



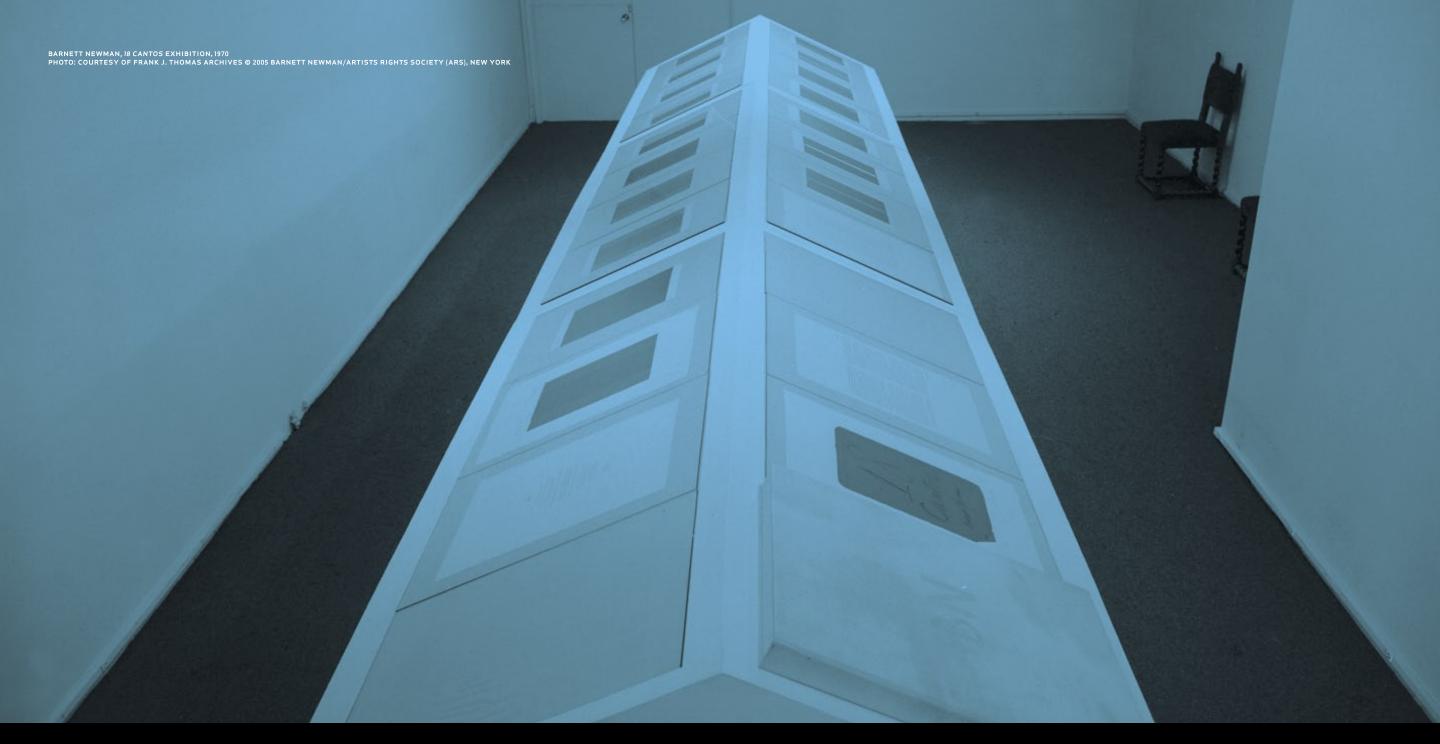
FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY AND JOAN T. WASHBURN GALLERY PRESENT:



A TRIBUTE TO THE NICHOLAS WILDER GALLERY LOS ANGELES, 1965–1979

APRIL 22–MAY 27, 2005





Nicholas Wilder and His Gallery, 1965-1979

KATHERINE BISHOP CRUM, PH.D.

For fourteen years, from 1965 to 1979,

Nicholas Wilder (1937–1989) enlivened the Los Angeles art scene with his irrepressible enthusiasm for art of every description, for everything from the work he showed in his gallery to ancient Near Eastern reliefs to Renaissance altarpieces. As mentor, teacher and guide to collectors, artists and anyone else with even the slightest interest, he revealed the mysteries and delights of contemporary art. Speaking with a witty rush of rapid-fire associations that leapt from art history to politics to the latest gossip on the street, he never doubted the reach of metaphor or his listeners' understanding. He showed, through words and example, but most of all through his gallery's exhibitions, many of the most important trends in American art of the 1960s and 1970s. He is best remembered now for discovering Bruce Nauman, but he also represented a number of other important artists from California (Ron Davis, Joe Goode, and George Herms) and introduced numerous New York artists to West Coast audiences (Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, Richard Tuttle, and Cy Twombly, to name a few.)

for him to move on and run his own gallery.

To many of his California friends and colleagues, including myself, Nick was the quintessential Easterner. He wore suits from Brooks Brothers, had a passion for liberal politics and read *The New York Times* every day, long before there was a national edition. He had been raised in Rochester, New York, where his father was a scientist in research and development at Kodak, and went to college at Amherst. He loved Southern California as perhaps only an East Coast person could. To Nick it represented an alternative to the expectations of [Eastern] educated "good taste." He loved the look of Los Angeles, its elegant Spanish Colonial and Deco

buildings, the clarity of Rudolf Schindler's houses, but equally, the colored lights illuminating banana plants and sparkling stucco, swimming pools and gorgeous cars. Los Angeles epitomized the transgressive beauty Nick most enjoyed.

He was always careful to distinguish between art—and everything else. "Everything else" included lifestyle things like gourmet food and tasteful interiors. He was a gay man who hated associations of the "Queer Eye" sort, preferring steaks, scotch and Pink's chilidogs and ignoring his wardrobe and furniture completely.

Nick's deepest desire was to become an art historian. Although he majored in political science at Amherst College, his most important education came from campus jobs showing slides for innumerable art history classes and working as a guard at the Mead Art Museum. (In fact, he once met Marcel Duchamp at the

museum when Duchamp arrived early to give a talk on its exhibition about the Armory Show.) After graduating, Nick enrolled in Stanford Law School. Very soon, however, he switched from law to art history/archaeology, to a department that, at the time, barely existed. (Stanford's celebrated art historians Albert Elsen and Lorenz Eitner were to arrive a short time later.) His plan was to earn the undergraduate credits he needed to enter a Ph.D. program in art history at Columbia. At Stanford, Nick studied with Hazel Hansen, a scholar of classical antiquities and Greek. Under her supervision, he com-

pleted a master's essay establishing a chronology for several hundred ancient Roman bronze lamps in the Stanford Art Museum. But Professor Hansen died unexpectedly, and his thesis was never deposited.

Meanwhile, in order to support himself, Nick had taken a job selling art at the Lanyon Gallery in the Stanford Shopping Center. The owners of the gallery, Dr. William Fielder and his wife Louise, had begun by buying the work of current School of Paris artists like Bernard Buffet, but met with little success selling the paintings in California. Nick persuaded the Fielders to try showing some local artists he had discovered, and the gallery took off. In one year, Nick sold forty-five paintings by Tom Holland. He discovered that he liked the work. Clients responded. Artists appreciated his respect for them. After two years it was clearly time

Among Nick's acolytes were several

fellow students, some of whom became collectors, publishers or dealers, like Charles Cowles; others, like me, curators or art historians. When I first met Nick at the Lanyon Gallery, I was completing my M.A. in Hispanic-American Studies at Stanford. I'd been spending a lot of time in South America, and expected to work in some sort of non-profit that dealt with economic development in Latin America. But then, subtly, Nick did for me what he did for so many people: facilitated a sort of conversion experience with art. I saw, really saw, a Mark Rothko painting and was filled with indignation that they'd never taught me about this at Stanford.

Nick and I began to talk about starting a gallery in Los Angeles. We didn't know anyone there, but in 1964 Southern California seemed to have more gallery potential than the Bay Area. I asked my father to lend me the start-up capital and he initially agreed. Two weeks later, he changed

his mind. Too risky. Nick turned to friends from Stanford (Charles Cowles and William Scott) and Amherst (Stanley Johnson and Robert Owen), and to a collector he'd come to know at the Lanyon Gallery, Moses Lasky, a well known San Francisco attorney and longtime supporter of the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). Each one invested \$2,000. When my father learned of Lasky's participation, he relented, because he regarded Lasky as a very tough, very smart guy. Maybe this was not so risky after all. He lent the other 80% of the money we thought we needed to start. Additional help came from Barnett Newman, who extended what was, effectively, an interest-free loan. He consigned a major painting to be sold with the understanding he would be paid over a two-year period. (This was *Tundra*, purchased

by Robert Rowan.) In three months, Nick rented a storefront on La Cienega, renovated the space, and hired Ed Ruscha to design the stationery. The gallery opened on April 1, 1965 with a show of new paintings by Edward Avedisian.



JOE GOODE EXHIBITION, 1966
PHOTO: COURTESY OF FRANK J. THOMAS ARCHIVES

The Wilder Gallery's years coincided with the end of a remarkable post-War art scene in Southern California, a scene well grounded in the modernist tradition. In 1953 the Pasadena Art Museum acquired the Galka Scheyer Collection, at the time, the most important collection of early twentieth-century modernist art on the West Coast. In addition, the Arensberg Collection was in Los Angeles from 1927 until it was finally given to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1950 after a formal agreement with the university's Regents nullified the Arensbergs' 1944 bequest to the University of California, Los Angeles. (The university failed to fulfill its agreement to build a museum.) (Sawelson-Gorse 89) The Arensbergs' home and collection also served as the training ground for curator Walter Hopps, who became one of the founders of the Ferus Gallery and later became a curator and director at the Pasadena Art Museum. There, Hopps organized foundational exhibitions on Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell. In the early 1960s the Los Angeles County Museum changed course. Richard Brown, then chief curator, and trustee Norton Simon formed a new department of modern art (1850-1960); they hired a young curator from the Guggenheim, Maurice Tuchman, whose first major show was the splendid New York School, the First Generation (1965). Both the Pasadena and Los Angeles County museums showed and actively purchased work by Southern California artists. Artforum magazine, which was based in Los Angeles from 1964 to 1968, chronicled the local scene and sustained lively exchanges between East and West Coast critics and artists.

As Nick and many other people have observed, the complete story of L.A.'s post-war galleries has never really been told. In addition to the wunderkinder of the Ferus Gallery, there were a number of other circles that, together, created a bubbling, lively scene, both inspiring and welcoming to new artists, dealers, collectors, critics, and curators. Cited in every history of the region's art is the Ferus Gallery, founded by artist Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps, which introduced Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Wallace Berman, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, Kenneth Price, and Ed Ruscha. Less familiar on the East Coast are some of the seminal post-War California artists who showed with Ferus in its early years. These were gifted Abstract Expressionist artists like Hassel Smith, Jay DeFeo, Richards Ruben, and John Altoon, as well as the founders of the ceramic sculpture movement on the West Coast, Peter Voulkos and John Mason. With Irving Blum as director after 1962, Ferus also showed Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella.

By the time the Wilder Gallery opened in 1965, Smith, Voulkos, Mason, and Altoon were all exhibiting at the David Stuart Gallery. Stuart also showed Vija Celmins and Stephen De Staebler. One of the founders of Ferus, Ed Kienholz, left Ferus to show with the Dwan Gallery in Westwood, near UCLA. Virginia Dwan and the gallery's director, John Weber, invited a number of New York artists to Los Angeles to stay for extended periods of time at Dwan's beach house in Malibu, Claes Oldenburg and John Chamberlain among them. Dwan also showed Mark di Suvero, Yves Klein, and Jean Tinguely. Yet another transplanted New Yorker, Rolf Nelson, showed George Herms, Lloyd Hamrol, Judy Chicago (Gerowitz, at that time), H.C. Westerman, Peter Saul, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The Felix Landau Gallery, which had been founded in 1953, exhibited important



BRUCE NAUMAN EXHIBITION, 1966 PHOTO: COURTESY OF FRANK J. THOMAS ARCHIVES © 2005 BRUCE NAUMAN/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

European artists like Lucio Fontana and the French-American sculptor Gaston Lachaise, as well as John McLaughlin. McLaughlin's colleagues, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, showed at Ankrum Gallery. Somewhat farther afield, in Beverly Hills, was the Paul Kantor Gallery, which had been showing important Abstract Expressionist work in Los Angeles since the early 1950s.

In fourteen years of operation, Nick showed a great range of artists, seventy-one to

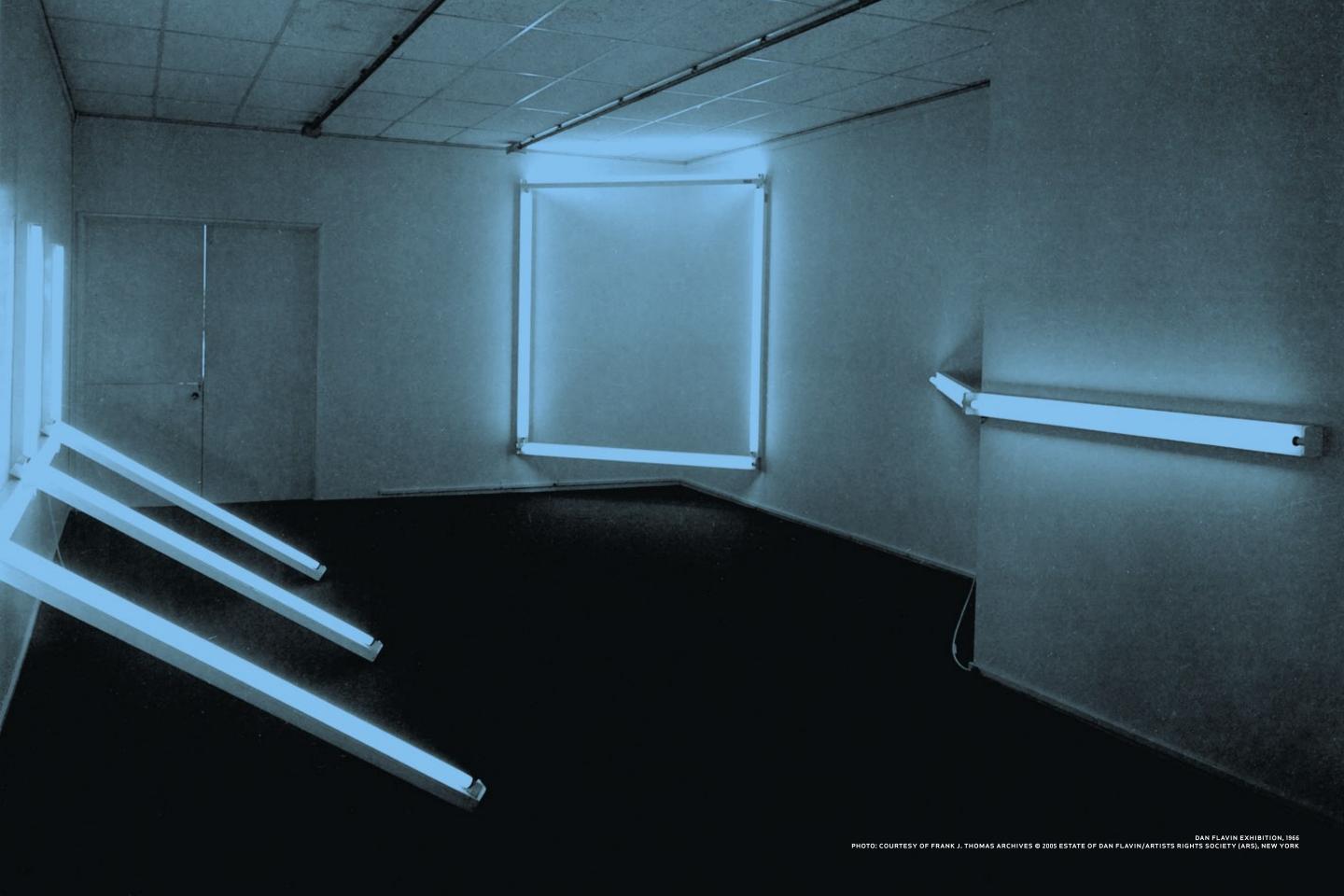
be exact. These included cool minimalists (Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin, Jo Baer, John McCracken, and Richard Tuttle), poetic assemblage artists (George Herms and Robert Helm), painters of gorgeous color field paintings (Jules Olitski, Helen Frankenthaler, and Dan Christensen), and a number of artists less easily classified (Barnett Newman, Bruce Nauman, John Altoon, Sam Francis, John McLaughlin, and Cy Twombly). Throughout the gallery's existence, he continued to show most of his original artists (Tom Holland, Ron Davis, Robert Graham, and Bruce Nauman, from Northern California and Joe Goode, from Southern California.) He was an innovator in terms of installation, building special cases for the Barnett Newman prints to simulate their being viewed in a portfolio; fabricating the Joe Goode staircases that led up into blank walls; and constructing sheetrock walls that filled the gallery for a Nauman show.

The artists Nick showed did not include all the artists he most admired. Some of his favorites showed with other galleries (Frank Stella, Claes Oldenburg and Ed Kienholz); some were sculptors whose work was simply too expensive to ship to Los Angeles and sell at a profit (Richard Artschwager and Anthony Caro); and some were impossible to sell, period (James Turrell).

The Wilder Gallery's exhibition history includes more relatively established New York artists in the years prior to about 1974, when the secondary market for contemporary art began to develop. Before that time, it was relatively easy for a dealer outside of New York to take major new work on consignment. After 1974 Nick represented a number of artists from the original Ferus group (Billy Al Bengston, Ed Moses, Kenneth Price and John Altoon).

From about 1974 on, new additions were almost all emerging Southern California artists (Alexis Smith, Allan McCollum, Richard Yokomi, and Andrew Spence). Throughout the 1970s the economic mainstays of the gallery were the more established Los Angeles artists (Charles Arnoldi, Ron Davis, and Robert Graham). At the same time, major changes were occurring in patterns of patronage, all of which proved damaging to commercial galleries like Nick's. The growing print market made it possible for new collectors to buy, say, an Ellsworth Kelly lithograph, for less money than a unique work by a young artist. The 1970s were also the great age of corporate collecting and saw the rise of art consultants (who effectively shielded both corporate and private clients from dealers). Non-profit and alternative spaces arose, supported by corporations and public funding, and thes diverted much of the energy and attention of critics in all media. Artforum, now based in New York, reviewed very few shows in Southern California. The resources of established Los Angeles collectors were overextended, strained by efforts to keep the Pasadena Art Museum's big new building functioning. A new generation of collectors preferred to buy their art in New York and felt less commitment to the local scene.

Nick adapted to these market changes by shifting strategies throughout the 1970s, but by about 1975 it was clear that the time had come to close and move on. Not only was business less rewarding, the gallery was interfering with his enjoyment of art. After a three-year period of transition for his artists and employees, Nick closed on the last day of 1979 and left for New York. He had become clear about his priorities in life. New York had more art, more rare book dealers, and more auctions, and he could get to Europe with only six hours of jet lag, instead of nine. His timing was perfect, because, as Nick knew very well, the age of ironic, self-reflexive, postmodernist art was dawning.



Throughout the 1980s he worked as private dealer, read and studied, played golf, traveled, took up painting (eventually showing at James Corcoran Gallery in Los Angeles and at Edward Thorp in New York). His library grew to epic size. At last he had become the *pedant* (his word) that he'd always aspired to be. In his oral history he delights to describe one of the many phone calls with research queries he received from art historians. A curator at the Museum of Modern Art had a question about a version of a painting by surrealist Rene Magritte. Nick answered it by pulling off the shelves of his personal library, the catalogue that contained the answer (Wilder, Archives 81). After his death Nick's splendid library was sold in its entirety to the Osaka Art Museum in Japan.

Nick learned that he was HIV positive in 1986. Friends recall that he was a good and diligent patient, learning all he could, seeing the best doctors, resting, eating fewer bologna sandwiches, and trying promising new drugs. Mercifully, the length of time he was seriously ill was not long. He died in May 1989.

Taken together, Nick's roster of artists violates that most sacred principle of marketing, the establishment and maintenance of an identifiable brand, a look that is instantly recognizable. There are some common threads, though. The work he liked and showed was not easily translatable into words. He did not like narratives, lessons, political statements, jokes, "art about art," or anything the least bit coy. Predictability, for Nick, was anathema. He hated smugness, even certainty, and felt that the best art always kept one off balance. A rich compliment from Nick would be that a painting "kept bothering" him. He was intrigued by things that resisted sorting, translation, interpretation, or analysis. A sense of de-centering seemed to him to be evidence of a fresh line of visual thinking on the artist's part. He once replied to a young dealer who had said,

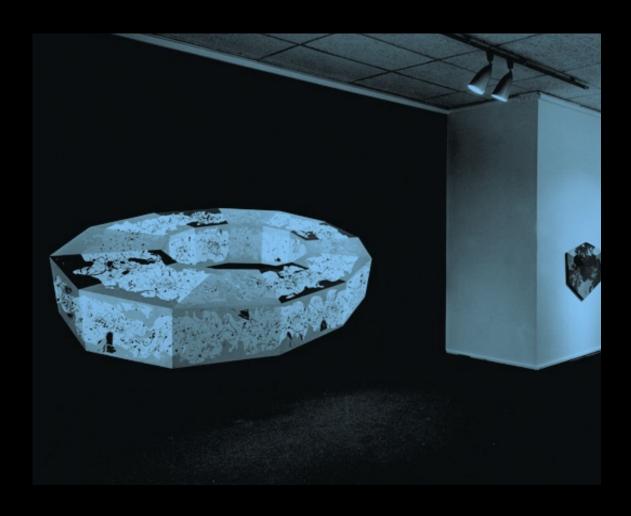
"I WISH I COULD BE A LITTLE MORE CERTAIN [ABOUT AN ARTIST]," "WHY BE MORE CERTAIN? WHAT THE HELL IS THIS 'BE CERTAIN' ABOUT?" (WILDER, ARCHIVES 58)

As art critic William Wilson observed,

NICK WAS UNIQUE AMONG L.A. DEALERS IN BEING ACCORDED THE INVISIBLE ORDER OF THE EYE BY HIS PEERS, THUS JOINING A TINY HANDFUL OF COMMERCIAL PROMOTERS LIKE LEO CASTELLI AND RICHARD BELLAMY WHO WERE THOUGHT TO HAVE THE TRUE CONNOISSEUR'S KNACK. ABOUT THE ONLY OTHER L.A. PROFESSIONAL TO BE HELD IN SUCH AWE WAS THE CURATOR WALTER HOPPS...(WILSON)

Nick had absolute faith in his ability to make artistic choices and firmly believed in the power of visual language. This faculty, hard-wired in human beings, he saw as independent of verbal symbols. At the same time he recognized the power of words to transcend words, placing great value upon poetry.

THE ENTERPRISE OF MAKING ART IS THE NON-VERBAL BRANCH OF SPECULATIVE THOUGHT, WHICH IS THE HIGHEST KIND OF ENTERPRISE THAT PEOPLE CAN GET INVOLVED IN. (WILDER, ARCHIVES 43)





In more scientific terms, Nick was surely a "Stage 5" visual thinker as described by the noted Harvard-trained educator Dr. Abigail Housen. Housen's levels of aesthetic development are analogous to the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's observations on the developmental stages of children's perceptions and learning. In Piaget's and Housen's schemas the levels represent different stages of processing and understanding the same given empirical data. Housen drew her conclusions and defined the five levels of visual thinking after interviewing hundreds of subjects of varying age and educational levels; she asked each one the same series of open-ended questions. The responses fell into a sequence of five stages, which were not strictly correlated with the subjects' levels of education. The Stage 1 thinker spontaneously develops a narrative. For example, Paul Cezanne's Bather reminds him of a childhood picnic. The Stage 2 thinker observes that the Bather does not match his expectations, e.g., the legs are "too short." The Stage 3 thinker recognizes Cezanne's style and can describe it. The Stage 4 person can plumb his own experience of the work of art to perceive the formal means the artist has used to evoke it. In addition, Stage 5 viewers, like Nick, relate their current perceptions to a vast personal encyclopedia of previous aesthetic experiences. These are the people the art world accords the distinction of "having an eye." Nick manifests Housen's Stage 5 thinking in this passage from his oral history:

WHEN YOU HAVE A CAB DRIVER OUTSIDE LA SCALA ABOUT TO SEE...THAT SAME OPERA FOR THE FORTY-SEVENTH TIME, WHAT THAT PERSON'S DOING IN LINE IS A LOT OF THINGS. I USE THE WORD "TASTE," WHICH MARXISTS DON'T LIKE. I THINK IT'S INFORMED EXPECTATION, BASED ON ALL THE OPERAS HE'S SEEN, RECEIVING THOSE OPERAS BASED ON HIS TALENT OR HIS APTITUDES TO HEAR AND [THAT] VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON, WHICH A LOT OF THESE PEOPLE DON'T THINK HAPPENS, BUT IT DOES—HE'S SEEN THAT OPERA FORTY-SEVEN TIMES. HE'S SEEN OTHER OPERAS BY THE SAME PERFORMERS AND BY THE SAME COMPOSERS. HE'S SEEN IT IN VARIOUS OPERA HOUSES. ALL THIS EXPERIENCE IS BROUGHT TOGETHER. WHAT THE HELL'S HE GOING IN THERE FOR THE FORTY-SEVENTH TIME FOR? HE WANTS THAT EXPECTATION TO BE MET AND EXCEEDED. HE'LL HAVE AN ART EXPERIENCE. AND AN ART EXPERIENCE WILL BE SOME TYPE OF SENSING OR REVELATION TO AN ANSWER TO A BIGGER—THERE WILL BE A HARMONY ACHIEVED. (WILDER, ARCHIVES 44-5)

Of course, Nick would never use such elevated language when he wanted to introduce someone to art. His method was, as he put it, to simply remove impediments. He would stand beside you, look at whatever it was with you and chat about the artist's life perhaps, or tell an anecdote, say, about how a Hans Hofmann "mudball" turned into a terrific painting after a few days' contemplation, and so on. Then he let the painting do the work. Very often, it did. Countless people in California, and New York, too, were charmed, delighted, instructed, and inspired by Nick Wilder and his lifelong passion for the transformative power of art.



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Artists exhibited at Nicholas Wilder Gallery, 1965-1979

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED

ARLO ACTON 1965

PETER ALEXANDER 1970

RAYMOND ALMEIDA 1974

JOHN ALTOON 1972, 1974, 1975

AMERICAN QUILTS, 1840-1940 1979

CHARLES ARNOLDI 1974 (2, INCLUDING 1 GROUP), 1975, 1977, 1979

EDWARD AVEDISIAN 1965, 1968, 1969

DON BACHARDY 1974, 1977

JO BAER 1973

DARBY BANNARD 1967

BILLY AL BENGSTON 1973 (2), 1974 (2, INCLUDING 1 GROUP)

WILLIAM BRICE 1978

JACK BUSH 1970

DAN CHRISTENSEN 1970, 1972

RON DAVIS 1965, 1966, 1967 (2), 1969, 1973, 1974 (GROUP), 1977

WALTER DE MARIA 1968

JAMES DEFRANCE 1969, 1973, 1976

TONY DELAP 1972, 1974, 1976

ANTONY DONALDSON 1968

WILLIAM DUBIN 1965 (GROUP)

FRIEDEL DZUBAS 1966

PAUL FEELEY 1966

DAN FLAVIN 1966

SAM FRANCIS 1969, 1973, 1974 (GROUP), 1975

HELEN FRANKENTHALER 1967

JOE GOODE 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1979

ROBERT GOODNOUGH 1972

ROBERT GRAHAM 1966, 1967, 1969, 1974, 1975, 1977

NIGEL HALL 1968

ALLAN HART 1970

ROBERT HELM 1976, 1978

GEORGE HERMS 1973, 1975

DAVID HOCKNEY 1970, 1976

HANS HOFMANN 1973

TOM HOLLAND 1965, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1972, 1973, 1974 (GROUP), 1975, 1976, 1979

JOHN HOYLAND 1967, 1973

ROBERT HUDSON 1967

MASATOYO KISHI 1965

NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK 1965

GEORGE PLATT LYNES 1979

JOANNA MAGLOFF 1965 (GROUP)

AGNES MARTIN 1965, 1967, 1970, 1973

CHARLES MATTOX 1967

ALLAN MCCOLLUM 1973, 1974

JOHN McCRACKEN 1965, 1967, 1968

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN 1972, 1975, 1979

DUANE MICHALS 1979

ED MOSES 1972, 1974 (GROUP), 1976

CLARK MURRAY 1966, 1967

GWYNN MURRILL 1977

BRUCE NAUMAN 1966, 1969, 1970, 1973, 1974 (2, INCLUDING 1 GROUP), 1977

BARNETT NEWMAN 1965

HELMUT NEWTON 1976

KENNETH NOLAND 1966

JULES OLITSKI 1966, 1968, 1973

WILLIAM PETTET 1966, 1968, 1970

DONALD POTTS 1965 (GROUP)

KENNETH PRICE 1973, 1974 (GROUP)

CHERI RACITI 1975

ALEXIS SMITH 1977

DON SORENSON 1975, 1976, 1979

ANDREW SPENCE 1974, 1976

LEWIS STEIN 1969

PETER STROUD 1967

TERENCE SYVERSON 1965 (GROUP)

MICHAEL TODD 1976

HORACIO TORRES 1975

RICHARD TUTTLE 1969

CY TWOMBLY 1969

RICHARD YOKOMI 1969, 1972, 1974, 1976

PETER YOUNG 1968

PETER ZECHER 1974



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