

Jane Wilson, Then and Now, Celebrated at 90 in Chelsea

A selective mini-retrospective, the show highlights earlier, more figurative paintings of New York City and her later South Fork-inspired abstractions, in which she aimed to capture atmosphere or the color of the air itself

By Jennifer Landes | October 28, 2014

Every so often we need an exhibition of Jane Wilson's paintings to remind us how spectacular an artist she truly is. Such an event is now occurring in New York City at DC Moore Gallery on the occasion of Ms. Wilson's 90th year. "Jane Wilson at 90: East Village/East End" will be up through Saturday.

A selective mini-retrospective, the show highlights earlier, more figurative paintings of New York City and her later South Fork-inspired abstractions, in which she aimed to capture atmosphere or the color of the air itself.



Jane Wilson's "Sun After Rain," from 1990, shows the layering that occurs with her characteristic low horizon.

For the past few decades, Ms. Wilson painted in a loft-like studio on the top floor of a barn that she and her husband, John Gruen, renovated into a living space. Bright and open with natural light, it was made even more ethereal by its white painted walls. Entering the space was akin to what apparitions of heaven might



"Avenue B Bus," from 1966, shows an affinity with and influence of Fairfield Porter in Ms. Wilson's work of the time.

be like — a bright nothingness with a sole painting on an easel evoking a cerulean paradise.

It is easy to see how Ms. Wilson developed what the gallery calls her East End paintings in that environment. Taken from memory, according to the artist, the layers of sky with just a blip of horizon if there is one at all, appear to be visions snatched from the air around her, brooding at times, triumphant in others.

How instructive to see these familiar paintings, which seem to be exhibited regularly in gallery shows and fairs, with other paintings rarely shown, but just as engaging to the artist in their time. These are works that say as much about her environment then — Tompkins Square Park in the 1960s — as her East End paintings in more recent years.

A portrait of Ms. Wilson in the gallery by Fairfield Porter confirms what we may have surmised from well-known photographs Mr. Gruen took of him, that Ms. Wilson was a friend and perhaps even an acolyte of his, dropping her expressionist landscapes of the time to take up more recognizable subject matter. This is most evident here in "Avenue B Bus" from 1966. The frank presentation, muted colors, flattened objects, and very slight abstraction all seem taken and filtered from one of Porter's city scenes.

In an Oct. 22 discussion at the gallery, Mimi Thompson and Elisabeth Sussman discussed Ms. Wilson and her contributions to painting from the mid-20th century up to the present. Ms. Sussman said of the 1960s paintings that Ms. Wilson "paints what's in front of her. She didn't have to travel to some exotic place." Although the park may have been bland to most people, she said, Ms. Wilson had a sensitivity to the landscape acquired in childhood, and was still able to find something of interest in it.

In an interview with Ms. Thompson for *Bomb* in 1991, Ms. Wilson said of her contemporaries in the 1950s, "I floated around the periphery and either disliked or couldn't handle the kind of scrappiness that was an element of the social scene." She showed then at the Hansa Gallery, a cooperative effort that she said had some respect "for the authenticity of differing directions going on simultaneously."

Ms. Thompson and Ms. Sussman said that the artist was respected by her peers and that contemporary painting students who had seen the current show expressed great admiration for her work. They also agreed that her Iowa upbringing fostered a creative engagement with the landscape that would become her life's work.

Surrounding them were three of her East End paintings: "Sun After Rain," "Moon Rise," and "Hurricane Watch," each one layered and full of the "retinal buzz" that Ms. Thompson ascribed to her paintings. There is a kind of ecstatic reaction viewers have to these paintings, that I once described as what St. Paul might have seen when he was otherwise struck blind on his way to Damascus. It was a vision that made him a convert.

As moody, evocative, and revelatory as those New York City landscapes are, they just don't come close to the full realization and maturity of these later works that give life and soul to the sky in a way that reminds us of the best of the atmosphere here, but always exceeds it, doing what some might call the ultimate creator one better.



"Rain on Avenue B," 1965



"Sun and Rain," 2004



Mimi Thompson and Elisabeth Sussman discussed the life and work of Jane Wilson on Oct. 22.

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Installation view of the New York works, c. 1965
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