

An abstract painting by Ben Willson, featuring a complex composition of bold, thick black lines that create a sense of architectural structure and movement. The background is a vibrant mix of colors, including deep reds, bright yellows, lush greens, and cool blues, all applied with visible, expressive brushstrokes. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and a rich, textured surface.

JASON ROSENFELD

BEN WILLSON

FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO ABSTRACTION



BEN WILSON

FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO ABSTRACTION

Jason Rosenfeld

September 6–November 4, 2017

George Segal Gallery

MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY



Upon request, information will be made available in alternative formats such as large print. Accommodations will be provided to all individuals with disabilities in order to participate in George Segal Gallery services, programs, and activities.

This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Ben Wilson: From Social Realism to Abstraction*, and presented from September 6 through November 4, 2017, at the George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University.

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Front cover: *In Plane Sight*, 2000, detail, see plate 46
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Ben Wilson, Paris, ca. 1960

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Acknowledgements

The estate of an artist is a world in itself, rich in documents, artifacts, memorabilia. If the past is another country, an artist's estate is a passport to that world. To have it preserved is a great gift to future generations, guiding us into the life of someone who interpreted and documented a place and time with a vision that transformed the human experience into art.

When Joanne Wilson Jaffe presented the opportunity to the George Segal Gallery to preserve the life's work of her father Ben Wilson, we were excited not only because the paintings are of great artistic merit but also because the evolution of his work over a long and productive life reflects so many of the important trends that brought American art to the forefront in the 20th century. We are deeply grateful to the Ben and Evelyn Wilson Foundation for the gift of these wonderful works and especially to Joanne for her trust, her guidance, and the wealth of information that she has provided about the artistic life and achievements of both Ben and Evelyn Wilson.

In addition to the Wilson works in the permanent collection of the George Segal Gallery, we are fortunate to have paintings on loan from the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, thanks to the assistance of Laura Kruger, its curator, as well as from the Kepner family. Thanks also go to the Quogue Gallery and owners Chester and Christy Murray for our new association and their enthusiastic support.

We are also fortunate to have in the scholarly role Dr. Jason Rosenfeld, who brings a wealth of experience to his appreciation of Ben Wilson's achievement as an artist. Debra Pesci of Hollis Taggart Galleries has been both generous and wise in her advice on the Wilson Collection and this exhibition.

The magnitude of the Wilson Collection requires the attention and care of professionals whose experience and insight allow these works and artifacts to live and breathe. I especially thank M. Teresa Lapid Rodriguez, Director of the George Segal Gallery, and her staff: Anthony Rodriguez, Andrea Marshall, and Adam Swart. The dedication of these professionals allows the George Segal Gallery to make a great contribution both to the field and to the state. I offer special thanks to conservator Walter Nowatka and his staff at Gate House Galleries, Inc. for their sensitive hands.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge Russell Hassell for his extraordinary design and Jay Stewart and his staff at Puritan Capital for printing this beautiful catalogue. Much appreciation also goes to our wonderful editor Ashley Park.

I gratefully acknowledge the McMullen Family Foundation and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, whose generous ongoing support has helped to make exhibitions like this one possible.

Once more with thanks to all the above and many other supportive University staff, I am delighted for this opportunity to expand the public's knowledge and appreciation of Ben Wilson and his very rich life in art.

Daniel A. Gurskis
Dean, College of the Arts
Montclair State University

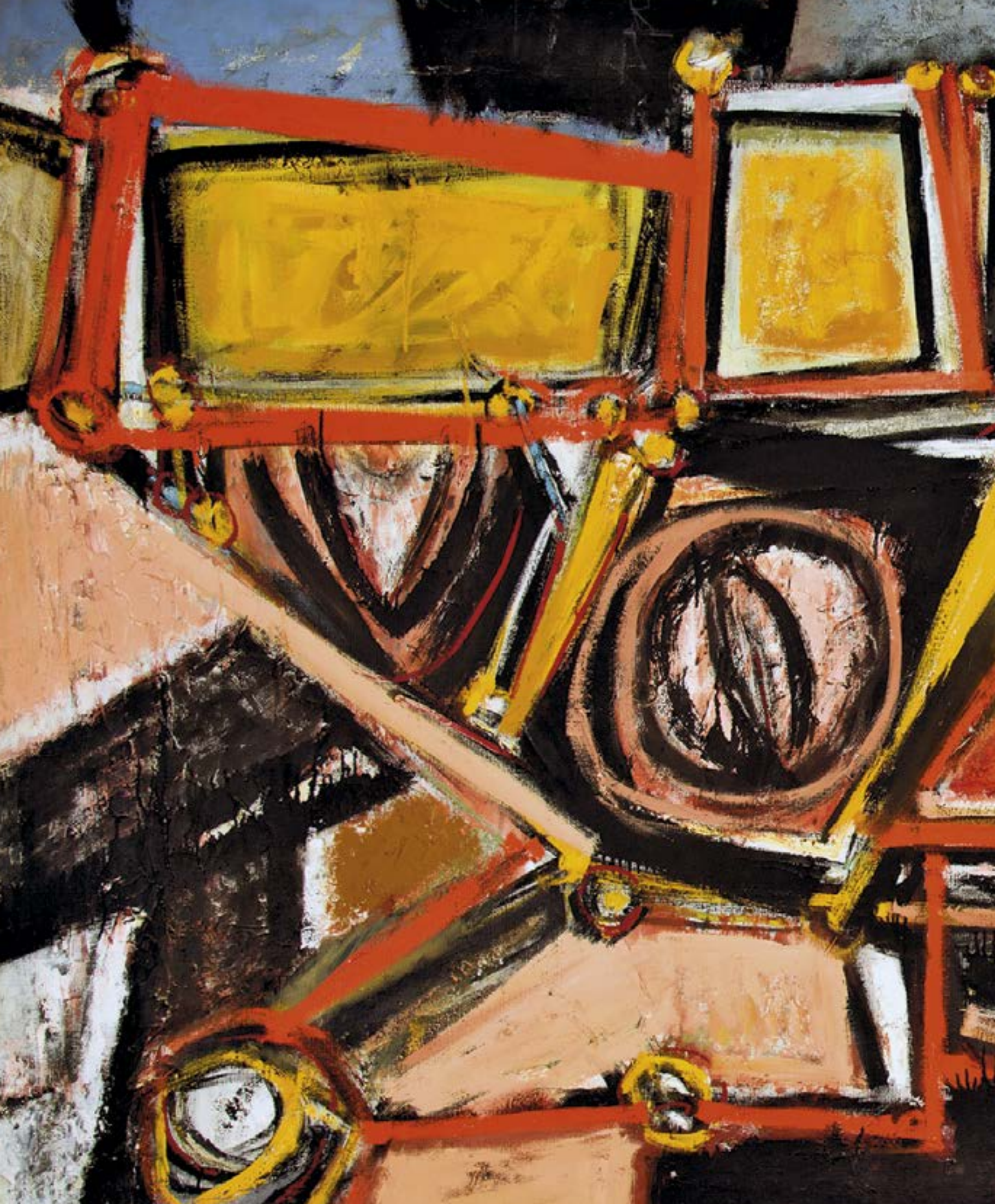
Message from the President

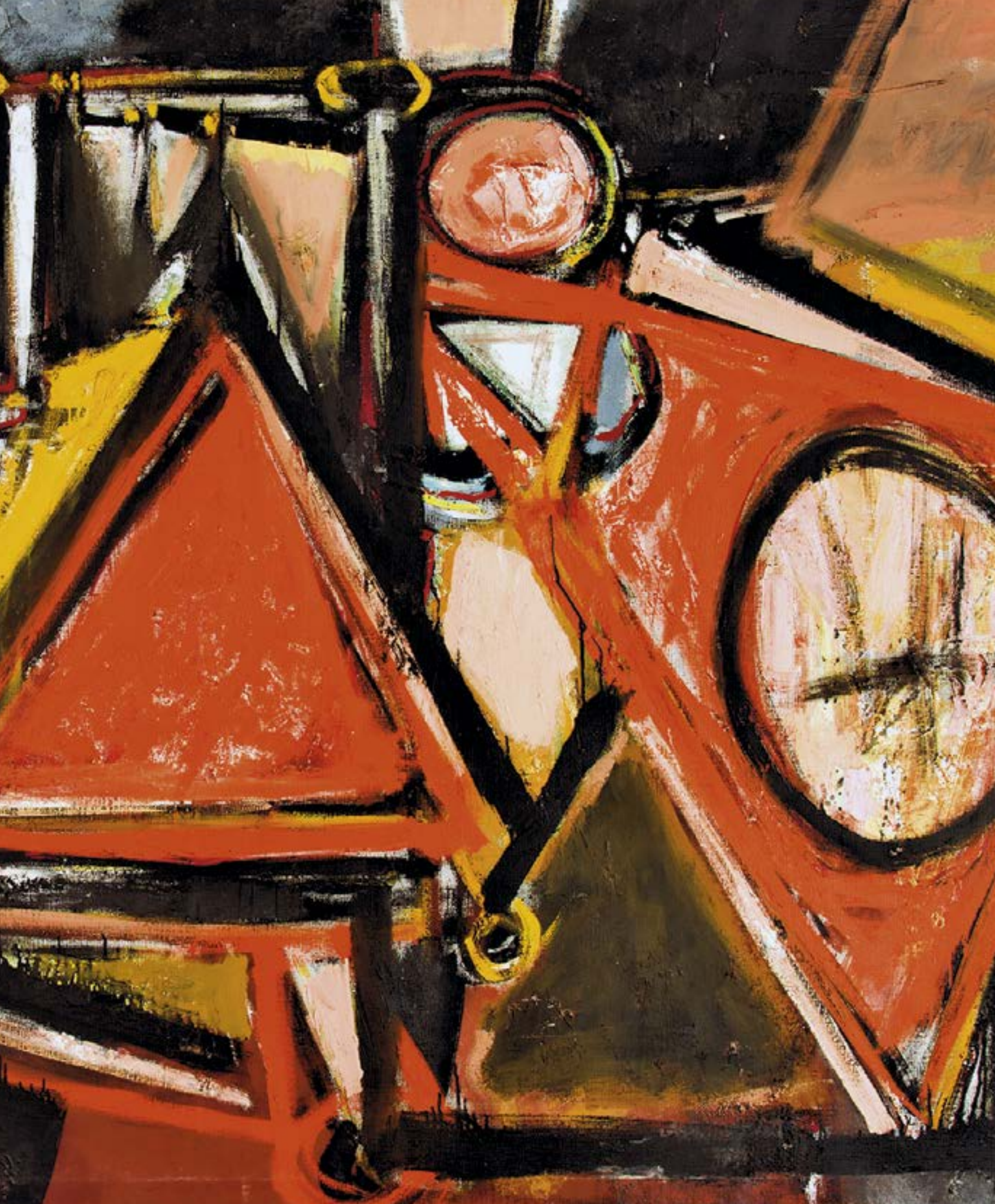
Central to the mission of Montclair State University is the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Essential to that process are discovery and sometimes, as in the case of the artist Ben Wilson, rediscovery. Wilson is a painter whose work and life reflect the arc of modern art in the twentieth century. Although the level of recognition accorded contemporaries like Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, and Robert Rauschenberg eluded him in his lifetime, the breadth of work on display in *Ben Wilson: From Social Realism to Abstraction* reveals a personal aesthetic that boldly transcends artistic movements and prevailing critical currents.

With the generous gift by the artist's family of a substantial portion of his complete body of work, Montclair State has been entrusted with safeguarding the legacy of Ben Wilson. Together with his art, the University maintains an extensive archive of exhibition catalogues, reviews, correspondence, and historical photographs as a part of the permanent collection of the George Segal Gallery. In addition, several dozen of his finest paintings are on permanent display in buildings throughout the University campus.

Ben Wilson: From Social Realism to Abstraction represents the beginning of what promises to be an extended period of rediscovery of the work of Ben Wilson through exhibition, study, and critical analysis. We are pleased that you are here with us at the outset.

Susan A. Cole
President
Montclair State University





“The Moment of Recognition” | Ben Wilson from Social Realism to Abstraction

JASON ROSENFELD

Ben Wilson was an artist whose formative years spanned the Great Depression and the Second World War. He was a Jewish, Philadelphia-born New Yorker who in his late thirties left the city for Ridgefield, New Jersey, and then moved to Blirstown near the Delaware Water Gap. He taught painting throughout his career, in the most committed sense, first in the New Deal under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), then privately and for many institutions in the region. He made a go at the New York art world and then withdrew. He began as a card-carrying Social Realist with an axe to grind and ended as an American original, pursuing a unique kind of rigorous and emphatically painted abstraction. This exhibition introduces the highlights of the Ben and Evelyn Wilson Foundation’s remarkable gift of an archive and vast cache of works by the artist to Montclair State University, and aims to reveal the whole of his singular career. The reader will find a chronology following this essay that gives a more concise picture of his life (p. 72).

Wilson’s parents emigrated from Ukraine and he was born in Philadelphia in 1913. The family moved to New York City when he was three, and he began to take art lessons at a variety of enlightened institutions in the early 1930s. He studied at the prestigious but conservative National Academy of Design under Ralph Nelson and Gordon Samstag and won its Sydenham Silver Medal for drawing. In 1946 *Art News* wrote appreciatively if snidely that his “studies at the National Academy have not proved limiting.” Wilson was awarded the James R. Steers Prize in the Department of Art from City College in 1933 and graduated in 1935 with a BS in social science.¹ He studied under George William Eggers, Leon Kroll, and others and would later teach there. During college, he also earned a scholarship in painting to study at the Master Institute of United Arts.

The evolution of Wilson’s art is at first not readily apparent. How did the WPA artist with an advanced figural style that was an amalgam of numerous variants of modernism end up developing into a geometric abstractionist with an unpredictable use of color? Early works provide perhaps a few clues. A pair of self-portraits from the 1930s (Pls. 1 and 5), exercises in identity framing, show his experience both of the old and the new. One is naturalistic, not photographic, and shows him in reverse, the right-handed painter looking at himself in the mirror. His arm is blurred—possibly unfinished, or perhaps shown in motion as he actively applies pigment to the support on his easel, which is not depicted. He wears a tie and suspenders with his sleeves rolled up and his thick hair brushed back: an artist at work who closely resembles his likeness in contemporary photographs (Figs. 1 and 2). In *Cubist Self-Portrait* (Pl. 5), Wilson adopted the style that would impact much of

FIG. 1 Wilson working on the frame of *Muckrakers* (Pl. 12) in his studio at 38 West 22nd Street, 1946. Photo Harry Kronenberg



FIG. 2 Wilson in front of *Polish Boy* at Galerie Neuf, 1946. Photo Alfredo Valente



his early work: the Analytic Cubism pursued by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque between 1909–12. Here, the body is broken down into constituent elements, the palette is dominated by earth tones, and forms seem to arc and swirl around each other. Again, the tools of the artist are missing (although there, at the right, is a waiting canvas), but now, when likeness is less important, elements are treated schematically. Analytic Cubism and its breaking down of form, as seen in drawings of the period (Pls. 6 and 7), would be a key tenet in Wilson's artistic philosophy until his maturity in the early 1970s (Pls. 26 and 27), when his compositions begin to be built up using geometric elements, brushwork, and color in a more synthetic approach, as discussed below.

A push and pull between realism and abstraction is thus present in his early work, and even in works on paper such as a colorful sheet of the 1930s (Pl. 4), a study of a male nude. It is clearly impacted by Cubism but also trades in a more American idiom: Art Deco. To be an art student in New York in the 1930s was surely a bewildering

experience. The deprivations of the Depression made life difficult, but skyscraping Manhattan must have been a dizzying, and thrilling, thing to see. The twenty-something Wilson would have witnessed great wonders rising from the bedrock: the Chrysler Building (1930), the Empire State Building (1931), and, most spectacularly, Rockefeller Center (1930–39), with its forest of skyward-thrusting buildings and public art featuring abstracted figural works. The dynamic bodies by Isamu Noguchi, Lee Lawrie, and Paul Manship that populate the Center, and that signal a modern American interpretation of the past, seem reflected in this drawing, with its monumental pose and stylized hair in parallel rows. Yet it is clear that the more realistic murals of the project made more of an impact, those of Frank Brangwyn and Jose Maria Sert, such that Wilson could produce an absorbing and sympathetic portrait of an old man in graphite (Pl. 10) that seems remarkably grounded in close looking at reality. Similarly heavy features and wide open eyes would recur constantly in Wilson's Social Realist art of the 1930s and 1940s, transformed in a more Cubist mode in a watercolor of desperate bald men pressed together by architectural forms (Pl. 8), or in the soulful face of *The Builder* of ca. 1940 (Pl. 9). By 1936 the fairly straightforward realism of Wilson's *Self-Portrait* and the drawing of the old man (Pls. 1 and 10) gave way to a mischievous modernism in the portrait of Evelyn Perlman, painted four years before he married her (Pl. 2). Here Paul Cézanne, famous for his portraits of his wife, Hortense Fiquet, was added to the mix.

Frontal and prim in a blue blouse with a red bow, hair drawn back in a bob, Evelyn stares off to her left and at first the picture seems direct to a fault. But then one notices the left eye, raised above the right, smaller and less deeply colored. Here the vagaries of modernism creep in: the multiple viewpoints of Cézanne and Picasso, the Surrealist embrace of the odd. The restlessness of Wilson, his dissatisfaction with two dimensions, is presaged in this seemingly sedate portrait of the woman who would be his closest companion for the rest of his life. But look at *The Builder* of 1940 (Pl. 9) or the faces in *Victory* of 1945 (Pl. 13)—eyes do not always match up, faces resist clarity, vision is unsettled—this is a key trope in Wilson's art.

Wilson consistently worked as an art instructor. He co-taught with the sculptor Milton Hebald at the American Artists School on West 14th Street from the summer session of 1938 and was a member of the Cooperative University Studio and instructor at the Queensboro Community Art Center.² The economy caught up to the American Artists School in October 1939, and on the sixth of that month Wilson was informed that his course would be canceled the next week, along with two-thirds of the classes offered. There is no better illustration of the need for the WPA, set up by the Roosevelt administration to employ young and practicing artists.

In April 1939 Wilson had a one-person exhibition at the Muhlenberg Branch of the New York Public Library, on the north side of 23rd Street just west of 7th Avenue. *Paintings by Ben Wilson* was scheduled to run from the 10th to the 30th. There were six works in the show, including *Pogrom* (Fig. 3). Other titles tell similarly gritty and grim stories: *The Hunt, Before the Storm, The Cloud, Fleeing Children*. They reflected the

FIG. 3 *Pogrom*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches. MSU W2012.001.0062

FIG. 4 *Untitled*, c. 1940. Graphite and charcoal on mat board, 12³/₄ x 7¹/₁₆ inches. MSU 2012.001.470

FIG. 5 *Apocalypse*, ca. 1938. Oil on canvas, 23⁵/₈ x 22 inches. MSU 2012.001.121



historical moment—just five months before the beginning of World War II. *Pogrom* was particularly related to the Jewish experience: the systematic violent persecutions endured by Wilson’s and Evelyn’s parents’ generation in Ukraine, Hungary, or Russia.³ In this work there are more of the large-scale Cubist heads, often with mismatched eyes, attached to bodies that are only suggested; meanwhile clubs swing and horsemen direct misery and wails emanate from soon-to-be-silent mouths. Painted in dark tones, Wilson’s work was unsettling and intended as such. His show was censored. Branch Librarian Adele C. Martin attempted to be diplomatic in a letter to the photographer Harry Kronenberg, who was representing Wilson:

I am sure that you will understand that we must reserve the right to remove any painting which may seem objectionable. I believe I mentioned this to you when we discussed the exhibit at first. Since you think Mr. Wilson may be offended by the removal of one picture, it seems to me that it would be best to discontinue his exhibit. His paintings would show to better advantage in a brighter room than we have to offer here.

Yet his dark pictures, in the spirit of Francisco Goya’s *Black Paintings* of ca. 1819–23 (Prado, Madrid), that Spanish Romantic artist’s dystopian and symbolic responses to the



Peninsular War, do not need brighter illumination—they need only to be seen and their truths revealed. An anonymous response was published in *This Week* on August 18:

We discovered Ben Wilson's exhibit hidden high up in the Muhlenberg Library . . . We still do not know why Mr. Wilson tried to keep it a secret. His expressive color and sensitive design together with his awareness of present day events, as expressed in his paintings are a very stimulating combination. The censors snooped their way into the show and had removed as "objectionable" for a public library exhibit, his picture called "Before the Storm," which satirically shows the role of the dictators and Chamberlain. It is a very satisfying show and we recommend it to all the students.

But the following day all the pictures were removed.

Such sharply political work is also found in caricatural drawings of the period, such as one of around 1940 (Fig. 4) with a diminutive Hitler clinging to the back of a bulbous Mussolini, who sits on the shoulders of an image of an observant Jew wearing a hat and spectacles, who then stands on a skeleton—a totem pole of fascist ascendance. In *Apocalypse* of around 1938 (Fig. 5), Wilson seems to be amalgamating the end of days imagery of Wassily Kandinsky with the broad forms of Marc Chagall to show flying

FIG. 6 Ben Wilson outside A.C.A. Gallery, 63 East 57th Street, 1946. Photo Harry Kronenberg

soldiers and scenes of violence and chaos. This was a deeply political artist. In the Cubist drawing *Arrest of the Picket* (Pl. 3), two hulking police officers bodily remove a slender protester. At the top left, Wilson sketched the same composition overlaid with zigzagging lines that reveal the geometric armature of the image—eventually such abstract forms would replace the figural work in his paintings.

Times were difficult all around, and Wilson tried to be nimble in finding meaningful work and showing his pictures. By 1941 he was advertising private art classes in painting and sculpture at his studio at 38 West 22nd Street, where he also held group exhibitions. He was a founding member of the Bombshell Artists Group, who held their first show in March 1942 at the Master Institute of United Arts, founded by Russian artists and intellectuals Nicholas and Helena Roerich on Riverside Drive and 103rd Street where Wilson had previously taken classes. The exhibition was a response to the dealer Samuel M. Kootz's letter in the *New York Times* complaining that contemporary artists lack originality and "rigor mortis has set in and they don't know it."⁴ In their manifesto the fifty-five Bombshell artists wrote: "This is a fight against the smugness of established and smoldering taste. It loosens the grip of cultivated, but stagnant, appreciation. The Bombshell invites the work of established men which is ordinarily not shown because, spiced a bit differently, it affords prepared palates and lazy digestion." Less than three months after America's entry into the war, this timely exhibit was largely overlooked, although Edward Alden Jewell in the *Times* called it "a show that is spirited and earnest and full of eager sincerity" and found Wilson's *Flight* to be "vigorously designed."⁵ There was a second Bombshell show in January of the next year at the American British Art Center: these independent art groups spawned by the collaborative activity of the WPA and in response to the war are deserving of deeper scholarly exploration, and began an impulse to show with like-minded artists that Wilson would pursue the whole of his career.

Wilson also had a relationship with the American Contemporary Art (A.C.A.) Gallery, established in 1932 on West 8th Street and still going strong today (Fig. 6). He sent *Drummer Boy*⁶ to its *Artists in War Production* show (ca. 1943), which provided a venue for forty artists who were engaged in war industries and who had little chance to show their works. During the war Wilson worked as a draftsman for Eugene Printing Company in the Bronx, International Telephone and Radio Corporation, and Birnbach Radio Company, affiliated with the defense industry. He painted on Sundays. *The Wasteland* of 1942 (Pl. 11) and *Muckrakers* of 1944 (Pl. 12) are good examples of his style in this period. Metallic blue in overall tone, they are actively painted scenes of figures clumped together in calculatedly minimal landscapes. *Art News* called *The Wasteland* "among the most moving protests which this reviewer has seen," noting the artist's "vehement social protest" and comparing his work to that of the Boston Social Realist Jack Levine (1915–2010).⁷ Retrospectively, in an interview in 1991, Wilson spoke of this era:

My figurative days are long gone. They were necessary then both for the project and me. I painted the agony and anger of the times. Not very pretty. I recorded what was going on both in this country and overseas. The degradation that was Europe, the hopelessness that was America. But I couldn't stay in that vein. It was too circumscribed. I needed to fill spaces with shapes, not people. People are limiting, shapes are not.⁸



New York art critic Alfredo Valente wrote that the work was “exceptional in its profound and revealing understanding of the great truth of our time. Here the contradictions, the distortions, the misery, the incomplete victory, the gropings of our epoch are strongly mirrored. . . . *Muckrakers* is especially forceful. It is the stuff and guts of the troubled era, painted with a satirical power that reveals the inherent weakness of man whose own bestiality defeats him.”⁹ There is a fine photo of Wilson working on *Muckrakers’* frame in his Chelsea studio (Fig. 1). The picture was inspired by his reading *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*. The story of that dirt-digging reporter who made his career in uncovering government corruption clearly touched a chord in the young, politicized artist, though the painting is less celebratory of the press.¹⁰

In 1946 Wilson had a well-reviewed solo exhibition at the Galerie Neuf, including the monumental *Victory* (Pl. 13), a response to the celebration on August 14, 1945, in Times Square of the victory over Japan. More colorful and grand in scale than previous works, it conveys a conflicted message. There is victory, but there is also the sober realization of its price. The Picassoid figures, heavily outlined in black as if designs for stained glass, are crushed together in an arid landscape. An inverted trumpeter blows his instrument with all his might, while a woman who peers down into the horn grasps an emaciated, bound prisoner. At the right a woman in red raises her right hand like Christ in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel *Last Judgment*, as if to swat the sinners down to hell, and next to her another woman contemplates a bud, a small sign of life in a destitute milieu.

At this time Wilson was working at the Douglaston Art League Studio¹¹ and also the City College Adult Education Program, giving classes on painting from nature at the American Museum of Natural History, on pencil sketching at the High Bridge Library in the Bronx, and on oil painting at the Tremont Library in the Bronx. It is unlikely that he was promulgating the dour outlook of his own oils. Martin Silver, in a review picked up by the national Jewish journals, called him a “Jeremiah in Paint.” Journalist Helen Carlson wrote, “Can such pictures serve any purpose other than as a release for the artist’s overwrought emotions, one wonders? The urge to run away from Wilson’s paintings is overpowering, yet one never questions his sincerity in having painted them.” The theme of such works at Wilson’s Artists’ Gallery show in the spring of 1949 was humankind’s search for security, one far removed from the subject of triumphalist progress in Art Deco public art. *The New York Herald Tribune* described his pictures as “pungent and sensitive.”¹² But by this time Wilson was thirty-five, and his ideas were changing. This show featured what may be the first audio guide in the history of art exhibitions. There was a phonograph player in the gallery so that visitors could hear him describe three works on view, “not to startle or challenge the audience, but rather to create closer understanding,” according to the artist. *The Builder* (Pl. 9), Wilson said on the disc,

asks a question. Man the builder is also man the destroyer. Which of his opposing forces will predominate? He is shown afloat . . . falling from his hands are his constructions. On his right is a blindfolded figure, a symbol of lack of direction—lack of vision. In reverse, reflected in the water, is the top of a death’s head peering upward over the edge.

Wilson also was in the gallery on Wednesday evenings to speak to visitors, revealing an early commitment to teaching and patient explication of his art in order to disseminate his ideas. This he would consistently pursue in his exhibition choices once he moved to New Jersey, in forming relationships with educational institutions, libraries, and Jewish community groups, and in trying to build an artistic culture in the state. The Wilson Foundation's posthumous gift of his art and materials to Montclair State continued this impulse to share his art and connect it to the world.

In the 1950s Wilson's life and art changed. In 1942 Evelyn gave birth to their only child, Joanne, and in 1948 she got a job with Fabergé Perfumes, which turned into a career. From 1950 Wilson had a few solo shows at the Harry Salpeter Gallery in West Midtown, and in 1951 the family moved across the George Washington Bridge to Ridgefield, New Jersey. In 1953–54 they relocated to Paris for Evelyn's work, arriving at Le Havre on March 12, 1953, and Wilson took classes there at the Académie Julian and kept a studio in Montparnasse. His letters from France are lively and show that while their rented flats and studio may have had problems with heating and plumbing, the artistic environs of Paris and also Spain made a great impact, although he found postwar painting in the city underwhelming.¹³ *Normandy Beach* (Pl. 15) of this period bears the new palette of iridescent greens, blues, and oranges also seen in *Lazarus* of 1950 (Pl. 14), adding a sense of surrealist fantasy in mysterious forms and clotted paint.

How does an artist come to embrace pure abstraction? Wilson was born within a decade of most of the Abstract Expressionists, but he came to non-figuration in a very different way. Although Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and others were also a part of the Federal Art Project division of the WPA, he did not have direct contact with them. But with the exception of some works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Wilson's art is not expressive abstraction—it is not existentialist nor is it dependent on emotional content. And he was openly scornful of the culture that promoted these artists. In a letter of 1984 Wilson explained his position in relation to that era:

. . . Peggy Guggenheim in her gallery Art of this Century was the first to show Pollock and others of the so-called New York School. Kootz picked up his own stable. These two were the first of a breed of impresarios who came from a money & business background. The more recent of like stripe—Castelli. They were arrogant manipulators who pursued their own power-driven ends. They neither understood nor cared about art or the artist.¹⁴

Wilson removed himself from this milieu, showing with smaller galleries or in artist-run collectives. He ultimately sought retreat in the leafy byways of New Jersey and developed a deep mistrust of the commercial aspect of the art world and its effect on artists: "When the commerce of the world you live in becomes the dominant element you get the most impersonal relationship between the artist and his work. In fact, the artist might just as well not be there . . . [the artist should be] concerned with himself, his comprehension of order, his feeling of things and how to express that. Now that's the



FIG. 7 Ben Wilson, 1969

most subtle thing, and the hardest thing to sell.”¹⁵ Yet Abstract Expressionism had an impact on his career. A photo of 1969 shows him adopting a canonical, serious “Ab Ex” pose, complete with pipe and standing in front of one of his large-scale gestural paintings (Fig. 7). Pollock and Franz Kline and de Kooning had made it possible for postwar painters to pursue abstraction as a personal style, and Wilson was obviously keen on their art. He titled a class in 1963 “Abstract Expressionism: The Calligraphy of the Unconscious/The Artist as Seismograph,” but in his own work he continued in a more rigorous way the coloristic abstraction of Kandinsky and the geometric approach of Mondrian, combined with the free brushwork of the Action-Type Painters. This synthesis is what makes his work truly original.

At the same time, one particular incident had a great effect on him. In 1956, two years after returning from France, Wilson fractured his back when he fell while uprooting a tree.¹⁶ He was in intense pain and could not paint, but he began to “draw ferociously,” in Evelyn’s phrase.¹⁷ The result was a shift to abstraction, and works like the grand drawing *Totentanz* of around 1958–60 (Pl. 19) signal Wilson’s concerns after this trauma. He used a fierce crosshatching technique seen in other contemporary drawings (Pl. 18), including the by comparison delicate *Walking Men* (Pl. 20), to evoke fetal figures enmeshed in a chaotic skein of black lines, rendered with graphite and barely any trace of color. Wilson was a great lover of music: the title refers to a Franz Liszt composition from the 1850s and means “Dance of the Dead.” Liszt was himself inspired by Francesco Traini’s or Buonamico Buffalmacco’s macabre frescoes in the Campo Santo in Pisa that were possibly responses to the Black Death in the 1340s. Wilson’s creepy forms share a similarly gruesome energy. It is physical work, on a large scale, and he translated this into a strong series of pictures in the early 1960s that seem almost epic in their communication of human power and psychology, such as *Anima and Shadow* (Pl. 17). As the critic, teacher, and artist Michael Lenson wrote at the time:

A new aspect of Ben Wilson’s painting, the reducing of his formerly richly colored and encrusted surfaces to black and white, commands attention. Curiously, this lends new force to such conceptions as . . . “Totentanze” [sic]. . . . Though spiked and globular forms churn like medieval wagons through these, no hand wields them and the violence is only massively implied.¹⁸

These were Wilson’s first large-scale works featuring gestural abstraction and represent an expansion from smaller and more controlled works such as *Miracle Kingdom* (Pl. 16).

In this vein the impressive *Prometheus* (Pl. 21) seems to show a frontal hulking male form, hunched over, burdened, and limbs akimbo, painted with emphatic black strokes and various shades of green. Its seeming pendant *Backward Glance* (Pl. 23), ups the ante in terms of color, with blue added to the mix, and even heavier and more thickly painted black outlines of forms that hint at reality. Most resplendent in this period is *Queen of Hearts* (Pl. 22), in which forms that resemble de Kooning’s abstract figuration of the 1950s, with their cylindrical heads and slits for eyes outlined in black in the left center, sit hard by

triangles that lie on the surface plane and do, indeed, resemble the schematic collapse and flattening of geometric form, costume, and space in face cards. Once Wilson embraced abstraction the titles of his works became more suggestive than literal, and he sometimes added them after pictures were completed. Ultimately this period is about a new conceptualization of how to render form, freed from the need to show reality.

In 1965 Wilson won the Ford Foundation Grant to be an artist-in-residence at the Everhart Museum in Nay Aug Park in Scranton, Pennsylvania, from July 18 to August 18. This enabled him to produce his most ambitious works to this point. When Wilson and his family lived in Paris he travelled at least twice to Spain and, perhaps inspired by Ernest Hemingway's compelling writings on the subject, became a fan of bullfighting. His largest painting in this exhibition, an oil on canvas titled *Corrida* (Pl. 24) of 1965–66, seems to reflect that passion. He wrote to his friend Leo Packer on June 18, 1953 from Paris:

The entrance to Spain had an element of shock, for if France is essentially still in the 19th century, Spain in many ways and places is still Stone Age.

We may except the capital like Madrid, the cities like Barcelona, which are prettied up as tourist bait. Much of Spain looks starved to the bare bone, ossified in misery, and the Spaniards are a warm, simple and friendly people, compared with the subtlety and sophistication of the French. They are dominantly male, the French are overrefined, and trail behind them the arts of the kitchen and the boudoir, witness, wine perfume and bidets.

We saw two *coredos* [sic], one, as you surmised was composed of novilleros, a farce in which the humans suffered shamefully by comparison with the performance of the bulls.

But the second was a top rate affair, which our guide and friend a former professional (well known) torero, claimed to be an unusually good fight. The bulls were dispatched with skill and artistry with the exception of some cruel business by the picadors, that had the crowd on its feet shouting "murderers."

All in all I acquired a taste for things I would formerly have dismissed as nonsense.¹⁹

Evelyn recalled of that time: "I almost lost him to Spain. . . . He fell in love with Mallorca, the bull fights, the Flamenco dancers, and wanted to buy a windmill there for five thousand dollars. I didn't want to be his Sancho Panza so I made him come home."²⁰ In a subsequent letter to Packer, he wrote:

So about the bullfight again—it is not enough to see this as a spectacle or a contest between two species of animal. It has not only a theme of art—the pictorial, the dance, the music. It has a religious note—primitive man against all the dangers of nature, and conquest thru knowledge and skill, but it is wrapped in mysticism, the acceptance of death as inevitable, and the deep feeling of both man's heroic potential and his destructibility. The Spanish have retained an overwhelming sense of tragedy and the gaiety of their dance & song is on the surface & the sorrow and desperation lies immediately beneath.²¹



FIG. 8 Evelyn, Ben, and Joanne Wilson, 1960s

Corrida retained a special importance for the artist—it hung in his studio in Blairstown until his death.

Corrida is a fine and powerful work, roughly painted on an often visible lightly primed white canvas. Along with *Tic-Tac-Toe* of 1968 (Pl. 25), *Fall of Ptolemy* of 1971 (Pl. 26), and *The Past Disassembled* of 1973 (Pl. 27), it shows his confidence and brio in working on a large scale, in many different permutations of color and shape. With the exception of *Tic-Tac-Toe*, these works have a central conglomeration of forms that hover against a modulated background: light in *Fall of Ptolemy* and *The Past Disassembled* and darker toned in *Corrida*. They presage the formal concerns of the rest of his career, and in them he developed a series of shapes and motifs: T-square elements, empty rectangular frames, round shapes with striations, and a clear progression of form and color built up from the background/lower levels of glazes and ending with interlocking elements on the surface, like the lattice of green lines in various combinations that sits atop the picture plane in *Fall of Ptolemy*. In this picture there are also hot red openwork rectangles that cross thick yellow and blue forms edged in brown that themselves appear to lie on top of anchoring brown struts that go off the edge on three sides. Despite Wilson's layering process, he cleverly managed to avoid creating any depth. It is instead turned inside out, with roughly calligraphic squiggles of white and pinkish paint covering much of the surface of *Fall of Ptolemy*, but for the red and green topmost lines. As Wilson recalled,

FIG. 9 Ben and Evelyn Wilson working at Blirstown, 1970s



As to method of work generally, I proceed with the elements in their simplest form, building the line into pattern and volume, organizing and manipulating them intuitively until the moment of recognition. This is characterized by a sense of truth or righteousness in the structure of the picture, which corresponds to a structural internal equivalent.²²

“The moment of recognition” is a marvelous phrase. This level of complexity without illusionistic depth is something often cited in Pollock’s mature drip and pour technique, where skeins of color lie all over the surface, but in a work like *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*²³ it is impossible to see discrete levels of paint on Pollock’s surface—all the colors overlap each other. Wilson worked in a more sequential manner, but one that allowed him, still, a considerable amount of freedom in his execution.

The openwork forms found in *Fall of Ptolemy* and the battleship gray-dominated *The Past Disassembled* signal new concerns when viewed beside the heavier and more compressed elements in *Corrida* and *Tic-Tac-Toe*, whose bold black lines resemble the paintings of Abstract Expressionists Robert Motherwell or Kline, and, in *Tic-Tac-Toe*, convey a sense of belonging to a larger, continuous, composition. Charles Giuliano, director of the Spectrum Gallery at 54 West 57th Street where Wilson had a solo show in May and June of 1966, described these works as “Big Brush symbolism,” continuing that

FIG. 10 *Machine Parts*, 1973.
Oil on Masonite, 48 x 54½
inches. MSU 2012.001.244



there was “no masking tape or stencil here . . . not a return but rather a vigorous continuation of the Action Spirit. Violently brushed symbols vibrate on his large surfaces.”²⁴ Subsequent pictures of the 1970s featured heightened color schemes, such as in complementary orange and blue of *Untitled* of 1974 (Pl. 29) and purple and lemon yellow against a vivid green background in *Compression* of 1979 (Pl. 30). Both works feature hatching in painted lines that fill largely triangular forms, a new element in his production introduced in works like *Untitled* of around 1973 (Pl. 28), a refined piece of design that bears a building up of forms towards the top of the panel, with one rounded peak at the right and one spherical apex at the left. As with so many of these works, they demand that they be considered in two ways: figuratively, as it is easy to try to make out bodies as he transitioned into pure abstraction, and also abstractly, as if an artist’s wooden lay figure with its tubular limbs and ball-like joints has been exploded into impossible postures and all link to figuration denied. The bodily disharmony is contrasted here by the vaguely architectural forms resembling the colonnade and pediment of a Greek temple at left, and at the bottom and on the top right in striations like flights of stairs. Color seems to respect borders but does not fill the whole of the demarcated spaces. Yellows and blacks shimmer as if considering freeing themselves from the surrounding armature. This black, gold, and white color scheme was also used in *Machine Parts* (Fig. 10), combined with an increased sense of movement evident in Wilson’s work of the 1970s. *Machine*

Parts can be seen as gears awhirl in some undefined space, as if Piet Mondrian's tight and restricted geometric grids, with their similarly thick and controlling black lines, went amok across the surface. Unlike in *Untitled* (Pl. 28), however, there is little sense of orientation or ground. The panel seems to twirl about as its shapes do, and in fact Wilson used to work on his paintings turned in up to four directions, often settling on the proper orientation at the end, when he was satisfied with the work.

It is important to bear in mind that all this time Wilson was teaching, in various capacities, in New Jersey and New York. Space in this catalogue does not permit a full exploration of this essential aspect of his artistic life, but he clearly thought deeply about how to teach students to paint abstraction, and this in turn impacted his own art and approach. Here is a sample lesson plan from a class in Ridgefield on October 16, 1969:

1. Paint 7 to 36 black shapes at random
2. Construct a related series of lines & points
3. Superimpose a disjunctive meander
4. Introduce a number of amorphous spheres at the disjunctions of the meander

This is how he thought. And he put this formal approach into his own practice, a kind of personal iteration of Hans Hofmann's famed school of abstract art that had such a great impact on the Abstract Expressionists of Wilson's generation.²⁵ At the same time he was looking at Abraham Walkowitz's writings on teaching art—he owned a signed copy of that Russian-born American modernist's *A Demonstration of Objective, Abstract, and Non-Objective Art* (1945). Wilson's mature art can be thought of as a combination of baking and cooking: he proceeded from a recipe for approaching a picture with the rigor of baking and its basis in chemistry, but to that he added the improvisational feel of cooking. His art is never fully prescriptive—in the most successful work the freedom of his thought is beautifully evident.

In the most elegant phase of his career, and in smaller scale and sensitively colored pictures such as *Byzantium Revisited* (Pl. 32) and *Mycenae* (Pl. 33), Wilson's painting practice reflected his obsession with drawing, a compulsion borne out in hundreds of works that he made in spiral bound books (Pls. 34 and 35). They also seem a response to the light, air, and colors that he began to experience in 1984 when he started wintering in Florida. As he noted in an interview at the time, "The paintings I produce in Sarasota are happier. It's the light. The light, the water, the sand have all added something new. My color is brighter—more reds and yellows—and the textures are richer."²⁶ Cross-hatched and vibrational, the drawings of this period were made with markers, and these spare compositions led to a dalliance with pictorial poetry in a series of "Haikus" in 1985–87 (Pls. 36 and 37). These are fully abstract, poetic in name, but absent of words. *Untitled* of ca. 1985 (Pl. 31) has no text but bears a mysterious image of a face, peering out from a now-familiar Wilsonian gridded armature. It is a face from his Social Realist past, suggestively looking into the abstract present, trapped but searching. In works like

FIG. 11 Ben Wilson painting, 1980s



the assured and deftly colored *Untitled* of 1985 (Pl. 38) and *The Studio* (Pl. 39), two of his most striking compositions, the refined Wilson fully emerges in tight and gracefully interlocking forms.

The final phase of Wilson's art showed an increasing freedom in the use of abstract elements. The elegant, settled armatures of the art of the 1980s gave way, in the 1990s, to big, bold, and boisterous compositions with an unmoored sense of color (Pls. 40–43, 46). Painting in his studio overlooking the Poconos on Mount Hermon Road in Blairstown, New Jersey, or in the brilliant Florida sunshine of Sarasota, Wilson worked with increasingly complicated color planes and gnashing geometric forms. The Social Realism of his courageous, firebrand youth seems thematically very far removed from these late works. Yet this must be understood in the context of a retargeting of his energies, away from protest art and amalgamations of European modernism into a commitment in his maturity to teaching the freedom he found in abstraction, and to exhibiting with groups that sought to promulgate the arts across a broad range of society.²⁷ Wilson wrote a letter in 1963 thanking William W. Skinner for sponsoring the \$50 prize he won in the New Jersey State Exhibition, and for:

. . . your recognition of the need of emphasizing in all manners possible stimulation and encouragement to the life of the arts in contemporary society.

These are values which today receive much lip service but very little of the constructive and concrete. As a member of a Bergen artists group [Modern Artists Guild] which is trying to interest the public in this part of Jersey in a museum such as the Montclair Museum, the degree of public apathy is very apparent to us. Our task would be much easier were there a number of people of your conviction in our community.²⁸

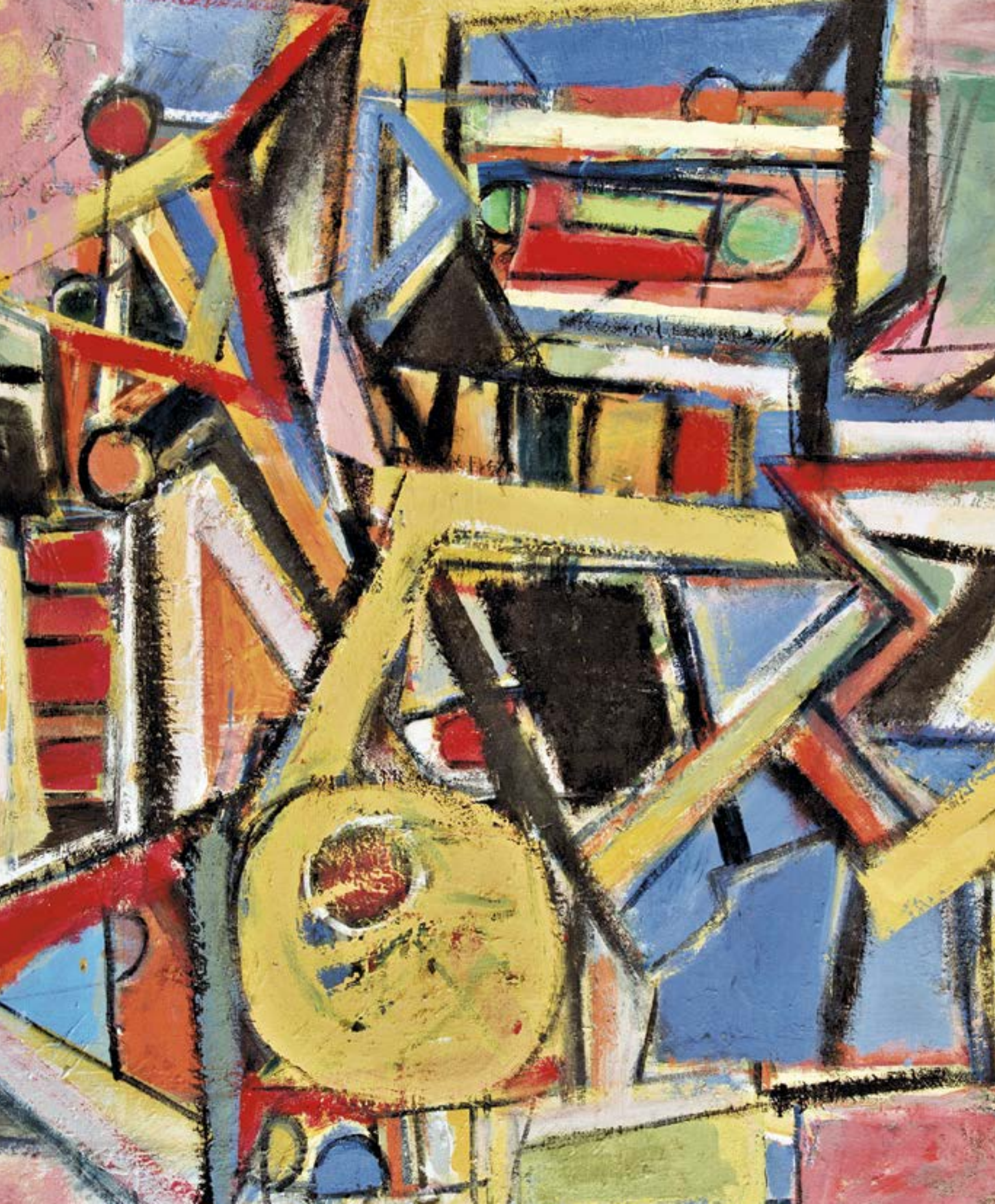
This is a ripe area for future study of the artist and his milieu.

In his final years Wilson remained a fine tactician with the color blue, as he had been in his youth (Pls. 11 and 12). Yet the alluring deep blues in works of around 1990 (Pls. 40 and 42) and lack of a clear orientation of the compositions are contrasted by the popping yellows and reds in *Bypass* (Pl. 43) and *In Plane Sight* (Pl. 46). The latter, from 2000, the year before the artist's death, seems a compendium of all his ideas about abstraction. Planes predominate while space is denied. Thinly painted areas abut densely worked realms of emerald, and black outlined forms haphazardly hover on the surface. It is all painterly delight. There is something for everyone, akin to the painter's own "moment of recognition." You just have to look to see his world. That is the innate generosity in the art of Ben Wilson.

Notes

The author would like to thank Joanne Wilson Jaffe for her generous assistance in the preparation of this exhibition and catalogue, Debra Pesci for steering me towards this project, Teresa Lapid Rodriguez, Director and Curator of the George Segal Gallery/University Art Galleries, for her unflagging support, and Andrea Marshall, Anthony Rodriguez, and the rest of the Gallery team for their help.

1. *New York Times*, June 30, 1933, p. 14.
2. Wilson taught Elaine de Kooning watercolor painting at the American Artists School. See Eleanor Munro, *Originals: Women Artists*, 1979, p. 252.
3. For a fuller discussion of Jewishness in Wilson's art, see Richard McBee, "Ben Wilson: The Roots of Abstraction," May 28, 2008: <http://richardmcbee.com/writings/contemporary-jewish-art/item/ben-wilson>
4. Quoted in *The New York Post*, March 2, 1942.
5. *The New York Times*, March 4 and 22, 1942.
6. 1943, Collection of Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion Museum.
7. 1946 review in written transcript, "Ben's Poetry" file, Montclair State University Permanent Collection, gift of the Ben and Evelyn Wilson Foundation.
8. Quoted in Pat Friedberg, "Neglected Treasures: The Art of the WPA," *Sarasota Arts Review*, January/February 1991.
9. Alfredo Valente, "Artist Ben Wilson," *Promenade*, November 1946, see also Joan Altabe, "Depression Artist Surveys the '30s," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, March 3, 1991, pp. 1, 3.
10. "Laurel Hill Artist is Acclaimed after One-Man Painting Exhibit," *Long Island Star-Journal*, November 8, 1946.
11. Now the National Art League, <http://www.nationalartleague.org>
12. *The New York Herald Tribune*, March 22, 1949.
13. Montclair State University Collections.
14. Letter to "C&C," dated July 2, 1984, Montclair State University.
15. Cassette tape labeled April 12, 1972, Montclair State University.
16. In July 1962 he was X-rayed after exacerbating the old injury while playing basketball at a camp where he was working, and it was revealed that he had a compression of the first lumbar vertebra.
17. Medical folder, dated 1962, Montclair State University.
18. Michael Lenson, "The Realm of Art," *Newark Sunday News*, March 26, 1961.
19. Ben Wilson, 12 Passage Doisy, Paris, 17 ARR, France, to Leo Packer, 1530 Sheridan Avenue, Bronx 57, N.Y., June 18, 1953, Montclair State University.
20. *Attitudes Magazine*, "The Art of Ben and Evelyn Wilson," May 1993.
21. To Leo Packer, 1530 Sheridan Avenue, Bronx 57, N.Y., dated July 20, 1953, Montclair State University.
22. Quoted in *Ben Wilson: The Margin as Center*, with an essay by Jack Spector, William Paterson University, 2008, inside front cover.
23. 1950, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.
24. Quoted in *New Jersey Music and Arts*, Volume 21, No. 10, June 1966.
25. See the thorough bibliography in the artist's trust's official website: <http://www.hanshofmann.org/selected-monographs/>
26. *Attitudes Magazine*, "The Art of Ben and Evelyn Wilson."
27. In particular he sought to expand the understanding of the arts in New Jersey with the Association of Artists of New Jersey, and also the Modern Artists Guild, founded in 1960 with Evelyn, Marius Sznajderman, and Sam Weinik, and he was active through the mid-1980s in the greater New York region with the Vectors Group (from 1959) and the Spiral Group.
28. Wilson to Skinner, 54 Melrose Place, Montclair, NJ, November 17, 1963, Montclair State University. He won it for *Galatea '63*, at the Thirty-Second Annual New Jersey State Exhibition, Montclair Art Museum, November 3–December 8, 1963.



PLATES

All works by Ben Wilson were generously donated by the Ben and Evelyn Wilson Foundation to the Montclair State University Permanent Collection unless otherwise noted.

1

Self-Portrait, 1935
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches
MSU 2012.001.150

2

Portrait of Evelyn, the Artist's Wife, 1936
Oil on canvas, 19⁷/₈ x 16 inches
MSU 2012.001.103







3
Arrest of the Picket, 1930s
Graphite on paper, 9 x 12 inches
MSU 2012.001.572

4
Untitled, 1930s
Watercolor on paper, 17³/₄ x 11³/₄ inches
MSU 2012.001.320

5
Cubist Self-Portrait, 1930s
Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 inches
MSU 2012.001.141







6
Untitled, 1930s
Charcoal on paper, 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.250



7
Untitled, 1930s
Graphite on paper, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.452



8
Untitled, 1930s
Pen and paint on paper, 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.290



The Builder, ca. 1940
Oil on canvas, 24½ x 16⅞ inches
MSU 2012.001.118





10

Untitled, 1930s

Graphite on paper, 8¹³/₁₆ x 5⁹/₁₆ inches

MSU 2012.001.609

11

The Wasteland, 1942

Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches

Courtesy of Hebrew Union College—Jewish
Institute of Religion Museum

12

Muckrakers, 1944

Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 inches

Courtesy of Hebrew Union College—Jewish
Institute of Religion Museum





13

Victory, 1945, with detail, opposite
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches
MSU 2012.001.192





14

Lazarus, 1950

Oil on Masonite, 20⁵/₈ x 14¹/₄ inches

MSU 2012.001.119

15

Normandy Beach, ca. 1954

Oil on canvas, 14³/₈ x 23¹/₂ inches

MSU 2012.001.109



16

Miracle Kingdom, 1950s
Oil on canvas, 46 x 37 inches
MSU 2012.001.139

17

Anima and Shadow, 1958
Oil on Masonite, 72 x 48 inches
MSU 2012.001.181





18

Untitled, ca. 1958–60

Charcoal on mat board, 14⁷/₈ x 13¹⁵/₁₆ inches

MSU 2012.001.276

19

Totentanz, ca. 1958–60

Graphite and gouache on panel, 48 x 36 inches

MSU 2012.001.159





20

Walking Men, 1958–60

Mixed media, 18³/₄ x 24³/₄ inches

MSU 2012.001.104

21

Prometheus, 1960

Oil on Masonite, 60 x 48 inches

MSU 2012.001.089





22

Queen of Hearts, 1960
Oil on Masonite, 60 x 48³/₈ inches
MSU 2012.001.067



23

Backward Glance, 1962

Oil on Masonite, 60 x 48 inches

MSU 2012.001.149





24

Corrida, 1965–66

Oil on canvas, 47 x 88 inches

MSU 2012.001.268

25

Tic-Tac-Toe, 1968

Oil on Masonite, 48 x 72 inches

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26

Fall of Ptolemy, 1971

Oil on canvas, 51 x 72 inches

MSU 2012.001.180

27

The Past Disassembled, 1973

Oil on luan panel, 48 x 60 inches

MSU 2012.001.184



28

Untitled, ca. 1973

Oil on Masonite, 48 x 35³/₄ inches

MSU 2012.001.152





29

Untitled, 1974

Oil on Masonite, 42 x 48 inches

MSU 2012.001.164

30

Compression, 1979

Oil on Masonite, 42 x 48 inches

MSU 2011.001.003





31

Untitled, ca. 1985

Oil on Masonite, 23³/₄ x 32 inches

MSU W2012.001.0084

32

Byzantium Revisited, ca. 1984
Oil on panel, 23⁵/₁₆ x 29¹/₄ inches
MSU 2012.001.129



33

Mycenae, 1985

Oil on Masonite, 27 x 36 inches

MSU 2012.001.230



34

Untitled, ca. 1985

Marker on paper, 10⁷/₈ x 13³/₄ inches

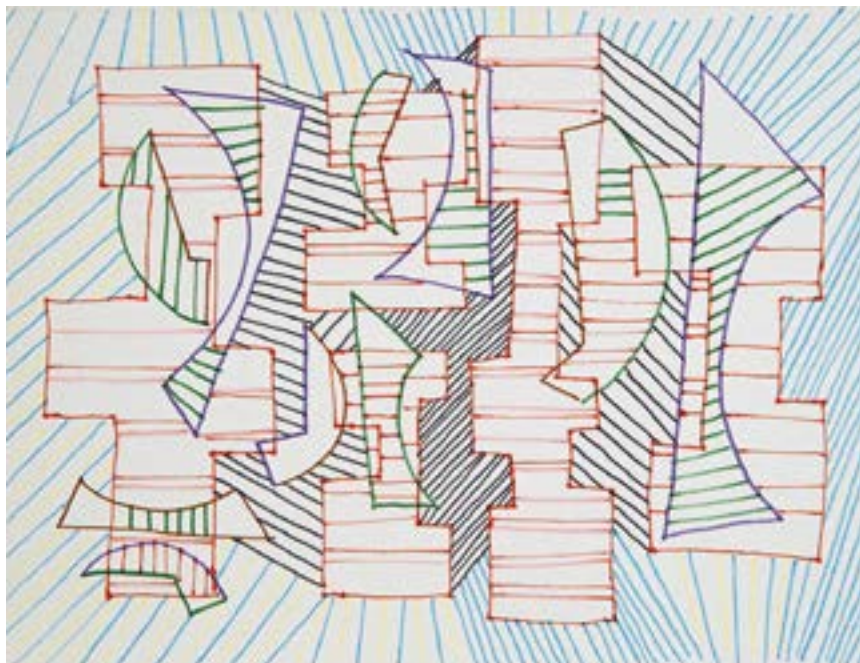
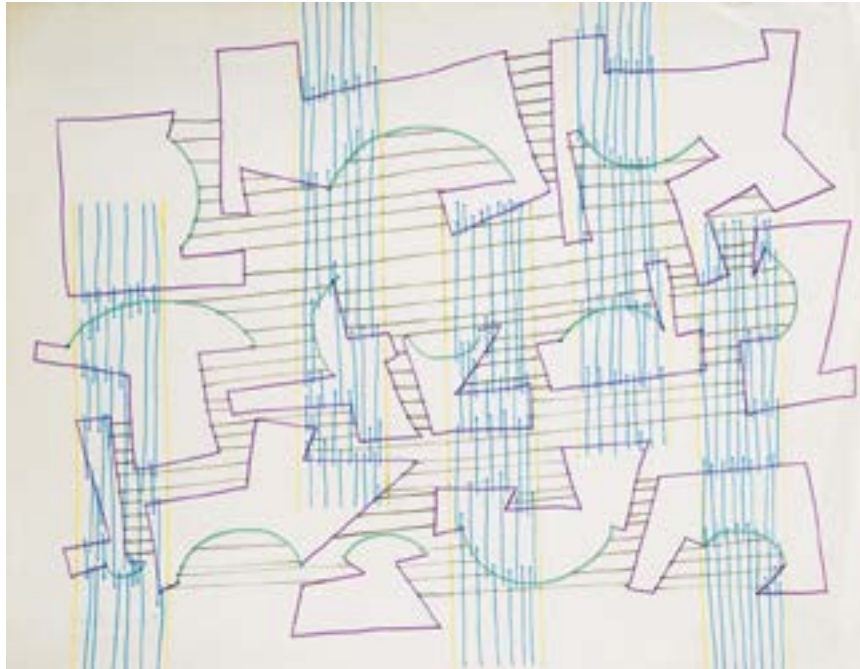
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35

Untitled, ca. 1985

Marker on matboard, 9 x 11³/₄ inches

MSU 2012.001.389



36

Haiku, 1985–87

Paint and marker on composition board, 9⁷/₈ x 32 inches

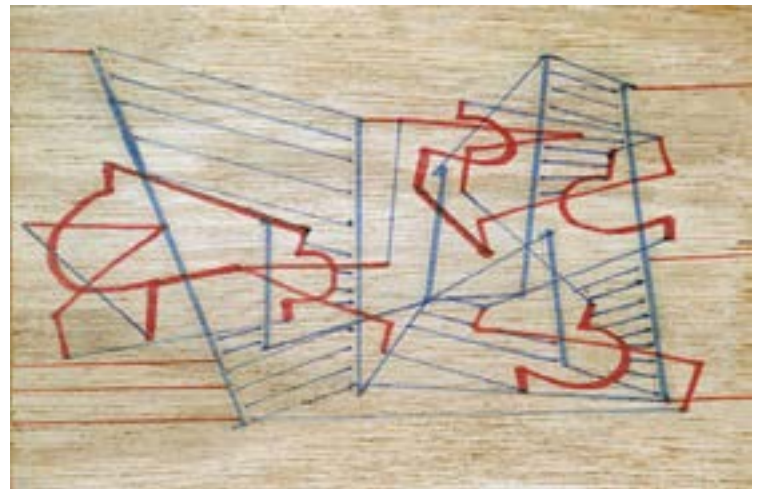
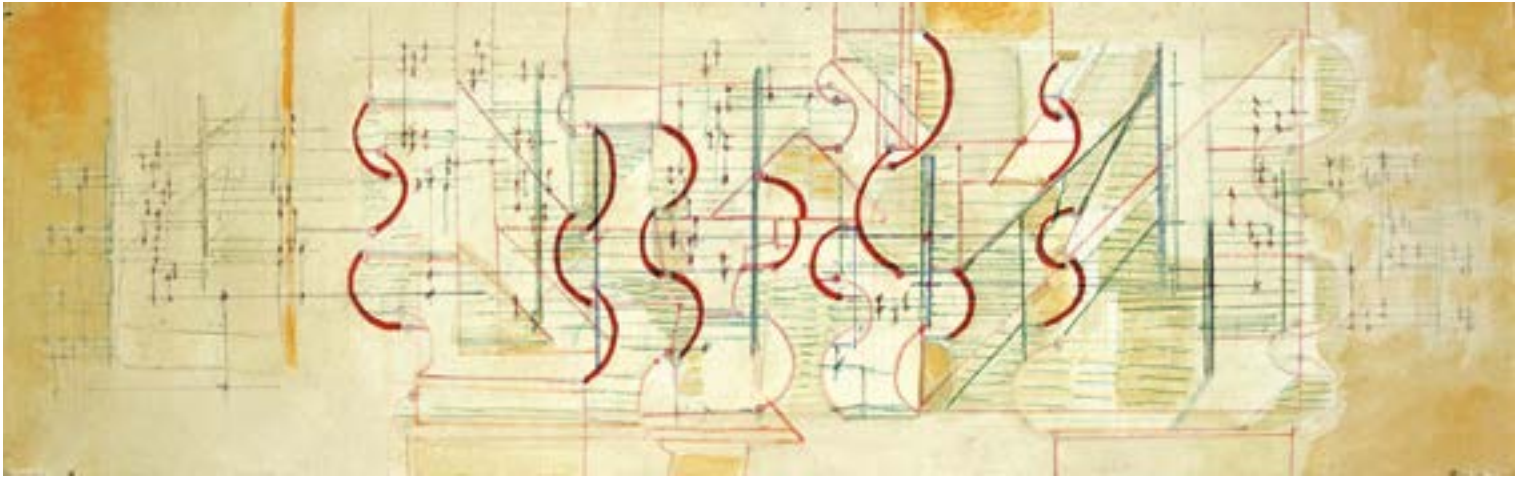
MSU 2012.001.105

37

Haiku, 1985–87

Marker on wooden panel, 9 x 13³/₄ inches

MSU 2012.001.216



38

Untitled, 1985

Oil on Masonite, 42 x 48 inches

MSU 2012.001.307





39

The Studio, 1985–86
Oil on Masonite, 24 x 28 inches
MSU 2012.001.143

40

Untitled, 1990

Oil on Masonite, 48 x 43³/₈ inches

MSU 2012.001.069



41

Emerging, 1990

Oil on Masonite, 48 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 42 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches

MSU 2012.001.062



42

Untitled, ca. 1990

Oil on Masonite, 44 x 48 inches

Courtesy of the Kepner Family

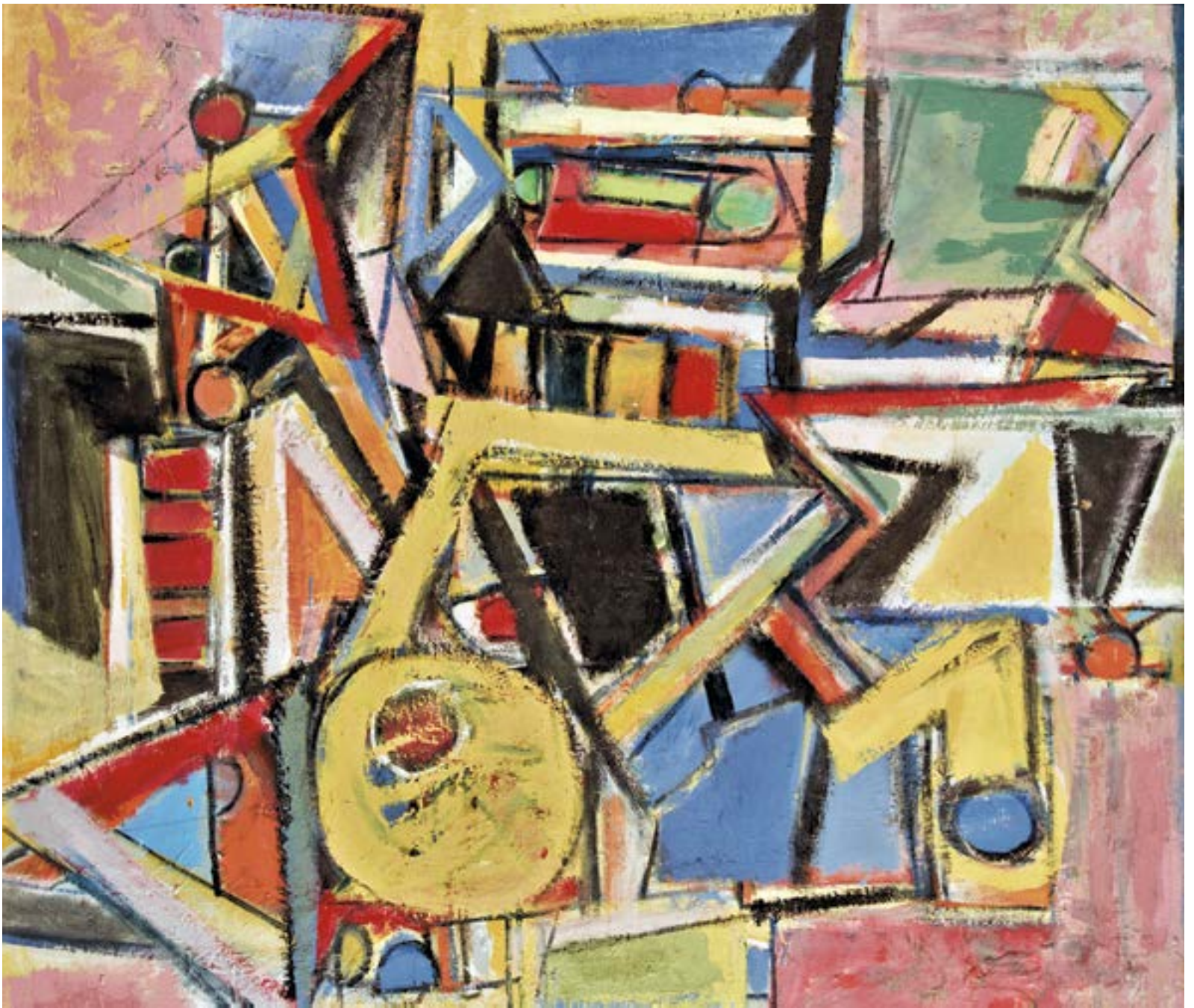


43

Bypass, 1991–92

Oil on board, 42¼ x 48¼ inches

MSU 2012.001.136





44

Caput, 1997
Mixed media, 9½ x 7¾ inches
MSU 2012.001.113

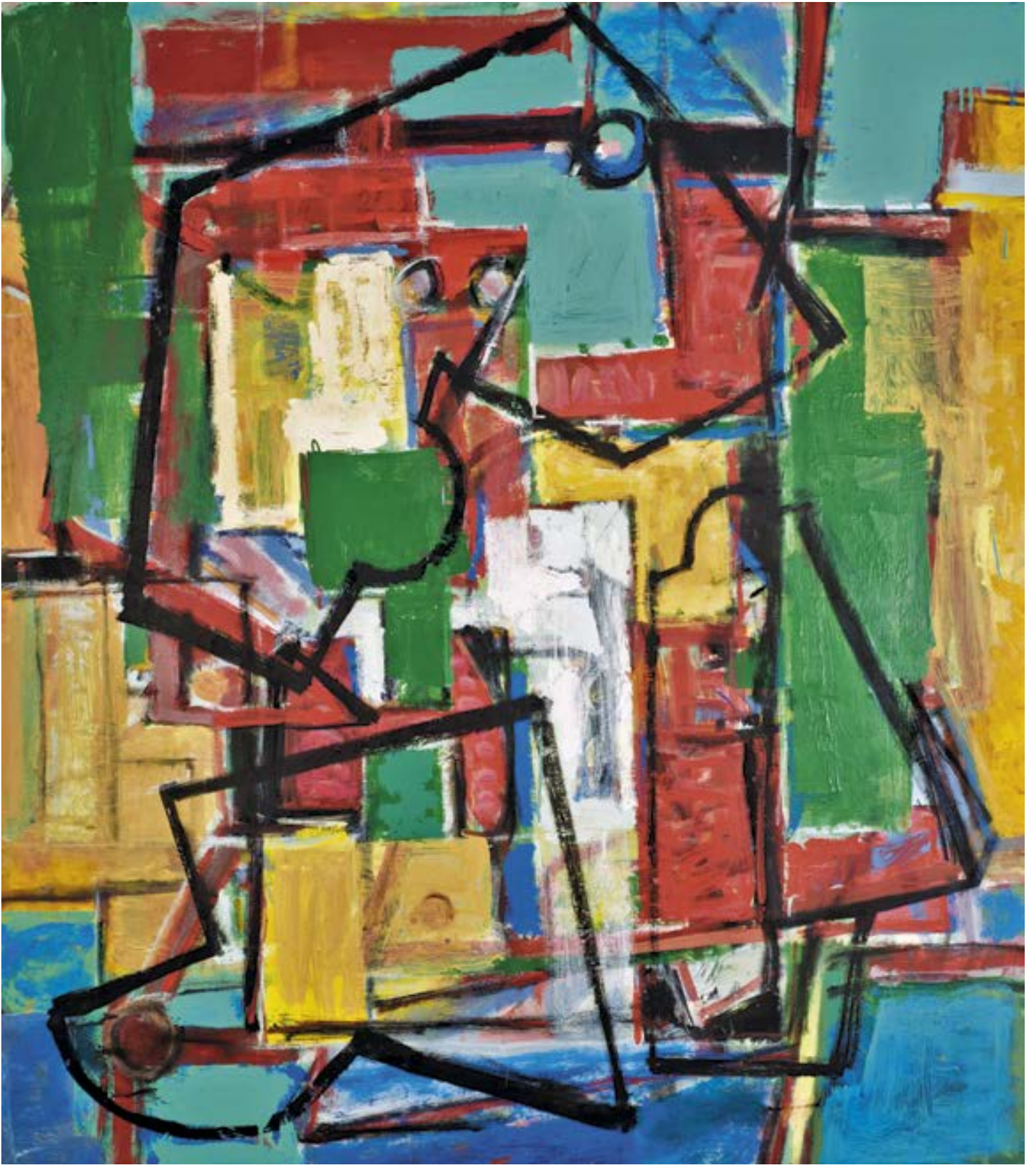
45

Peterson Collage, 1998
Mixed media with acrylic, 18½ x 22¼ inches
MSU 2012.001.059

46

In Plane Sight, 2000
Oil on Masonite, 53¾ x 47⅝ inches
MSU 2012.001.077





Checklist of the Exhibition

Height precedes width.

All works by Ben Wilson (1913–2001) were generously donated by the Ben and Evelyn Wilson Foundation to the Montclair State University Permanent Collection unless otherwise noted.

Arrest of the Picket, 1930s
Graphite on paper, 9 x 12 inches
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Self-Portrait, 1935
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches
MSU 2012.001.150
Plate 1

Pogrom, 1936
Oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches
MSU W2012.001.0062
Figure 3

Portrait of Evelyn, the Artist's Wife, 1936
Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 16 inches
MSU 2012.001.103
Plate 2

Apocalypse, ca. 1938
Oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 22 inches
MSU 2012.001.121
Figure 5

The Builder, ca. 1940
Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 16 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.118
Plate 9

Untitled, c. 1940
Graphite and charcoal on mat board,
12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.470
Figure 4

The Wasteland, 1942
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Courtesy of Hebrew Union College—Jewish
Institute of Religion Museum
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Oil on canvas, 51 x 72 inches
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Plate 26

Machine Parts, 1973
Oil on Masonite, 48 x 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
MSU 2012.001.244
Figure 10

Ben Wilson, Sarasota, FL, 1990s.
Photo Nancy Rica Schiff



The Past Disassembled, 1973
Oil on luan panel, 48 x 60 inches
MSU 2012.001.184
Plate 27

Untitled, ca. 1973
Oil on Masonite, 48 x 35³/₄ inches
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MSU 2012.001.164
Plate 29

Compression, 1979
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MSU 2011.001.003
Plate 30

Byzantium Revisited, ca. 1984
Oil on panel, 23⁵/₁₆ x 29¹/₄ inches
MSU 2012.001.129
Plate 32

Untitled, ca. 1985
Oil on Masonite, 23³/₄ x 32 inches
MSU W2012.001.0084
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Untitled, ca. 1985
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Oil on Masonite, 44 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the Kepner Family
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Oil on board, 42¹/₄ x 48¹/₄ inches
MSU 2012.001.136
Plate 43

Caput, 1997
Mixed media, 9¹/₂ x 7³/₁₆ inches
MSU 2012.001.113
Plate 44

Peterson Collage, 1998
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MSU 2012.001.059
Plate 45

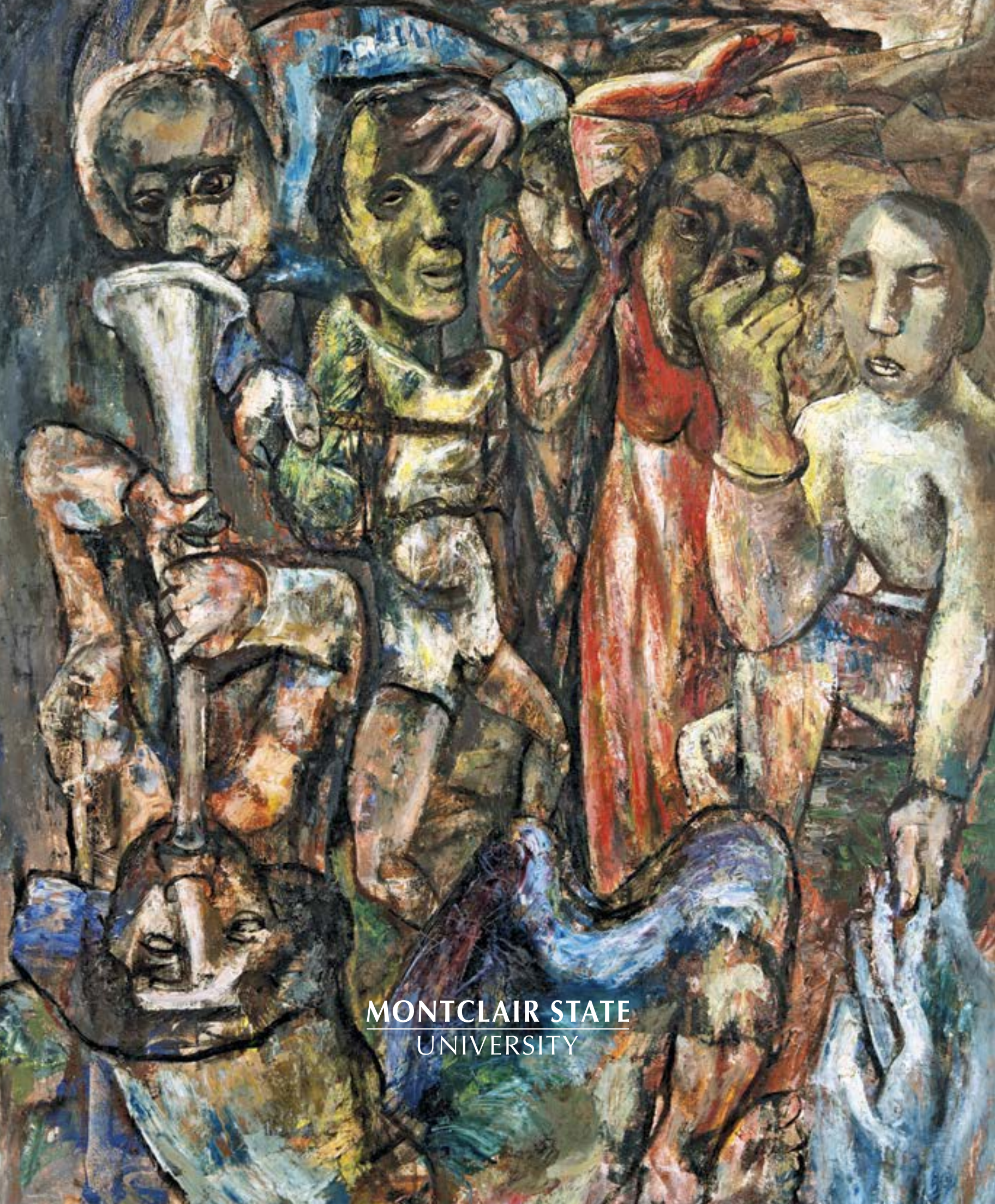
In Plane Sight, 2000
Oil on Masonite, 53³/₄ x 47⁵/₈ inches
MSU 2012.001.077
Plate 46

Ben Wilson Selective Chronology

- 1913 June 23, born in Philadelphia, PA, to Ukrainian immigrant parents Morris and Mary (née Attman) Wilson.
- 1915 October 22, future spouse Evelyn Olga Perlman born in New York to Hungarian immigrant parents Anton and Lena (née Goldstein) Perlman.
- 1916 The Wilson family moves to New York City.
- 1930–33 After attending DeWitt Clinton High School on Tenth Avenue (now John Jay College), studies at the National Academy of Design under Ralph Nelson, Leon Kroll, and Gordon Samstag; wins Sydenham Silver Medal for drawing in 1931.
- 1932 Studies under Abbo Ostrowsky at the Educational Alliance Art School.
- 1933–35 Studies at the Master Institute of United Arts, Inc., 310 Riverside Drive, winning the Recipient Award in 1934.
- 1935 Graduates College of the City of New York, BSS, having won the James R. Steers Prize in 1933, and studied under Abram Gustav Schulman, Karl Anderson, and honors with the department chair George William Eggers.
- 1936 Meets Evelyn Perlman.
- 1937 Teaches at the Queensboro Community Art Center, to 1939; by this time he was part of the WPA.
- 1938–40 Teaches at the American Artists School, 131 West 14th Street, to 1940 and then 1946–48.
- 1939 April 10–19, *Paintings by Ben Wilson* at the Muhlenberg Branch, New York Public Library, 209 West 23rd Street, includes *Pogrom* (Fig. 3).
July to January 1943, Eugene Printing Company, 6 West 17th Street, Bronx, NY doing layout and design.
- 1940 August 31, Ben and Evelyn are married.
- 1940s Lives at 38 West 22nd Street, top floor with a studio, retained until 1951.
- 1942–43 Lives at 72–48 Calamus Avenue, Woodside (now Flushing), Queens.
- 1942 March 1–22, exhibits with the Bombshell Artists Group, Riverside Museum, Master Institute of United Arts, Riverside Drive at 103rd Street .
November 4–21, exhibits *The Wasteland* (Pl. 11) and three other works at *Recent Paintings by The Hetero Painters*, at The Pinacotheca, 20 West 58th Street.
August 11, birth of Joanne, only child and later a ceramicist.
- 1943 Moves to 50–20 39 Place, Laurel Hill (now Sunnyside), Queens, purchasing it in 1946, and selling it in 1951.
January 5–16, *Second Bombshell Artists Group Exhibition*, American British Art Center, includes *Hail the Newborn and Drummer Boy* (both Collection of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, NY).
- January to July, International Telephone and Radio Corporation, 67 Broad Street, NY, draftsman.
July to September 1944, Birnbach Radio Co., 160 West 18th Street, engineering draftsman, tool design.
- 1946 Teaches at City College to 1947.
October 1–31, National Academy of Design, Pepsi-Cola Company's Paintings of the Year, exhibits *Hunger*.
November 3–25, *Ben Wilson: Exhibition of Paintings*, Galerie Neuf, 342 E. 79th Street, including *The Wasteland* (Pl. 11), *Muckrakers* (Pl. 12 and Fig. 1), and *Victory* (Pl. 13).
- 1947 Starts Modantik Lamps, a company with Jerome Burstyn that produces high-end table lamps.
- 1948 Evelyn begins career in cosmetics industry at Fabergé Perfumes, made Executive Vice President in 1954 and works there until 1963.
- 1949 March 19–April 8, solo exhibition at Artists' Gallery, 61 East 57th Street, including *The Builder* (Pl. 9).
- 1950 March 5–25, solo show at Harry Salpeter Gallery, Inc., 36 West 56th Street.
- 1951 Moves family to Ridgefield, NJ, eventually buying 596 Broad Avenue.
- 1953–54 Works at the Académie Julian, Paris, and lives with his family at 12 Passage Doisy, Paris, 17^e, and after June 28, 1953, 102 rue la Boétie, Paris 7^e, with a studio at Boulevard Raspaille, Montparnasse.
- 1955 April 18–May 7, show at Harry Salpeter Gallery, now at 42 East 57th Street, with works produced in Paris.
- 1957 October 7–26, *Ben Wilson: Recent Paintings*, show at Salpeter.
- 1959 May 3–24, exhibits with Evelyn's sculptures in the first Vectors Group show, Riverside Museum, 310 Riverside Drive.
October 6–24, exhibits with Evelyn at Gallery New York, 931 Madison Avenue.
December 6–January 1, 1960, exhibits with the Spiral Group, Hudson River Museum, Trevor Park, Yonkers.
- 1960 June 9–30, shows fourteen abstract paintings in the exhibition *Evelyn et Ben Wilson* at Galerie A. G., 32 rue de l'Université, Paris 7.
- 1961 April 23–May 10, Modern Artists Guild, First Group Show, YMHA of Bergen County, 211 Essex Street, Hackensack, NJ.
- 1962 Teaches Modern Art and classes on Contemporary Art in New York at the School of General Education, New York University, to 1968.
- 1964 October 4–29, Modern Artists Guild, Memorial Auditorium, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey, 1964, shows *Rock Candy Mountain* and *Queens Mirror* [sic] .
November 8–December 13, Thirty-Third Annual New Jersey State Exhibition, Montclair Art Museum, includes *Anima and Shadow* (Pl. 17).
December 1–21, *Ben Wilson: Recent Paintings*, Granite Galleries, 63 East 57th Street.
- 1965 April 21–June 21, exhibits two works at the Modern Artists Guild, Group Show, New Jersey Pavilion, New York World's Fair, Flushing, Queens.
Awarded a Ford Foundation Grant, Artists in Residence in Museums, Everhart Museum, Nay Aug Park, Scranton, PA.
August 1965, *Ben Wilson: Constructions and Paintings*, Everhart Museum, includes *Anima and Shadow* (Pl. 17) and *Backward Glance* (Pl. 23).
- 1966 Purchases a country home at 2 Mount Hermon Road, Blairstown, NJ.
May 31–June 18, *Ben Wilson Abstractions*, Spectrum Gallery, 54 West 57th Street.
June 1–30, *Drawings and Watercolors by Ben Wilson*, Everhart Museum, including *Totentanz* (Pl. 19).
August 14–28, Modern Artists Guild, Group Exhibition, Lever House Park Avenue at 53rd Street, shows *Corrida* (Pl. 24).
- 1984 Begins to winter in Sarasota, FL, at 2720 Herwald Street.
- 1987 Moves full-time to 2 Mount Hermon Road, Blairstown, having built a studio there earlier in the 1980s.
March 24–April 22, *Abstract Expressionist Tendencies 1955–1965: Mario Garcia, Albert Kotin, Ben Wilson*, Princeton Gallery of Fine Art, 8 Chambers Street, Princeton, NJ.
- 1989 *Ben Wilson: New Collages*, Mira Mar Gallery, 1284 North Palm Avenue, Sarasota, FL.
- 1990 September 11–October 31, *Ben Wilson: Paintings of Three Decades 1960–1990*, The Gallery, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University/Brookdale Center, 55 Fifth Avenue, NY.
- 1991 March 7–April 7, *WPA Artists and their Paintings 1930 thru 1940: Ben Wilson and Joe Wolins*, The Salon Fine Art Gallery, Longboat Key, 5380 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Sarasota, FL.
- 1993 *Ben Wilson Recent Paintings*, Lyra Gallery of Fine Arts, 8854 South Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL.
- 1999 Ben & Evelyn Wilson Foundation established.
- 2001 November 9, Ben Wilson dies aged 88 in New Jersey.
- 2006 March 16, death of Evelyn O. Wilson aged 90, in Santa Monica, CA.
- 2008 May 4–June 16, *Ben Wilson: From Figure Through Abstraction*, Chassidic Art Institute, 375 Kingston Avenue, Brooklyn.
September 15–November 28, *Ben Wilson: The Margin as Center*, Ben Shahn Gallery, William Paterson University Galleries, Wayne, NJ.
- 2009 November 14–December 27, *Art in the Family*, Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts, Ojai, CA, with sculpture by Evelyn and ceramics by Joanne.
- 2017 June 29–July 19, *Ben Wilson: An Abstract Expressionist Vision*, Quogue Gallery, 44 Quogue Street, Quogue, NY.



Ben and Evelyn Wilson,
Sarasota, FL, 1990s.
Photo Nancy Rica Schiff



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