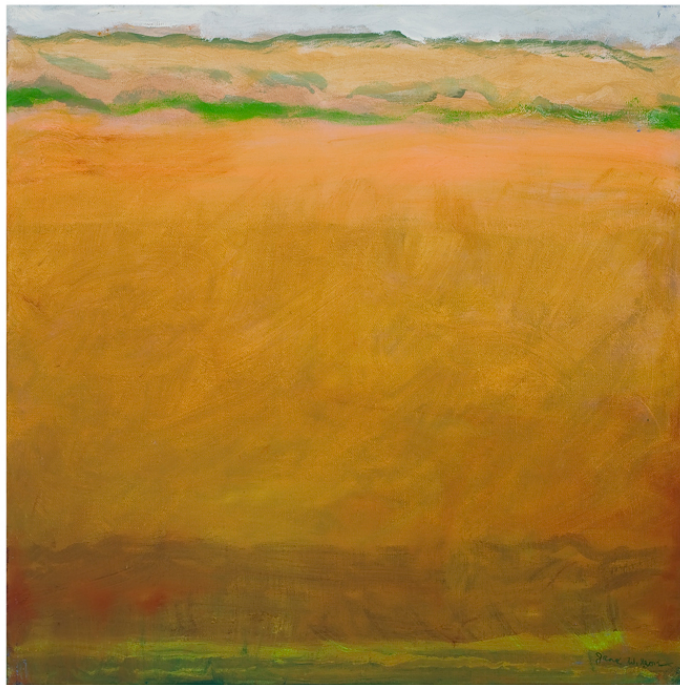


BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Art : Interview
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Jane Wilson by Mimi Thompson

Twenty years after their first interview, Jane Wilson and Mimi Thompson sit down together to discuss the behavior of paint and that moment when the artist disappears.



Jane Wilson, *Torrid Day*, 2011. Oil on Canvas. 30" x 30".
All images courtesy DC Moore Gallery.

In the 1950's Jane Wilson did something unusual—she began to paint landscapes while most of her fellow painters wrestled with the idiosyncratic tenets of Abstract Expressionism. She was not entirely alone. Artists such as Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher also painted figures and landscapes, but Wilson's work was, and remains, different. It vibrates on the line that separates the abstract from the real. Her balancing act continues with her new series of

landscapes. They release a palpable atmosphere, surrounding the viewer and pushing two dimensions into three and four. Growing up in the wide open spaces of Iowa, and living by the sea in Watermill, New York, Wilson contacts a lifetime of experience as she works, and pairs what she calls “an uncontrollable allegiance to subject matter” with an ability to transmit nature as feeling and memory.

Mimi Thompson: The surfaces in your new paintings are complex. Some of them won't let the viewer in.

Jane Wilson: I am usually looking for the color behind the color. There is always something underneath to discover. I try to irritate the surface until it gives up what I want, so I guess I just like making trouble.

MT If it's trouble it's the beautiful kind. Each painting's atmosphere seems to slide into the air around it, and the paintings communicate with each other as well.

JW I hope they are doing that. The artist never knows anything. You don't really see your own paintings. You think you are doing one thing, and you are actually doing about fifteen different things at the same time. You don't know what's dominant, but you just keep doing it until you discover the answer.

MT In the interview we did in 1991 you spoke about your admiration for Martin J. Heade and the foreboding atmosphere he often creates in his storm paintings. In some of these new paintings you seem to create a related atmosphere.

JW There is a certain amount of dismay in the paintings. It could be for many reasons. It takes me about two years to accrue the work, and then time for me to be ready to let go of it, I wouldn't say finish. Nobody is ever finished, it's just a question of what the paintings add up to and how they add up. There's no putting salt on the tail of this bird.

MT In *Torrid Day* the picture plane is packed with such dense and warm color.

JW *Torrid Day* was painted after that incredible period of heat last summer which was so unforgiving. The air was so thick, just hanging, and the color and composition seem to communicate that kind of atmosphere.

MT And what led to the painting *Colorado Blue*? Was it an experience you had in a specific landscape?



Jane Wilson, Colorado Blue, 2011. Oil on Canvas. 30" x 30".

JW I was thinking of a family trip we took to Colorado in 1939. It was the first time I had seen the Rockies, and I had never seen a sky so blue before. That particular kind of intensity got to me. I thought, *Well we may have blue skies in Iowa but they are not fierce and knife sharp like this.* That sky has stayed with me.

MT *Call it a Day* is such a tender painting. It seems puffed up, full of air and uncertain gravity.

JW Making that painting, and looking at it, is like stepping off into space or stepping off a cliff. Nature is very scary and is not lovely or kind. It is also oblivious to us. All of this nature is going on around us and we can't do a thing about it. I suppose I like to check in on reality once in a while.

MT It's interesting that while you check in on reality, you create an atmosphere where the viewer can get lost. You must get lost in the painting too as you work.

JW I think I work until I do disappear, and then the painting is done. There are no personalities involved by the end.

MT That's a difficult thing to achieve.

JW Well, yes, but you can try.

MT The painting *Waiting Moon* seems to push the viewer away a bit, with the green creating a gate that the viewer needs to pass through in order to reach the rest of the painting.

JW I had a student once who had a whole other way of painting . What she did was layer intense complements over each other until something happened in between. Layering until something happens is something I am familiar with, but I had never followed something through with its complement to see where it takes you. It takes you someplace where you may not have been before. That impenetrable quality comes with being who I am. I'm a great pusher away.



Jane Wilson, *Call it a Day*, 2011. Oil on Canvas. 50" × 60".

MT These paintings share things and they don't—a bit like siblings at an impasse. You once said, "I choose to have this notion that the place and the light

you've been born with sets you up for a lifetime, everything else is measured against that." Do you still feel that same way?

JW Exactly. I believe you start in a certain landscape and somehow you find all kinds of leads in it. When we took our family trips it was during the Dust Bowl and the Depression, and people were going by with all of their belongings on a wagon. Children are never spared anything, they see it all. Growing up on a farm, especially during the Depression, it was life or death. Those were the options. I think the landscape was immensely valuable to my parents although they never talked about it, and never agreed on anything except the importance of the land itself. I have a very physical memory of walking over plowed fields, and the turning of the disc during the harrowing of the fields. That machinery was always sitting on the side looking predatory.

MT And everything was timed by nature. You rose with the sun and went to bed as the sun set. You operated in step with nature.

JW It's very deep. There's not much you can say about it, but it quivers in there. Primal is the word to describe the connection, and I feel lucky to have it. I could never be a city painter for that reason. Even though we lived on Tompkins Square Park, I found I could not remember a geometric skyline. That was one of the reasons I did all those city paintings, I felt determined that the skyline information was not going to get away from me. It was also a surround, and I thought of the park as a quotation of nature in the middle of the city, all reduced to a square or several acres that could be the size of a farm. And it's a place you are living in, walking through and taking for granted. And then there are all the inhabitants. There were the Polish, Hispanic and Bohemian sections, all there side by side but maintaining their own entity. Tompkins Square Park was like a sandpit for adults.

MT I remember you speaking about Philip Guston and his influence on your work.

JW What I got from Guston was the importance of questioning the substance of the paint. Whether it's thick or it's thin, the paint has such a range of qualities, you can go strolling through it. Paint has a behavior of its own which makes it interesting to use.

MT Are there other artists who stay with you for the long haul?

JW Rothko does. Everyone takes his name in vain, but I love to see the hovering bands of color, which is certainly the landscape we live in. I like artists who take

the protective layers off so you can see the structure of their thinking, for instance 17th- century Spanish still-life painters. You look at their still lives and your fingers actually hurt from imagining you are picking up, say, the spiky artichoke. That reliance on physical experience is something you pick up unconsciously. There is a wonderful painting by Poussin. It's a winter scene and it resides in the Louvre, but I don't think it's hung frequently. It writhes and is one hell of a scary painting. There are very few painters that can do scary paintings and he was one of them.

MT That toughness I was speaking about earlier in your paintings is working to similar effect. A disturbance emanates from the canvas.

JW Oh, that's very nice. I'd like to believe that.

MT I hadn't seen that in your work before.

JW Well, if not now, when?

MT What's up next?

JW I must order canvases and make decisions about the sizes, and I must remember to ask for double woven linen because I love that surface. The process of beginning is like walking into a bay with clam shells all over the bottom. There's something tentative about it. I guess what drives me is a question I always ask myself, "What would happen if?"

Jane Wilson's *New Paintings* will be up at DC Moore Gallery from November 17 to December 23, 2011.

Mimi Thompson is a painter and writer living in New York.