

Jane Wilson, Noted Landscape Painter

April 29, 1924 - Jan 13, 2015

By Mark Segal | January 22, 2015 - 12:02pm

Jane Wilson, whose singular landscape paintings, many inspired by the East End, secured her reputation as one of the leading painters of the postwar era, died of heart failure on Jan. 13 at the Calvary Hospice of the Mary Manning Walsh Nursing Home in New York City. She was 90.



Her landscapes and seascapes, characterized by low horizons, vast skies, and changing weather, have been likened by many critics to the paintings of Turner, Delacroix, Porter, and, perhaps most often, Rothko, suggesting a commitment not to representation or abstraction but to “the pursuit of light,” according to the late Rose Slivka, a longtime art critic for *The Star*.

In a 1991 interview with Mimi Thompson in *Bomb* magazine, Ms. Wilson 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.” She went on to compare the landscape of eastern Long Island to those of the Netherlands and the Midwest.

Jane Wilson was born on April 29, 1924, on her family’s farm in Seymour, Iowa, amid the flat spaces of the Corn Belt, to Wayne Wilson and Cleone Marquis. “As a child in Iowa,” she once said, “I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the unending space around me. . . . The land was vast. The sky was vast. Everything was vast. . . . And the weather was continually changing.”

She earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Iowa, graduating in 1947. While there, she met and was pursued by John Gruen, a photographer and writer who was studying English. After seeing her on campus, before even meeting her, “I could not

get Jane Wilson out of my mind,” he said. “There was an air about Jane that intrigued me. She looked so European . . . so quietly glamorous! I absolutely had to meet her!”

He got his wish, and they were married on March 28, 1948, “the happiest day of my life,” in his words. Mr. Gruen and their daughter, Julia Gruen, survive her.

They moved to Manhattan the following year and settled in Greenwich Village. In 1952, while at the Cedar Tavern, Ms. Wilson was asked to be a co-founder of the Hansa Gallery, an artists’ cooperative that opened on East 12th Street. She had three solo shows there and participated in group exhibitions at Tanager Gallery and the Stable Gallery over the next six years.

“There were lots of women artists and there were a few who were in and out of the Cedar Bar social scene,” she told Bomb magazine. “The most vocal of the women painters tended not to be married. There was also a position taken that you could not be married and be a painter — it indicated you were not serious. Later, I began to realize that there were many other artists that were not part of that scene, women artists who were married and who even had children, for God’s sake.”

At that time she was working in an Abstract Expressionist style, but shifted to expressionist landscapes later in the decade. “In 1956 and 1957, I found myself in one of those lucid moments that occurs every 20 years and I realized I wasn’t a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. I looked at the ingredients of what I was painting and felt an uncontrollable allegiance to subject matter, and landscape in particular.”

The artist and her husband began visiting the South Fork in 1950 and bought an old carriage house in Water Mill 10 years later, splitting their time between Water Mill and the city ever since.

While she was painting and exhibiting during the 1950s, Ms. Wilson had a second career as a fashion model, which provided additional income but, according to Mr. Gruen, did not please the Hansa Gallery, whose other artists were less in the public eye. In 1958 she was a contestant on “The \$64,000 Challenge,” a spinoff of “The \$64,000 Question,” which, along with “Twenty One,” became embroiled in the famous quiz show scandals of the late ’50s. She testified that she was not given answers and wound up with only \$1,000.

In 1960, the Museum of Modern Art acquired a large landscape, “The Open Scene,” and she joined Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which represented her friends Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Fairfield Porter, and Helen Frankenthaler, among others. During the ’60s, while living on East 10th Street across from Tompkins Square Park, she painted cityscapes of the park and surrounding neighborhood.

By the late 1960s, Ms. Wilson was focusing on still lifes set in her apartment and studio, including several paintings of work tables and artist materials, subjects that also

interested Porter. She returned to landscapes in the early 1980s, forging her signature style over the next three decades.

She joined DC Moore Gallery in 1999 and had seven solo shows there. Her work is in the collections of major museums across the country. In 2009, “Jane Wilson: Horizons,” an account of her life and work by Elisabeth Sussman, curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, was published by Merrell.

Ms. Wilson worked mostly from memory. Alicia Longwell, the Parrish Art Museum’s chief curator, wrote in the catalog for the exhibition “North Fork/South Fork” that her “horizon tends to hug the bottom of her compositions, leaving plenty of space for the drama of the painting. In a long and slow process, she builds up the paint in layers, to convey the singular, atmospheric interactions of land, light, and water in marvelously subdued pyrotechnics.”

Ms. Gruen wrote of her mother that “Water Mill is my mother. She found lifelong inspiration in the land, sea, and sky of this place, and I felt nurtured by it, as much as by her. But could a child grasp the significance of my parents’ circle of friends? De Kooning, Rauschenberg, Johns, Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, Marisol, Jane Freilicher, Lukas Foss, Virgil Thomson, Leonard Bernstein, Jerry Leiber, Stella Adler, Arthur Gold and Bobby Fizzdale, Frank O’Hara, Edward Albee, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, to name only a few? No.”

“My father’s photographs recorded very specific moments and occasions, but for five decades, my mother’s paintings have provided the atmospheric evocation of and window onto my childhood. Over the past decade, I’ve been obsessively photographing the skies in Water Mill . . . but whenever I look up, I always see a Jane Wilson sky.”

A memorial service and the dispersal of ashes will take place at a later date.