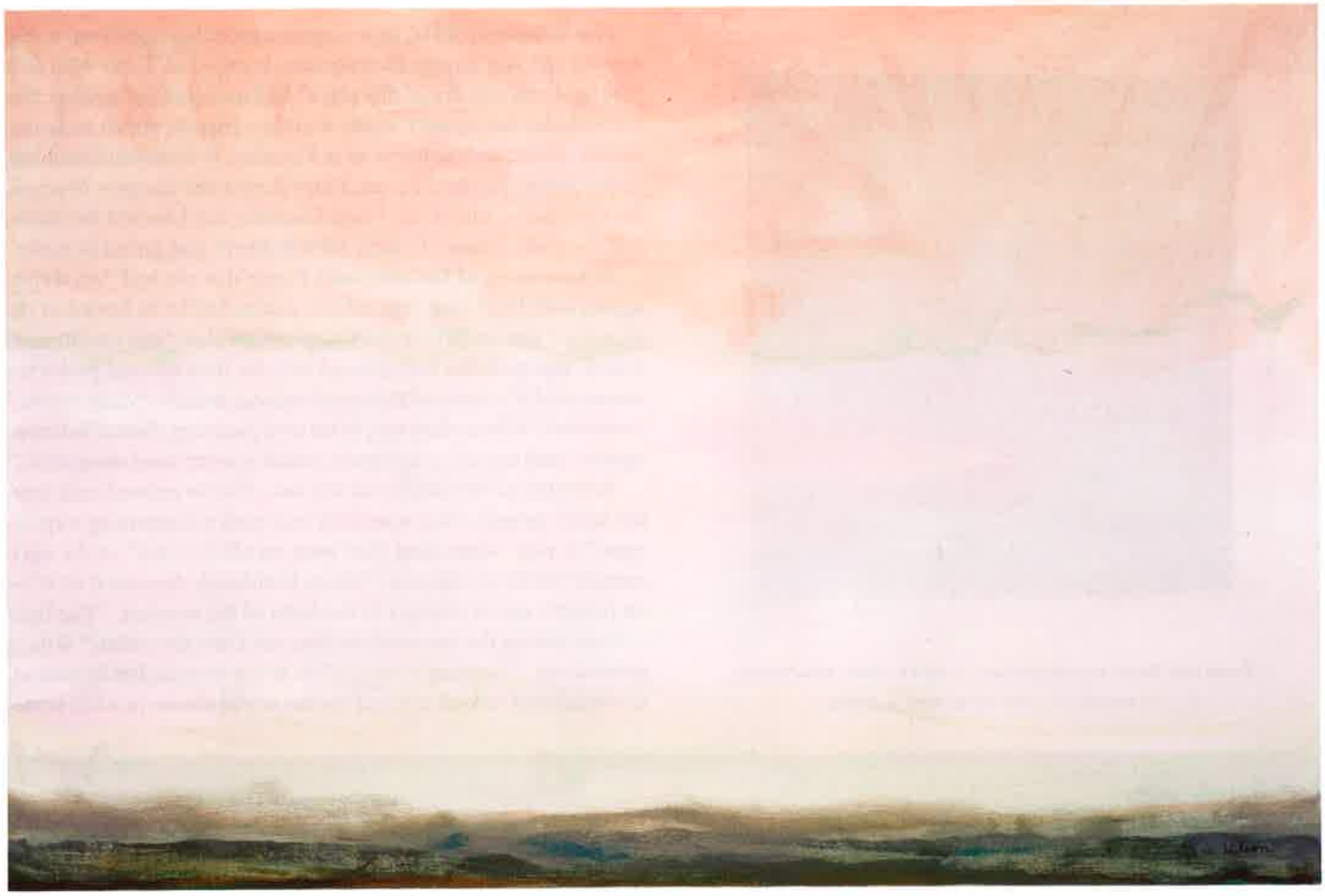
At various stages of their careers, some abstract-expressionists, like ab-ex's first-generation icon, Willem de Kooning, famously investigated the tug of war between pure abstraction and a hard-to-shake desire to depict the human figure. How to make the two modes of painting coexist in the same, primarily abstract work—that was the kind of technical-stylistic wrestling match that was visible in de Kooning's tempestuous images of women from the 1950s. By contrast, Wilson, once she worked her way through earlier still lifes and some rather gutsy, substantive abstract compositions, settled on subject matter that led her away from the figure and directly into the heart of painting's expressive language and craft. Light and color became both her subject matter and, in effect, her raw materials.

Thematically, however, her decision to concentrate on landscapes set her apart from those abstractionists who looked inward to the subconscious or who mined the emotional stirrings of their

Previous page: Jane Wilson in front of her painting *The Open Scene*, 1960; This page, from top: *Glimpse of Winter*, 2011; *All Night Moon*, 2006.

own souls as starting points for their actions on canvas. Wilson recalled: "I had one of those devastating conversations you have with yourself; I said: Let's look at this" —meaning her own work—"and see what it's trying to say. I found it was dominantly horizontal and about light and gesture and I found a great deal of emotion in the gesture, as long as it was not extravagant. I just wanted my own little corner in which to paint what I wanted to paint. I [was] not de Kooning, nor did I have any aspirations to be, but his confidence in the telling quality of gesture gave me the nerve to pursue it."

Maybe Wilson's creative direction was completely natural for an artist who had grown up in the vast, open space of the American Midwest. She told a magazine interviewer in 1974: "The landscape was enormously meaningful to me. I used to roam around a lot by myself as a child and when I think of a landscape, I think of the great weight of the sky and how it rests on the earth. And I remember the light." For many years, Wilson and her husband have owned a property in Water Mill, a hamlet on the eastern end of Long Island, where the painter keeps a studio in a former carriage house. That region's atmosphere has also found its way into Wilson's art.



Clockwise from top: *Time Change*, 2011; *Spring Begins*, 2011; *Torrid Day*, 2011.

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From top: *North Haven 6:30 am, 8/10/99*, 1999; Jane Wilson in her studio, New York, June 4, 2000.

Her daughter, Julia, in a reminiscence that appeared a few months ago in a European magazine, recalled of Water Mill that "the land, sea and sky of this place" had nurtured her mother. She remembered her parents' circle of artistic friends, which included, among others, such painters as de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, the sculptor Marisol, the composers Lukas Foss, Virgil Thomson and Leonard Bernstein, and the poets Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and James Schuyler.

Wilson noted of her talks with Porter that she had "absolutely agreed with him" that "the subject matter had to be buried in the painting." She said Porter had emphasized that "you had to push it back and push the background very far forward and pull what was around it"—around a picture's subject, that is—"close to you." Sometimes, Wilson observed, in his own paintings, Porter had managed to "pull this off in the figure, which is a very hard thing to do."

Referring to her childhood in Iowa, Wilson remembered that, for many people, "sky-watching was such a consuming experience." It was "something that went on all the time" in the agricultural Midwest, she said, "where livelihoods depended on it"—on nature's mood changes in the form of the weather. "The light changes during the course of the day, and I love the cycles," Wilson pointed out. "Nothing is ever stable. It's in motion; I'm in motion. It's wonderful to look out and see the world always moving some-

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This page: *Summer Haze*, 2011

where, to feel that movement on your skin. All of the senses are involved in seeing and feeling."

For years, the artist has brought that Buddhist-like awareness of nature's changing conditions, especially as they are reflected in the pageantry of ever-permutating cloud formations and the drama of the skies, to her art-making. Indeed, in her newest paintings, like *Cold Moon* (2010, oil on canvas), *Getting Colder* (2011, oil on canvas) or *Looking Up* (2011, oil on canvas), Wilson's brushstrokes themselves seem to emulate the random-pattern behavior of clouds as they swell, gather or fall away to reveal patches of vibrant color—sometimes only wisps of vibrant blue or pink, recalling the expertly placed highlights on a Rubens angel—that turn out to be the very lifeblood of a composition.

"I like exploring what the brush will do," she explained. "It's like exploring tonalities on a piano by applying different pressures to the keys. The differences between them can be almost imperceptible but they can affect you mightily." In works like *Spring Begins* and *Time Change* (both 2011, oil on canvas), Wilson's fascination with representing such subtleties in a visible way (she describes them as "subliminal") calls attention to another of the enduring themes of her art. That is time itself and its passage as it is reflected on the ever-present face of nature's gigantic, inescapable clock, the sky. In these images, as in many of those of salt marshes or the sea by the American painter Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), Wilson manages to capture the unmistakable sense of something imminent—the distant roar of thunder, a sudden rush of cold wind—or, magically, a meteorological event played out only in paint, as in *Call It a Day* (2011, oil on canvas), in which a mysterious wall of glowing pink cloud appears poised to crash through a foreground of watery-blue haze.

Over a career that has spanned six decades, Wilson has developed a language of abstract painting that has turned out to be perfectly suited to her subject matter, the biggest, most expansive subjects to be found in nature: the sky, the earth and the sea. They are, of course, in form and appearance, inherently abstract to begin with. Her approach to her work has been both knowing and humble in the face of subjects so grand; the results of her efforts often have been elegant.

Still, Wilson said, even now getting started on a new painting can be a challenge. "I always hope some clue or trigger will emerge from the poking around I do," she explained. "It might be a gesture, a new color or an old color I've rediscovered. I re-examine the basic palette over and over again, because it's the vocabulary you've got and you can never know it too well." It's with a language of rich color and light that, over the course of a lifetime, this keen observer of nature's rhythms has painted the soul of the sky.