Things of nature and the nature of things : [John Wilde in the McClain collection].

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Things of Nature and the Nature of Things

JOHN WILDE

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Things of Nature and the Nature of Things: John Wilde in the McClain Collection
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On the front cover: *Muss es Sein? Es muss Sein!*, 1979–1981, oil on wood, 19 1/2 x 36 in. (cat. no. 10).
On the back cover: John Wilde in his studio, September 8, 2000. Photograph by Russell Panczenko.

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IN MEMORIAM

John Wilde 1919 – 2006

Foreword

In 1999, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, the Chazen Museum of Art, then known as the Elvehjem Museum of Art, organized a comprehensive exhibition of John Wilde's paintings and drawings. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that was published and distributed nationally in collaboration with Hudson Hills Press of New York. This was fitting acknowledgement of a long and successful career dedicated to creating art and training future generations of artists.

Sadly, John Wilde passed away on March 9, 2006. To honor him and to assure that his artistic legacy would be preserved for posterity, William H. (Bill) McClain is donating his collection of twenty-two exemplary works by John Wilde to the Chazen Museum of Art. These, combined with the works of Wilde already in the permanent collection, will make the Chazen the foremost repository of this important artist's work. This exhibition and catalogue acknowledge and celebrate Bill McClain's generous donation and mark the passing of an artist who contributed a great deal to the university, the State of Wisconsin, and the nation.

John Wilde's art resonated with many different people during his career, including fellow UW professor Bill McClain. Halvorson Professor of Bacteriology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, McClain first encountered the work of John Wilde in 1978 or 1979 at an exhibition at the Fanny Garver Gallery on Madison's colorful and vibrant State Street. Although smitten at first sight, Bill being Bill did "a lot of thinking" before acquiring his first painting, *My Grandparents* (cat. 5), on March 10, 1980. He quickly acquired a second, *Love* (cat. 2), and shortly after a third, *A Tribute to February 11* (cat. 1). Over the years, he has owned more than thirty-five of Wilde's paintings and drawings. Through intimate study of the paintings and with the advice of the artist, McClain culled the collection down to the present twenty-two pieces, which he considers, and the museum staff wholeheartedly agrees, to be among the best works that Wilde produced.

I also wish to acknowledge the impressive efforts of Lisa Wainwright, Dean of Graduate Studies at the Chicago Art Institute. Probably the last scholar to interview the artist about his work, she has produced an insightful and sensitive essay that effectively charts Wilde's place within Surrealism. Suspecting that Wilde's condition might be terminal, we only commissioned her to write the essay for this catalogue late last fall.

A special thank you to the Erdman Family—Timothy B. Erdman, Daniel E. Erdman, Deborah L. Erdman-Luder, and M. Rustin Erdman, the four children of Marshall and Joyce Erdman—for their generosity, which made the publication of this catalogue possible. Marshall and Joyce had been long-time friends and patrons of John Wilde and passed their commitment to and belief in his work to their children. "We lived with Wilde paintings everyday; they gave us, and still give us, great pleasure." (TE)

Additional support for this project has come from UW–Madison's Hilldale Fund, the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin, and the museum's special projects fund to which the members of the Chazen Council contribute annually. We are sincerely grateful to them all.

John Wilde's art gave pleasure; it was executed with great skill; and it left us wondering about the meanderings of the human mind. Very few artists have left behind such an artful legacy. We will miss him.

Russell Panczenko
Director, Chazen Museum of Art

"Nature is okay and everything else is questionable."

JOHN WILDE, 2006

THINGS OF NATURE AND THE NATURE OF THINGS INFORMED the work of John Wilde for some seventy years. In painstakingly crafted vignettes of figures and props and still life arrangements, Wilde served up grand parables on the existential condition of modern man. These are timeless and enduring narratives, drawing on traditions of painting from the northern and early Renaissance period and Flemish painting to symbolist and surrealist iconography and strategy. Wilde amasses a potpourri of sources and motifs and brings them up to the present moment by setting his compositions in the Wisconsin landscape just outside his studio door. In Wilde's wondrous scenes, giant dogs carry fair maidens across moonlit skies, oversized still lifes reek of earthy abundance, naked ladies march through orderly suburban streets or cavort with dapper gentlemen in suits, variously colored balls float around Midwestern plains, women transform into wolves, and lovers embrace in a sea of skulls and fossils and shells. Wilde's life work is devoted to the absurd at its most horrific and at its most poignant, delivered with such coherence as to make the remarkable believable.

The McClain collection presents a superb overview of Wilde's *oeuvre*. It includes the full palette of still lifes, allegorical landscapes, and portraits, and covers the period of Wilde's work from reproductions of drawings from the 1940s to recent work from the 1990s. Two important artist's books complete the collection: *44 Wilde 1944*, a facsimile of drawings from the early sketchbooks created with Walter Hamady of Perishable Press in 1984 and *The Story of Jane and Joan*, an illustrated story also from Perishable Press in a limited edition from 1977. The two books reveal Wilde at his most inventively macabre and serve to frame the whole collection brilliantly.

John Wilde spent his entire life in Wisconsin and his local surroundings served as the source for many of the still lifes and the background of most of the narrative scenes.[2] But his is not the *oeuvre* of a rural painter, for Wilde came of age in the university town of Madison, Wisconsin and then stayed as a professor of drawing in the art department for thirty-five years. The rich liberal arts and progressive politics of a college town influenced Wilde's making. His close examination of nature was set against the myriad theories of literature, poetry, art history, and philosophy that the university scene provided. The irony, of course, was that despite the august aim of higher education, a vestige of enlightenment rationalism, Wilde's paintings suggest he never found the answers that the university model promised to reveal. As Goethe's *Faust* opens:

> I've read, alas! Through philosophy
> medicine and jurisprudence too,
> And, to my grief, theology
> With ardent labor studied through.
> And here I stand with all my lore,
> Poor fool, no wiser than before![3]

At the center of a bastion of learnedness, Wilde, like Faust, contemplated the consequences of human behavior with only confusion and despair.

Concomitantly, Wilde was well versed in the existential literature of the era as were many who came of age in the 1950s. Wilde's friend and fellow painter Gertrude Abercrombie declared, "I paint the way I do because I'm just plain scared... I mean, I think it's a scream that we're alive at all—don't you?"[4] Like the canonized Abstract Expressionists of the period—Pollock, de Kooning,

Figure 1. Max Ernst (French, b. Germany, 1891–1976) *The Nymph Echo (La Nymph Écho)*, 1936, oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 21 3/4 in., ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 2 (Cat. 8). John Wilde (American, 1919–2006) *Untitled (woman on a log)*, 1975, oil on wood, 8 x 10 in., gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

Rothko, and Newman—Wilde and his colleagues took the same existential condition of meaninglessness and self-determination but conveyed this bleakness through a representational language. Wilde explained, "...My vision is essentially black when I consider the future of the species and totally real when it comes to expectations. None! None, excepting the joy of the moment, the awe of the vision, the possibility of the morrow..."[5] World War II had shattered any sense of order, decency, humanity, and meaning for artists across the continent. The only philosophical state that made sense to them was Existentialism and this became their common ground with the act of painting as their hold on existence. When Wilde said, "To me, there is very little difference between being in the painting and the act of painting—it is the same thing,"[6] he recalls the rhetoric around Pollock's action painting where Pollock's marks were seen as moments for the assertion of his being.

If Existentialism cast its pallor over much of Wilde's painting, a heavy dose of Surrealism inflected the work as well. Wilde's images depict that other state of consciousness between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the awake and the not awake that is so often found in the art of René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst, all of whom Wilde admired.[7] André Breton, the self-proclaimed leader of Surrealism, defined Surrealism in a manifesto of 1924 as, "Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation."[8] Many of Wilde's visionary narratives fulfill this dictate, and the unconscious is clearly Wilde's muse.

Surrealism's odd contrasts in scale, the play of metamorphosis, the unsettling juxtaposition of objects or entities, the strangeness lurking behind the most familiar things, and eroticism as a form of liberation, as well as an obsessive use of the female nude as a vehicle for exploring fear and desire, all informed Wilde's image making. He had written a master's thesis on Max Ernst and there are many affinities between the two artists' works. (See fig. 1 in comparison with fig. 2). Asked about his relationship to Surrealism, Wilde replied, "There is a relationship, of course: the incongruous. I read with great care and enthusiasm a wonderful surrealist magazine called *View*, and then...*VVV*..."[9] In these journals and in the surrealist art he saw at the Art Institute of Chicago and elsewhere, Wilde found compatriots in a world of the imagination governed only by the artist's own peculiar psyche.

To Existentialism and Surrealism is added the regional flora and fauna of Wilde's Wisconsin home, and it is this triumvirate that helps to illuminate Wilde's subject matter. This is not to suggest, however, any clear or simple reading of the work, for the complexity of Wilde's personal iconography forestalls such an approach. Viewers are left to reconcile feelings of ambiguity around meaning by succumbing to the sheer pleasure of looking that his beautiful surfaces allow. The McClain collection is no exception. While Wilde's biography and the historical moment help to open up the work, these are paintings and objects that delight the senses. The sheer craftsmanship is extraordinary, reminding us of the lure of art in transcending the banal and everyday. Like Leonardo da Vinci or Albrecht Dürer, two important figures for Wilde, we are in a world of magic where the skill in creating is like an alchemy of art.

The Formative Years: Madison and the War

THERE HAVE BEEN A NUMBER OF RECENT SCHOLARLY ESSAYS setting down the history of a bizarre offshoot of French Surrealism in the American Midwest in the 1950s that included artists Sylvia Fein, Gertrude Abercrombie, Marshall Glasier, Dudley Huppler, and Karl Priebe.[10] Variously called Magic Realists, Fantasists, Post-Surrealists, and Neo-Romantics, these artists put exact images of nature to the service of the unconscious. The Madison, Milwaukee, Chicago triangle was a close knit group, a bohemian avant-garde, university fed in part, who together experienced a number of important artistic and social awakenings. Rooted in Madison where Wilde, Fein and Huppler were students, the group coalesced around shared ideas about art and life and posed and painted each other, taking trips to Chicago and into the countryside to draw like the renowned Brücke clique forty years earlier. When they weren't together—during the war years especially—the artists corresponded regularly, continuing with the close dialogue that so nurtured each of their work. It is important to note how this surrealist coterie found a suitable home in the state of Wisconsin with its long-standing tradition of cultivating and supporting so-called outsider art and by its proximity to Chicago with its commitment to Surrealism in many private and public collections.

Priebe and Abercrombie were the Chicago connections, but Marshall Glasier was the New York conduit and his role was particularly formidable for Wilde. Glasier had studied with George Grosz, and brought the harsh realism of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, as well as the thinking of the Art Students' League at the time back to Wisconsin—to Wilde and the group. Wilde recalls how Glasier was a big intellectual force on campus, and how instrumental Glasier was in opening up the literary and art world to him. Wilde remembers the boxes of books that Glasier sent from New York filled with the latest works on art, philosophy, and literature.[11]

Marshall Glasier shared with University of Wisconsin Art Historian James Watrous an intense interest in drawing and in late medieval and Renaissance art.[12] Watrous was another key thinker in Wilde's early education, exposing him to old master drawings and teaching their techniques such as silverpoint, which Wilde would employ for drawing and as underpainting for his entire career. Although the prevailing view for years, as outlined in the art historical literature, promoted regionalism as the Midwest model of the period, Watrous, Glasier, Wilde, and friends were quite adamant in their dislike of the thinking and style of John Steuart Curry, for example, who was an Artist in Residence in Madison from 1936 to 1946. Instead, it was the art of the past that Watrous and Glasier encouraged. Wilde's subsequent conversancy with this history of art from these two individuals would come to play out directly in his paintings.

Wilde was drafted into the Army in 1942, and the halcyon college years swiftly ended. Michael Duncan explained the war's effect on the entire group, writing that they were "...eclipsed in their own time by the postwar rush to abstraction...they created a different kind of wartime art, sparked by private anxieties, whimsical desires and personal psychodramas."[13] Many have written of Wilde's work from this period, noting the severe anxiety that surfaced in his notebooks, in the long letters to friends and especially in the drawings (see figs. 3–4). Wilde never saw battle, but that didn't matter—the entire war set-up was anathema to him. He hated the constriction, he

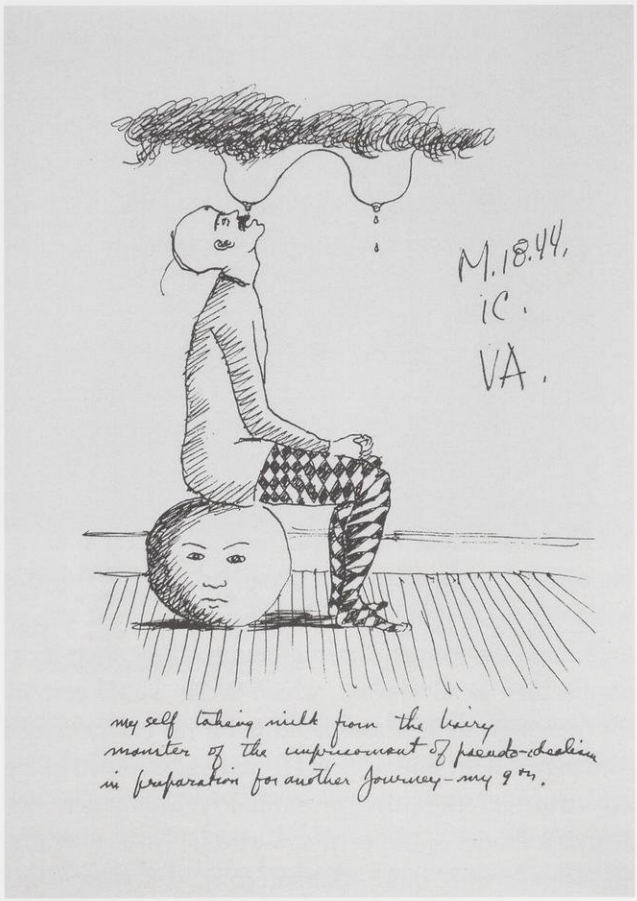

Figure 3. An image from *44 Wilde 1944*, Perishable Press Limited, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1984, Chazen Museum of Art, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

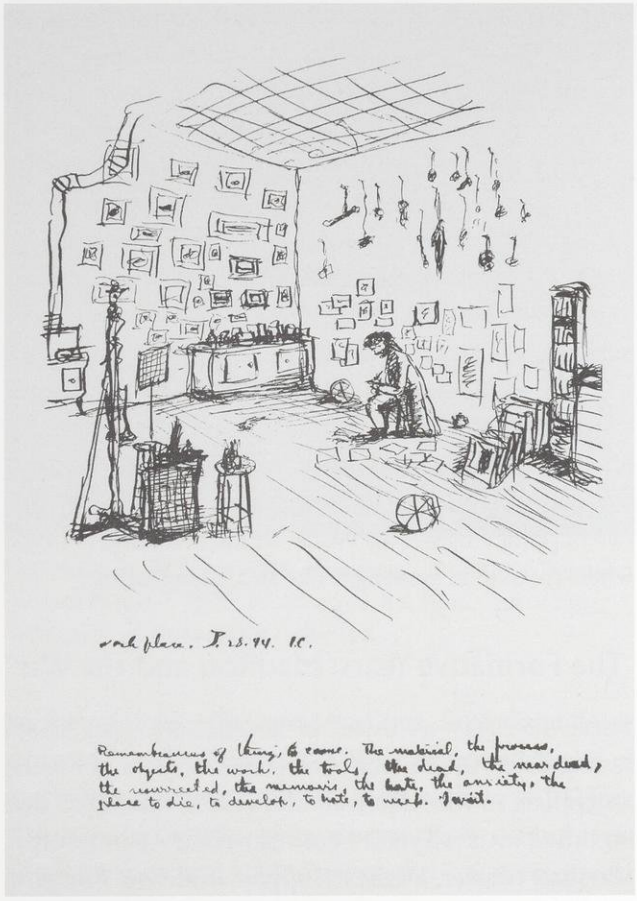

Figure 4. An image from *44 Wilde 1944*, Perishable Press Limited, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1984, Chazen Museum of Art, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

hated the death toll, he hated what seemed to be man's innate violence. "I stayed out of the army as long as I possibly could," Wilde explained, " because I knew if it didn't kill me, I might kill myself...everything about the army is antithetical to my whole spirit. I still cringe when I see a general... it's a loss of liberty more than anything else."[14]

Conscription made Wilde feel that he was in prison and he signed his artwork at the time "I.C." for "In Confinement" or "Illegally Confined." In one such sketch, *Normal and Abnormal Skulls* (fig. 5) included in the book, *44 Wilde 1944*, Wilde draws an eerie but normally sized skull above another whose cranium is perversely swollen and covered with bumps or dents. The scrawled handwriting reads, "You be never quite right!" as if to suggest that the war put the artist over the edge. Indeed, in subsequent drawings and paintings, Wilde's head often kept this malignant shape and the associated sentiment it conveyed.

In another sketch *Third Eye/Camera* (fig. 6) from the same book, a naked Wilde, with his deformed skull and small bird skeleton in hand, sits before three tripods: one with a screen, the next with a camera, and the last balancing the beach ball that would become a recurring motif throughout his *oeuvre*. In part a play on Dürer's famous engraving of a nude studied through a perspective device, Wilde lays out the props of his profession as they make contact with the psychic vectors of his imagination. The text reads, "Making the complete picture of the divine rubber ball. I am here very ill and I fear death, and in spite of

this I carry on long and fatiguing experiments until finally my objective is achieved. For days after I am 'keyed up'—suffering beyond compare, doubt and fear."

The dark content of the war drawings secured lifelong themes, for Wilde's imagery is rife with "doubt and fear" as he wrote above. Whether this subject was borne out of the war experience coupled with his immersion in Existentialism, or whether the war exacerbated the sense of *angst* inherent in his personality, is unclear. Wilde does make reference to being haunted by "schwarze morgen denkst" a made-up German expression for dark morning thoughts or "soul pain" that disturb his sleep and inhabit his art.[15]

While Wilde's war years consisted of basic training, work in the Office of Strategic Services, camouflage design and other assignments, what is most interesting in terms of the direct influence on subject matter were his duties as part of the medical corps. There he was trained "to perform quick inspections to identify soldiers suffering from venereal diseases," and to "make drawings for venereal disease prevention propaganda."[16] The equation of sex and death which venereal disease suggests was a romantic preoccupation as in the paintings of Edvard Munch or the writing of Edgar Allen Poe. It was also a key concept for the Surrealists. Wilde would take up sex and death as a major theme throughout his career as evidenced by a number of works in the McClain collection. This subject was perhaps reinforced by the horrific drawing assignment during the war, an experience that Wilde would never forget.

The McClain Collection

In 1946, Wilde was discharged from the Army and returned to the University of Wisconsin for graduate studies; in 1948, he began teaching in the art department and then basically never left Wisconsin. His art production was prodigious in the coming years, despite the careful craftsmanship each work demanded. Silverpoint in particular, which Wilde employed in drawings and as underpainting, is one such laborious technique and the McClain collection includes excellent examples.[17]

Hats #4, 1988, *Nackte Fraulein #12, Mit Serviettenring*, 1994 and *Nackte Fraulein #20, Mit Birkerinde,* 1994 employ

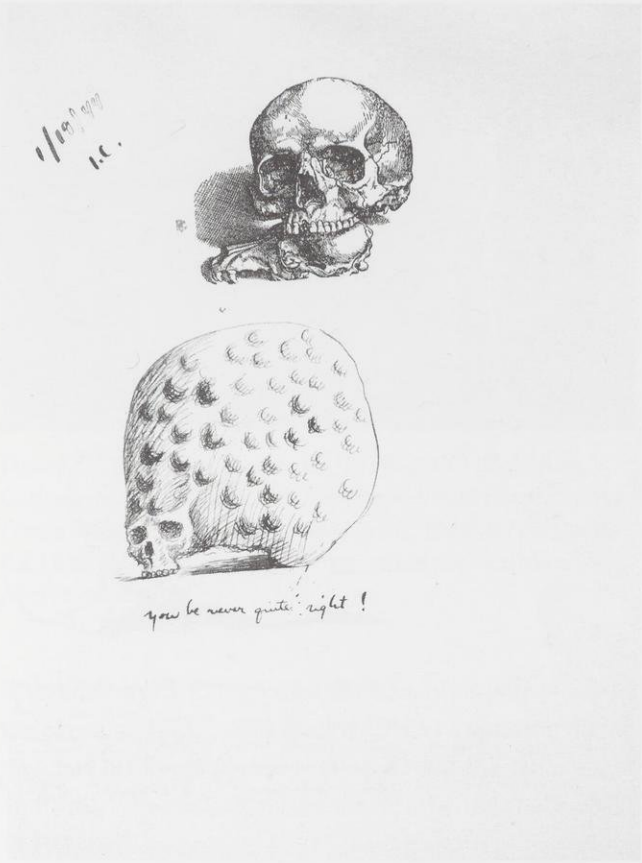

Figure 5. An image from *44 Wilde 1944*, Perishable Press Limited, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1984, Chazen Museum of Art, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

this Renaissance technique but in the service of surrealist machinations. All three drawings pair a woman with an ordinary object although in typical surrealist fashion, the scale is wrong and the juxtaposition makes no sense. *Hats #4* (cat. 16) belongs to a larger series of women donning various skulls or fish-heads for hats. In this piece, the woman appears to be in a state of ecstasy with parted lips and a cross-eyed stare, no doubt induced by the giant fish that snuggly fits her head. *Nackte Fraulein #12* (cat. 18) shows a nude woman asleep behind a giant napkin ring whose shiny surface reflects the artist at work. Wilde borrows this reflection trick again from past art, recalling, for example, Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* of 1434 whose convex mirror at the back of the scene, like Wilde's concave napkin ring, reflects the scene in front of it. *Fraulein*

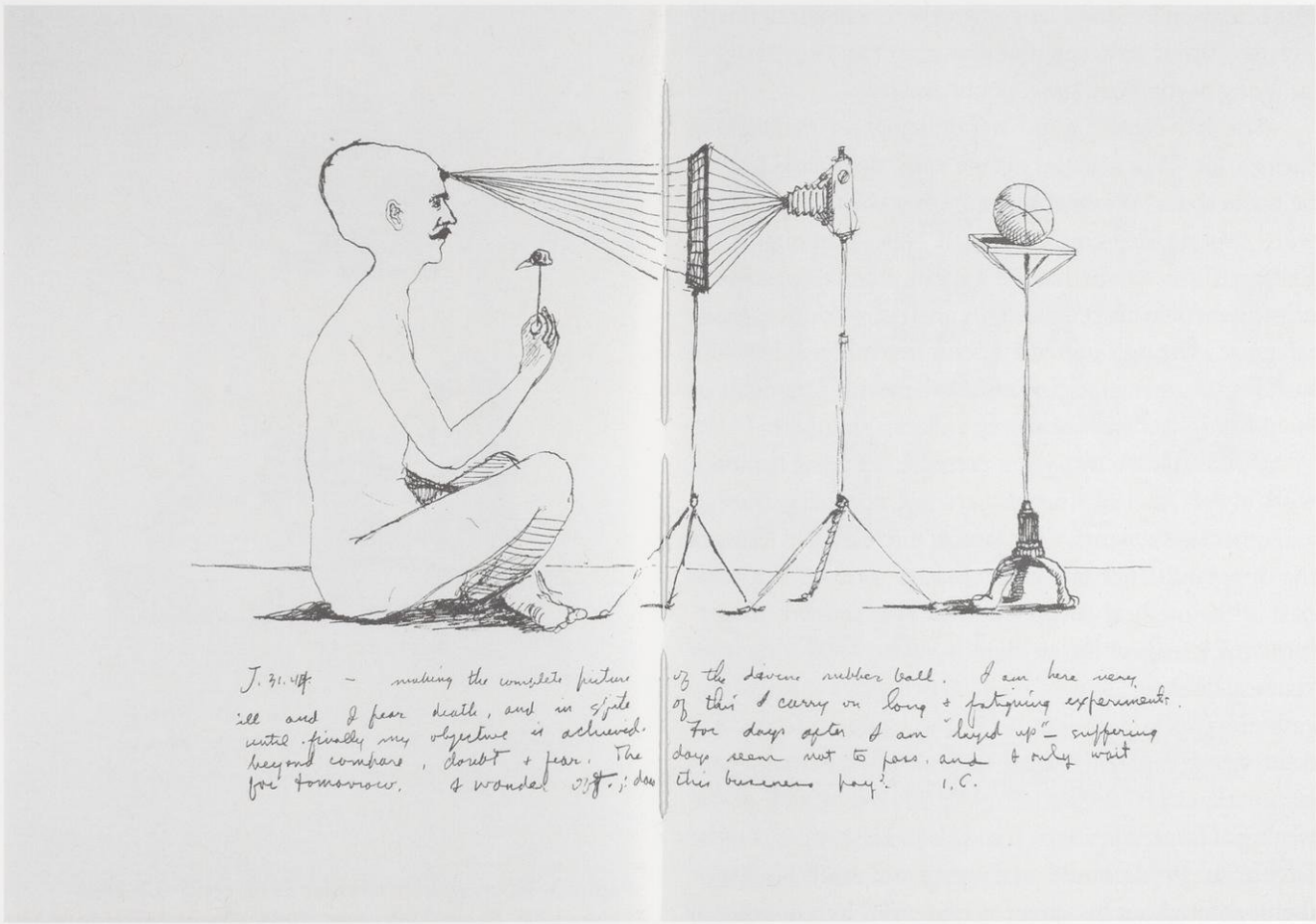

Figure 6. An image from *44 Wilde 1944*, Perishable Press Limited, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1984, Chazen Museum of Art, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

#20 (cat. 19) depicts a woman standing in an enlarged bit of peeled bark. One leg juts through an opening with the top of the break in the bark hitting just above her pubic region, thus showcasing her sex as in the napkin ring's edge framing *Fraulein #12*'s.

Women's sexuality is a constant concern of Wilde's as it was for the Surrealists in general. Indeed, the nude serves as Wilde's primary vehicle of expression throughout the McClain collection, echoing her relentless presence in the larger *oeuvre*. Even in the oft reproduced group portrait of Wilde's circle (fig. 7) from 1966, a single nude (labeled 'a friend' in the picture's title) stands between Sylvia Fein and Arnold Dadian. This odd inclusion in an otherwise straightforward group portrait not only challenges conventional bourgeois morality—a conceit in keeping with the era, but above all hints at Wilde's privileging of the nude symbol overall. Perhaps, she is the traditional personification of truth, or she is nature, or she points to the modernist equation of creativity and virility that so many artists from Gauguin to Picasso preferred to exploit.

Wilde explained the recurring nude on one occasion saying, "They have more to do with fecundity and reproduction…I think it represents the totality of nature."[18] And on another, he claimed that they stood for "the stark reality of nakedness; its bluntness and its nice unniceness [sic]… she stands for desire—desire for her, desire for health, desire for wealth, for comfort, desire for graspability, for comprehension…Desire for her is perhaps the least

of all of these."[19] Like the Surrealists before him, Wilde finds woman a complicated idea to be reckoned with over and over again in art.

In the last of the silverpoint drawings in the collection, *A Costume That is Grown, Not Made,* 1986 (cat. 15) the nude again takes up a central position. Here a woman with closed eyes begins her metamorphosis into a beast with wild hair growing over her lower body, and talons replacing her hands and feet. If Wilde sees woman as the "totality of nature," in this picture, his sense of woman's connection with the wild is grotesquely explicit. Again this is a surrealist convention, not only in terms of metamorphosis, but in the equation of woman with nature, read as the untamable unconscious. And yet despite the jarring transformation of her body, the figure seems content with her station as she smiles peacefully. Wilde commented, "Well, we go through life that way, don't we? As horrible as it is, it's pretty fancy at the same time."[20]

Like a Dalí or a Magritte, the oddness and tension of Wilde's surrealist subjects come to life through his extraordinary capacity to convincingly render the peculiar. *Good Things. Small Heron Skull, Thrice,* 1972, (cat. 7) although devoid of surreal strangeness—Wilde goes back and forth throughout his career depicting either straight still lifes or bizarre narratives—demonstrates his close observation of nature. Like the artist/scientist da Vinci, who Wilde greatly admired (even scrawling obscure text into his drawings like the Italian master), Wilde scrutinizes the object from a number of vantage points, thus revealing as much of its form as possible—drawing the thing makes one see the thing well. And like da Vinci, it is the world of nature that Wilde studies. He said,

> ...I know every damn thing that grows on this property, 2,000 of them. I'm interested in having an awareness of everything around me. That kind of awareness is important to the basic person. It's the thing that gives the essence of individuality. I know all the birds, all the insects; my knowledge of all that stuff is encyclopedic, and it sticks.[21]

But what *Good Things. Small Heron Skull, Thrice* demonstrates is that often the things Wilde takes from his property to deploy in his art are, in fact, dead. His subject

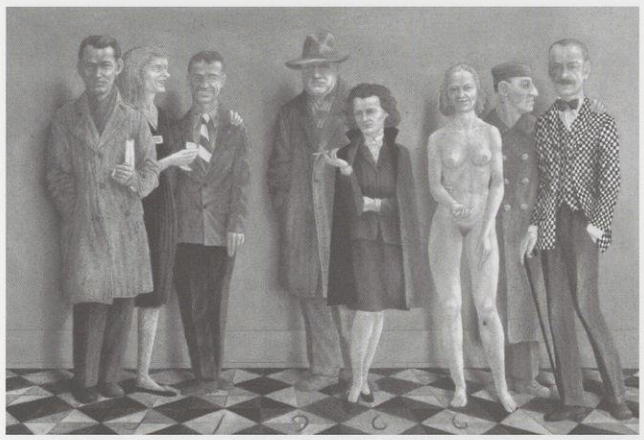

Figure 7. John Wilde (American, 1919–2006) *Karl Priebe, Gertrude Abercrombie, Dudley Huppler, Marshall Glasier, Sylvia Fein, a Friend, Arnold Dadian, and Myself,* 1966, oil on panel, 8 x 12 in., Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust.

is *vanitas*, and although death is a familiar part of life in the country, Wilde's obsession with it as a painting theme matches his irrepressible need to depict the nude again and again. Indeed, as noted above, the ideas are often intertwined.

In the painting *Untitled (woman on a log),* 1975 (cat. 8) again scale is disrupted and an otherworldly quality ensues. A nude woman with her back to the viewer lays her hand on a giant still life upon which she also sits. The still life rests on a table that creates a low horizon line commonly used in most Wilde paintings. All is set against an empty background, also typical for his still life studies. Wilde is an uncommon painter with uncommon results. Working from a silverpoint underpainting, he slowly builds form through layers of thin glazing that lend a jewel–like quality to the paintings. The surface is marvelous and the light luminous. This is a painting of texture and shape that only oil painting allows. The work is as much about how the nude's soft flesh echoes that of the rounded fungi, and contrasts with the hardness of the log below as it is about anything else. She appears at one with nature, united through her materiality and pose, against an unseen force outside of the picture that blows her hair aloft.

Figure 8. Marshall Glasier (American, 1902-1988) *Life of the Cabbage*, 1944, oil on Masonite panel, 17 7/8 x 24 1/8 in., Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of William Monroe White and artist by exchange, photo by John R. Glembin.

Figure 9. Juan Sánchez Cotán (Spanish, 1561-1627) *Still Life with Game Fowl*, c. 1602, 26 11/16 x 34 15/16 in., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Leigh B. Block, 1955.1203, reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago.

It is important to recall that the grandeur of nature, which the odd scale in *Untitled* and other paintings and drawings reinforce, was of interest to many in Wilde's Madison group. In Marshall Glasier's *Life of the Cabbage*, 1944 (fig. 8), for example, a towering cabbage dominates the landscape like some monstrous character. This is nature writ large as in many of Wilde's conceptions.

Wilde's predilection for the subject of still life is interesting to consider in relation to the larger *oeuvre*. Against the existential pondering that informs much of the content of his painting, the still life seems to provide a quiet respite. The three traditional still life paintings in the McClain collection, *9 Beans 2X,* 1979, *Celebration of the Month: July, the Green Basket,* 1980 and *More Good Things,* 1984, may suggest Wilde's interest in holding on to something stable against an otherwise frightening and disorienting sense of existence. He keeps accounting or auditing the things of nature by collecting and studying them closely through his drawing and painting. And these are things from his immediate surroundings, familiar things that anchor him to his world. In *Four Essays on the Still Life*, Norman Bryson writes, "The forms of still life are strong enough to make the difference between brutal existence and human life: without them there is no continuity of generations, no human legacy, only an intermittent and flickering chaos; with them, there is cultural memory and family, an authentically civilized world."[22]

Still life is an ancient genre of art and Wilde's love for the form confirms his thinking that, "the truth of art," as he put it, "was discovered when the first artist made the first work of art—it hasn't changed since, it never can, it never will. It can only be sought and re-discovered by individuals of succeeding generations, generation after generation." [23]

9 Beans 2X (cat. 9) is a straight-on depiction of an array of beans, some whole, some halved, all carefully deployed across a ledge against an empty black background. *The Green Basket* (cat. 11) shows a decorative basket filled with the bounty of the garden resting on a stone ledge etched with the date "July 1980." The third still life, *More Good Things* (cat. 14) is an arrangement which includes a peeling tree branch, a flowering fungus, an egg, the head of an animal skeleton, and a fish dangling from a string. The refer-

Figure 10. Gertrude Abercrombie (American, 1909-1977) *Tree at Aledo*, 1938, oil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 24 1/4 in., Elmhurst College, gift of Gertrude Abercrombie Trust.

ence to past art in this piece is unmistakable, particularly the work of Juan Sánchez Cotán (fig. 9) whose paintings Wilde admired in the Art Institute of Chicago.[24] Wilde has even employed Cotán's Spanish stage, or the *cantarero,* a cooling space in Spanish kitchens where food is hung on strings for preservation.[25] And like the Cotán, the ordinary domestic object becomes somehow hyper-real through its isolated presence in the picture and in its close-up detail. This is true for all three still lifes where the touch of the brush is the same across all of the objects' surfaces,

Figure 11. Paul Delvaux (Belgian, 1897-1994) *The Village of Mermaids,* 1942, oil on panel, 41 x 49 in., gift of Mr. and Mrs. Maurice E. Culberg, 1951.73, reproduction, Art Institute of Chicago.

creating a seamless connectedness that appears not entirely naturalistic.

But *More Good Things* also displays decay. The egg is old and cracked, the fish has begun to dry, and the skeleton head is redolent of death. Despite the quiet these still lifes might provide for the artist's active imagination, many become *memento mori* nonetheless. Wilde's larger theme is again bridged. Wilde explained, "...[the] world is in every aspect and prospect infinitely lovely and beautiful, and I who observe it, though I have a brief moment of joy, am only destined for illness and death..."[26] For Wilde, *vanitas* is a constant refrain.

Lest one begin to believe that every picture in the McClain collection forebodes impending death, there are several images that convey love and happiness. *The Kiss,* 1961 (cat. 4) depicts a young couple, eyes wide open with parted lips about to meet. Their flesh has a strange hue: the woman's is orange, and the man's is slightly rust, but the iconic profiles and their secure embrace is a pleasing reminder of our nature to love.

In *Limestone and Bindweed*, 1965 (cat. 6) two more nude lovers in a tight embrace lie on a rocky precipice. As

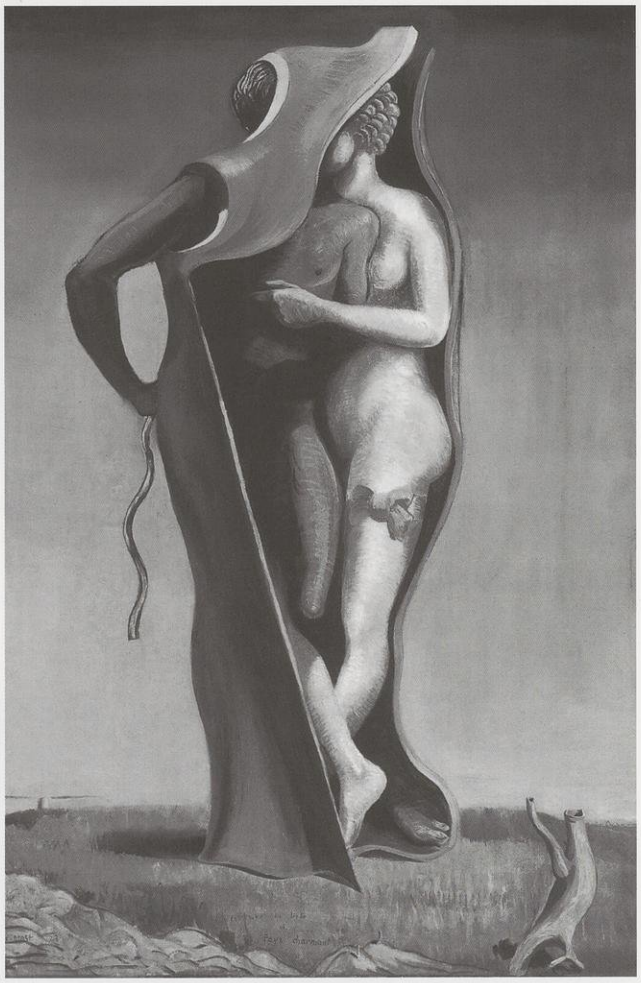

Figure 12. Max Ernst (French, born Germany 1891–1976) *Long Live Love or Pays charmant,* 1923, oil on canvas, 51 x 38 5/8 in., St. Louis Art Museum, bequest of Morton D. May.

in other work, there is an uncanny resemblance between their flesh and the rock, an effect achieved by Wilde's play with form and texture. Two little spiders sit in the foreground, the only sign of life in this hard, desolate place other than the couple and a bindweed and vine at the right of the composition. The painting is rendered in characteristic Wilde fashion with a shallow, stage-like setting and figures in the foreground. Although the subject of entwined lovers nestled in nature is familiar—from the Rococo to Matisse, Wilde's version is characteristically strained. The cliff shelf, whose drop is indeterminable, the hardness of the rock, and the two insect witnesses seem

Figure 13. Edouard Manet (French, 1832-1883) *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the grass),* 1863, oil on canvas, 81 4/5 x 93 7/10 in., photo by Herve Lewandowski, Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France, Réunion des Muśees Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

an inhospitable site for love. And yet despite the strangeness of their surroundings, the lovers carry on, oblivious to their condition. Like spiders, they will copulate anywhere.

Although much has been stated about Wilde's painting style as a vestige of Renaissance practice, in this particular painting the rendering of the vine, the way it appears flat on the surface of the canvas, asserting the picture plane, is a thoroughly modern convention. Indeed, it is interesting to note the general sense of flatness in much of Wilde's work, perhaps the result of his studying so many reproductions of paintings rather than seeing them first hand.[27] Except for the landscape scenes that he directly observed all around him and often sketched, Wilde's compositions lean toward the two-dimensional.

Like the floating nude in Max Ernst's *Approaching Puberty...The Pleiades,* 1921, Wilde sets a version of the lovely floating creature into a festive fantasy in the McClain collection piece, *A Tribute to February 11,* 1951 (cat. 1). Along with Ernst, the picture is also an homage to Gertrude Abercrombie, whose signature tree from her *Tree at Aledo,* 1938 (fig. 10) appears at the right of the Wilde composition. The painting is seemingly a joyful one about women, life and the greater cosmos. Wilde explained:

> One night when I was driving home after a long day at the office, and it was evening, I think it was February 9th. There's a certain time of the year [when] the Moon and Venus almost touch, and it was perfect that night, skies were clear, it was really fantastic. That's what happened. That's why it's a tribute to that date.[28]

Indeed, the moon at the top of the picture underneath his Dürer like signature just touches the shining glint of Venus. Below is a beautiful, red ribboned landscape whose straight striations complement those of an undulating, floating ribbon above. The ribbon dances near the Abercrombie tree, toying with its high seriousness, the tree's straightness juxtaposed with the curling arabesques of the ribbon beside it. And at the left is the hovering Ernst-like nude holding a red flower, seemingly plucked from the bouquet that grows out of two truncated female legs in red high heel shoes below. Although the work is fanciful and lightness pervades the scene, the dead tree remains a constant reminder of the fleeting nature of all things, for Wilde can't help himself. He said, "You're like everything else, like that tree that's falling apart out there. That tree's got a disease, and that tree's got broken branches, and that one's falling down, and yet there's saplings coming up all around. But I don't think you ever really reconcile to that."[29]

Wilde's interest in Ernst is again hinted at in *My Grandparents*, 1962 (cat. 5). In this strange scene, Wilde's grandparents are on the porch of their country home. His grandmother stands naked next to his grandfather, who sits in full formal attire. Near them on the property are two dogs and a horse. The oddness of the unclothed woman with the dressed companion recalls the paintings of Surrealist Paul Delavaux (fig. 11). But the weirdness of the scene doesn't stop there. The perspective is wrong, the animals' sex is oddly pronounced, and through the windows and doors of the house and barn, shadows of enormous figures emerge—or do they? The most obvious example is in the far left doorway, but like Ernst, who enjoyed the surrealist game of finding images in abstract patterns, one can't help but imagine figures everywhere. Ernst's famous description is apt: "It is not to be despised, in my opinion, if, after gazing fixedly at the spot on the wall, the coals in the grate, the clouds, the flowing stream, if one remembers some of their aspects; and if you look at them carefully you will discover some quite admirable inventions. Of these the genius of the painter may take full advantage, to compose battles of animals and of men, of landscapes or monsters, of devils and other fantastic things which bring you honor."[30] Wilde, too, asks his viewers to discover the inventions of his paintings, and it's easy to do.

It should be noted that Wilde's grandfather resembles Sigmund Freud; that he sits next to a naked woman only strengthens the comparison.[31] The possible appearance of Freud in a Wilde painting is in keeping with the artist's general interest in Surrealism and, in turn, the Surrealist's

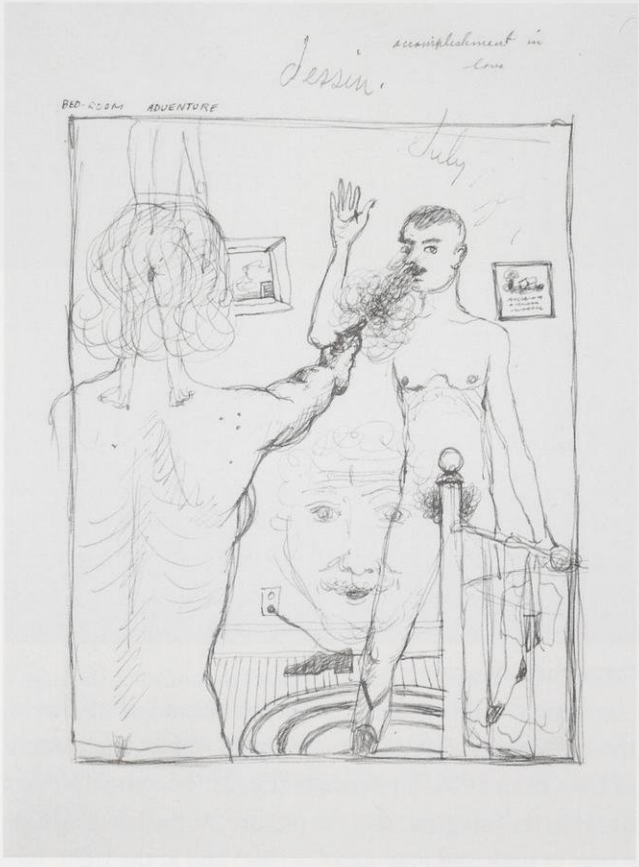

Figure 14. An image from *44 Wilde 1944*, Perishable Press Limited, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1984, Chazen Museum of Art, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

Figure 15. John Wilde (American, 1919–2006) *Work Reconsidered: Love After Murder*, 1989, oil on wood, 13 x 20 in., collection of William Wartmann.

reliance on Freud's theories. In several works in the McClain collection, signposts of Freud's psychoanalytic focus—the erotic and the traumatic—dominate.[32] Indeed, that Freud developed much of his thinking about the unconscious while working with traumatized war veterans is also interesting, given the anxious themes that surfaced during Wilde's wartime experience and then evolved throughout his career.

The primal struggle between the life and death drives, the basis of Freudian theory, seems to inform the content of *Love*, from 1958, for example (cat. 2). Two principle acts occur in the foreground of the picture. At the left, a *ménage à trois* in pink and gray unfolds (life) and at the right, two dogs eat the entrails of a blue woman stabbed with a knife (death). The odd coloring of the figures recalls Ernst's predilection for colored skin (see fig. 12). The scene of *Love* occurs on a grassy lawn with two Abercrombie-like trees holding up a line with decorative pendants. Three similarly ornamental birds fly above the flags in the sky of a deep Wisconsin landscape. Like the medieval martyr scenes Wilde saw in different museums, the grotesque is regally conveyed. Somehow the scene also recalls Edouard Manet's radical appropriation of a Titian composition in *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)* (fig. 13) with its odd arrangement of clothed men and naked women at the left side of a picnic scene.

Despite the art historical lineage, Wilde's picture is disturbing to behold. The commingling of violence and sex recalls the darker vision of his wartime drawings as in *Woman Shooting Man,* (fig. 14), a preoccupation that lingers late into his career as evidenced by the lustful carnage in *Work Reconsidered: Love after Murder*, 1989 (fig. 15)

for example. Perhaps *Love* embodies the surrealist notion that "since the death drive is 'tinged with eroticism,' pleasure may be felt in destruction and desire aroused by death," as Hal Foster put it.[33] Or perhaps Wilde's *vanitas* theme resurfaces here as a larger allegory. Wilde said, describing the iconography of a dead animal and a nude in another work: "That is the death symbol, and the frontal nude is the life symbol and the sex symbol at the same time. It's that simple. There's immediate juxtaposition. It's basically the old idea of the beautiful figure with the skull—that's very traditional. The concept of death and the maiden ..."[34] Or maybe *Love* is both: a surrealist fascination with sex and death reborn in the American Midwest, and the theme of *vanitas* recuperated from northern Renaissance painting into Wisconsin art.

The dog that reaches between the blue nude's legs to eat at her body recalls the snake that slithers between the legs of the reclining nude in *Murder*, 1983 (cat. 12) another troubling work from the McClain collection. Based on one of the wartime drawings from almost forty years earlier, the painting follows much of the format as *Love* above. Against a deep Wisconsin landscape, one augmented by crags in the middle ground drawn from Italian Renaissance paintings (see fig. 16), a figure with closed eyes lays before another Abercrombie tree awaiting the striped phallic snake that makes its way toward her. Above, the sun has become the divine beach ball that Wilde employs in so many pictures, and echoes the leafy, round top of the tree.[35] With the title of 'murder,' the erotic scene becomes charged with the same pleasure/pain dichotomy in so much of Wilde's work.

The dangerous canine appears again in *The Great Dog of Night*, 1984 (cat. 13). With his rapacious maleness and bright red tongue—the sharpest color in an otherwise muted landscape—the great dog moves across the night sky bearing a white nude who rests against his dark flank. She sleeps unaware or unafraid of the force that swiftly moves her across the sky and she is the color of the moon that illuminates the Wisconsin landscape below her. Her eyes are closed like many women of symbolist art—Munch's, Rodin's, Klimt's, for closed eyes measure an inwardness; they convey moods or states of feelings. The

Figure 16. Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia (Italian, 1417–1482) *St. John the Baptist Entering the Wilderness,* 1455/60, tempera on panel, 26 x 13 in., Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1010, reproduction, Art Institute of Chicago.

contentment she seems to embody also recalls the comfortable pairings of women and beasts in Henri Rousseau's *The Dream*, 1910 (fig. 17), a favorite of the Surrealists. And yet the aggressive masculinity of the dog places the picture in the company of Wilde's other sexually charged work. Such ambiguity of meaning is typical to Wilde's *oeuvre* as a whole and it is what gives the pictures their edge.

The canine protagonist returns in perhaps the most troubling piece of the entire McClain collection, *The Story of Jane & Joan* (figs. 18–19). In twenty-four pages of image and text, Wilde tells the story of attraction, love, jealousy, and death. The simple text recounts how the dog meets Jane, then Joan, then the two women meet and the dog is forgotten, Jane and Joan part, the dog returns to Joan, Jane kills Joan, then the dog kills Jane and devours both.[36] The narrative is grotesque but the drawing style is splendid with Wilde's customary northern Renaissance figure types, a landscape background, and occasional still life props all in perfect concert. The perversely horrible is beautifully rendered as in so much of Wilde's work, for *The Story of Jane and Joan* both captivates and repels. *Jane and Joan* is a parable of life where "...nothing is 'given' as real except our world of desires and passions, that we can rise or sink to no other 'reality' than the reality of our drives—for thinking is only the relationship of these drives to one another...," as Nietzsche puts it for Wilde, who puts it for us.[37]

Figure 17. Henri Rousseau (French, 1844-1910) *Le Douanier (The Dream)*, 1910, oil on canvas, 6 ft. 8 1/2 in. x 9 ft. 9 1/2 in., gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 252.1954, © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

A few self-portraits complete the McClain collection: A small portrait of the artist, *Bemused and Befuddled*, 1990 (cat. 17), which recalls the work of some of Wilde's historical mentors, Dürer in particular; *Myself Æ 78, With Myself Æ 28,* 1997 (cat. 20) a magical moment where art allows the elder Wilde to meet the younger, and *In the Barn,* 1959 (cat. 3) although not a rendering of Wilde per se, is perhaps the most telling self-portrait of all. In a parody of Andrew Wyeth's famous painting, *Christina's World,* Wilde takes the crippled Christina and places her on the floor of a barn. This is Wilde himself, knocked out by the enterprise of art–making but still clutching a single still life prop in hand and surrounded by the accoutrements of his trade. Like the many depictions of the artist in his studio from Velázquez to Courbet, Wilde sets out an allegory of the artist's world—*Christina's world* made personal. On the walls of the barn hangs a girlie calendar titled, "John's Place," an American flag, a hat, a pencil holder with pencil, a bird head skeleton, and other miscellany. Ropes hang ominously from the rafters and graffiti on the door that reads, "We hate you," sets a dark tone. But what would one expect from an artist like Wilde for whom the act of painting brings forth existential woe just as it revels in the creative wonder of things. This is the ultimate irony in Wilde's work.

A final self portrait, *Muss es Sein? Es Muss Sein!,* 1979/81 (cat. 10) finds Wilde in the harlequin pants he's worn in other paintings seated amidst a taxonomy of skeletons and shells. His faithful nude symbol accompanies him there, and both look to the distant horizon where two moons rise. Wilde holds an instrument up to the sky to better understand nature's properties, but this will be to no avail and the progression of death, symbolized by the hundreds of bones upon which he and his nude companion sit, continue on indefinitely. Wilde can only measure and paint and measure and paint, and by doing so defy for a moment the tragedy of his own meaningless end.

The McClain collection is a tour de force of Wilde's imagination embodied in oil on canvas and marks of silver on paper. We behold here beautiful and frightening images of a mind given over to the uncanny, to the familiar made

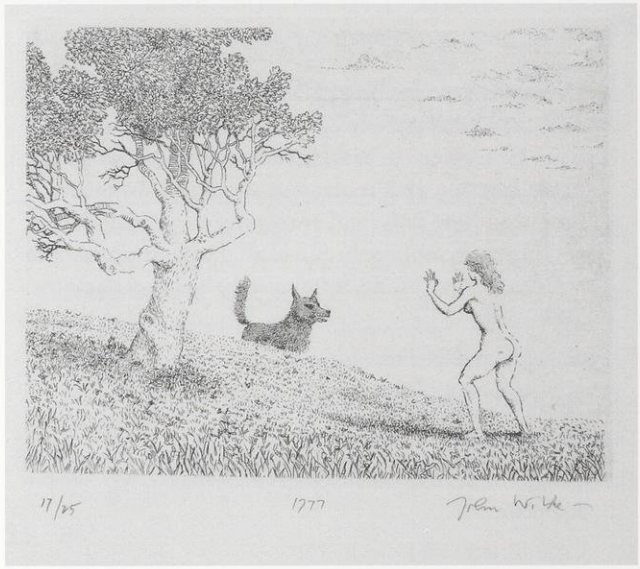

Figure 18. John Wilde (American, 1919–2006) "Jane & Great Dog Cavort" from *The Story of Jane & Joan,* The Perishable Press, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1977, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

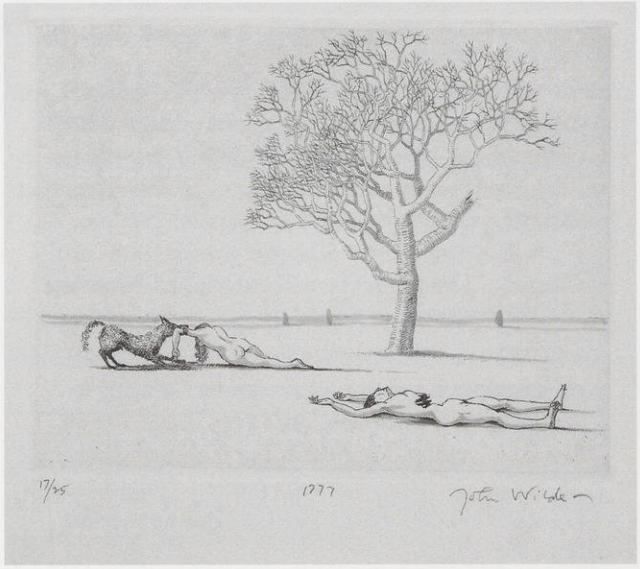

Figure 19. John Wilde (American, 1919–2006) "Great Dog Devours Jane and Joan" from *The Story of Jane & Joan*, The Perishable Press, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 1977, gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection.

unfamiliar, to the unveiling of forces within human nature that remain hidden in conventional society. Wilde coaxes out that which we only dream about, that which resides deep in our unconscious. And in his objects of wonder, objects so exceptionally crafted, he beseeches us to consider the beauty of the everyday as well as to anguish over its inevitable passing. In the Midwest, a master artist resided, one who took on the unfinished project of Surrealism, and delivered its peculiar conventions with great aplomb and conviction. A university professor who preferred the example of nature over the wisdom of the academy, Wilde created a timeless body of work whose prodigal musings marvel and enchant. In beholding a Wilde, we are for a moment suspended from the uncertainty of the real world and enter into the clarity of an unreal world. It is a form of transcendence that only great art allows, and it is one that relies on the senses to get us there. Wilde's gift for drawing and painting allows the unknowable to become visible. He is the magician in his fancy harlequin pants, with his magic tricks, and with his nude female helper. In every picture, the magic is convincing and divine.

Notes

1. Interview with the author, January 2006. I wish to thank John Wilde and his family for granting this interview during the precious last days of Wilde's life. Wilde's gentility, good humor, and spirit will be remembered along with the wonder of his art. I also want to thank my research assistant at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Caroline Ewing, without whom this project would not have been possible.
2. John Wilde is the fifth generation of paternal and maternal grandparents who emigrated from Germany to Freistadt, Wisconsin Territory, in the 1830s. For an excellent biography and description of his technical processes, see Nancy Eckholm Burkert, "John Wilde," *Leaders in Wisconsin Art 1936–1981* (Milwaukee Art Museum, 1982).
3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One and Part Two*, translated by Charles E. Passage (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), 19.
4. Robert Cozzolino, *With Friends, Six Magic Realists, 1940–1965* (University of Wisconsin–Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 2005), 75.
5. John Wilde, *What His Mother's Son Hath Wrought: Twenty-Four Representative Paintings with Excerpts from Notebooks Kept Off and On Between the Years Nineteen Forty Through Nineteen Eighty-Eight* (Mount Horeb, Wisconsin: Perishable Press, 1988), n.p. [opposite plate 10].
6. Russell Panczenko, "Interview with John Wilde," in *Wildeworld: The Art of John Wilde* (New York: Hudson Hills Press/Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1999), 28.
7. Heartfelt thanks to Carol Becker from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who provided important insights into Wilde and Surrealism.
8. Quoted in William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 64.
9. Tina Yapelli, "Interview with the Artist," *John Wilde: Eros and Thanatos* (Madison Art Center, 1993), 6.
10. See Michael Duncan, "Heretics of the Heartland,"*Art in America* (February 2006), 98–103, 142; Cozzolino, *With Friends;* and Isabelle Dervaux, *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum and Hatje Cantz, 2004).
11. "I had this great friend in Madison that nobody knows about anymore, Marshall Glasier. I think he was a great man. He's lost in the history so far. He was a tremendous book collector, and he was teaching at the Art Students' League in New York, and every once in a while I would get this big box of books full of all the latest philosophical ideas." John Wilde, interview with author, January 2006.
12. Cozzolino, *With Friends*, 2.
13. Duncan, "Heretics of the Heartland," 98.
14. Wilde, interview with author.
15. Wilde, *What His Mother's Son Hath Wrought*, n.p. [opposite plate 16].
16. Cozzolino, *With Friends*, 150.
17. See Nancy Eckholm Burkert, "John Wilde," *Leaders in Wisconsin Art 1936–1981* (Milwaukee Art Museum, 1982).
18. Yapelli, 13.
19. Wilde, *What His Mother's Son Hath Wrought* n.p. [opposite plate 11].
20. Wilde, interview with author.
21. Yapelli, p. 13.
22. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 138.
23. Wilde, *What His Mother's Son Hath Wrought,* [opposite plate 4].
24. Interview with author.
25. Bryson, 65.
26. Quoted in Burkert, *Leaders in Wisconsin Art,* 47.
27. "One thing they had in the Art History Department was a huge collection of very, very, very good reproductions called collotypes. I used to relish those. I never got tired of looking at them." Wilde, interview with author.
28. Yapelli, 6.
29. Interview with author.

30. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 428.
31. Wilde discussed his grandmother in this picture as a "proper lady, that's why I took her clothes off. The thing that gets me about this painting, and I don't know if you would want to mention it, or whether you even noticed it is the perspective isn't constant. And I wonder why I did that. I think I know perspective well enough not to make that kind of mistake, so I must have done it for a reason. It's just slightly off-kilter." Interview with author.
32. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), 11.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Yapelli, 14.
35. Wilde explained, "I like patterns in painting. I love them especially in the Renaissance where they use a lot of patterning, and in contemporary art where they use patterning. They're symbolic in so far as they represent the hand of man—man's craft, man's ingenuity, his ability to manipulate. They represent, too, the intrusion of mathematics." Yapelli, p. 11.
36. The play with lesbian love in *Jane and Joan* is found in other work and comes out of his interest in homosexuality in general. "It's a nod of recognition and respect for homosexual love and particularly for lesbian love," he claimed. "I'm just placing it in the world, in the natural world, to be given the same kind of credence as any other kind of physical love." Yapelli, 14.
37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* translated by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 66.

Lisa Wainwright

After studies at Vanderbilt University and a year living in Germany, Lisa Wainwright earned a Ph.D. at the University of Ilinois at Champaign-Urbana. Her work on modern and contemporary art secured her a position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she has taught since 1989. She is a professor in the Art History, Theory and Criticism Department and since 2004 has served as the Dean of Graduate Studies for the School. She writes and lectures widely on twentieth-century art.

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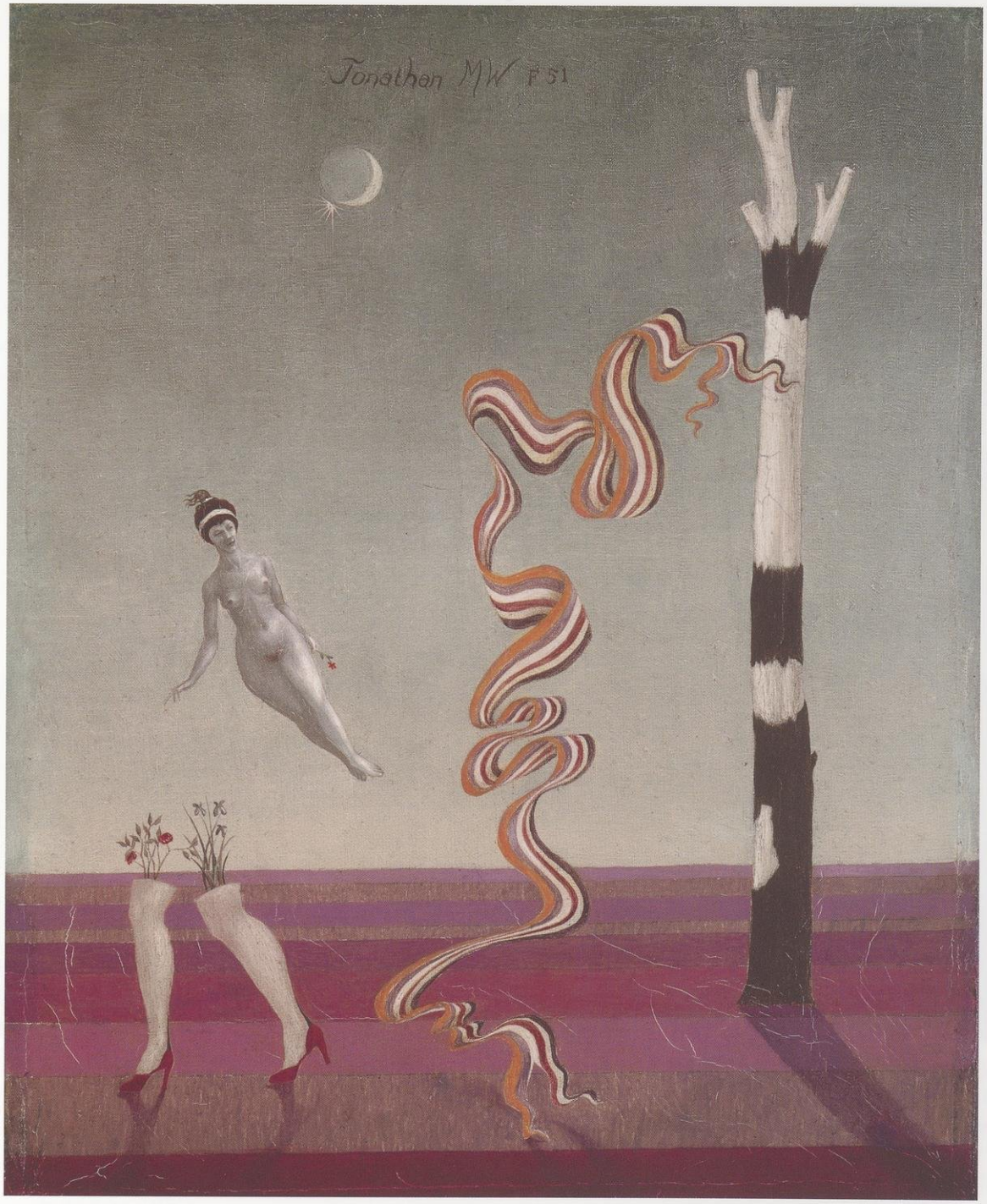
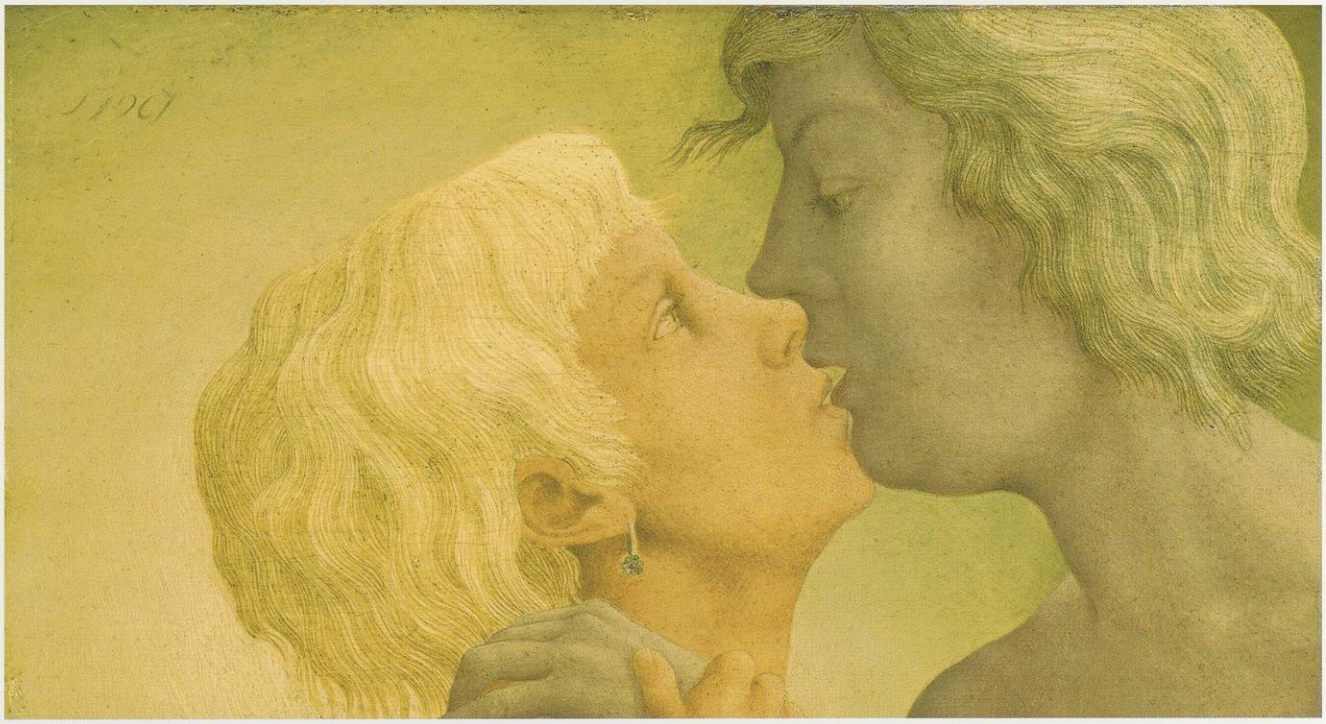
EXHIBITION CATALOG



Color plate 1
A Tribute to February 11, 1951
Oil on linen
10 x 8 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

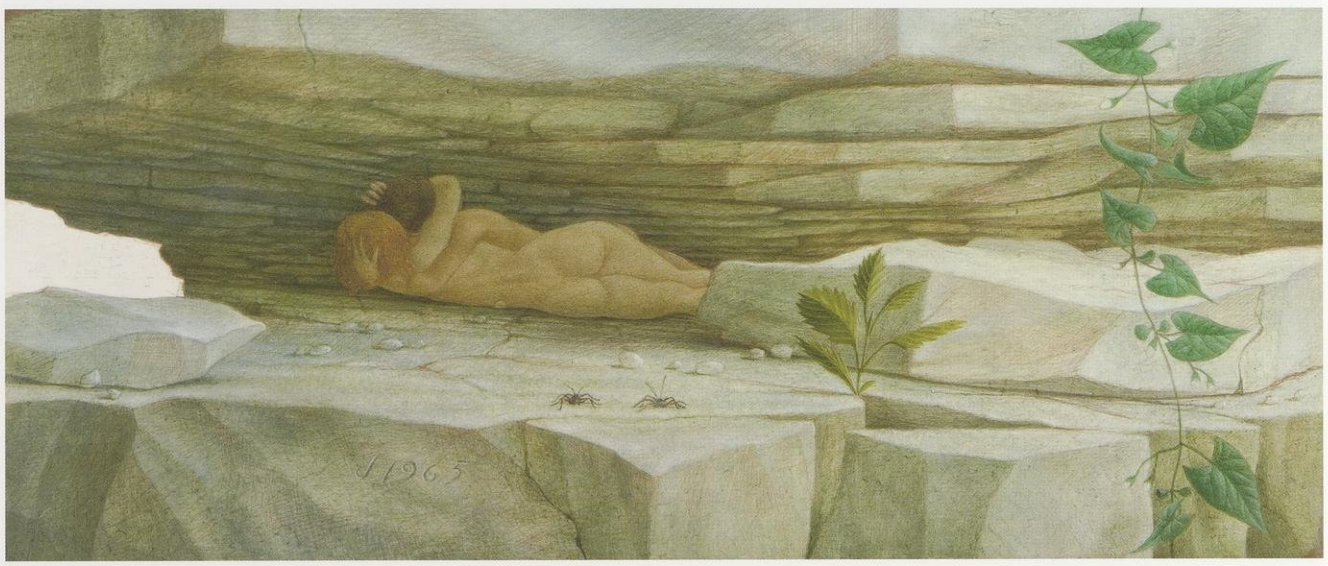
Color plate 2
Love, 1958
Oil on wood
10 x 12 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 3
In the Barn, 1959
Oil on wood
19 1/2 x 15 3/4 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

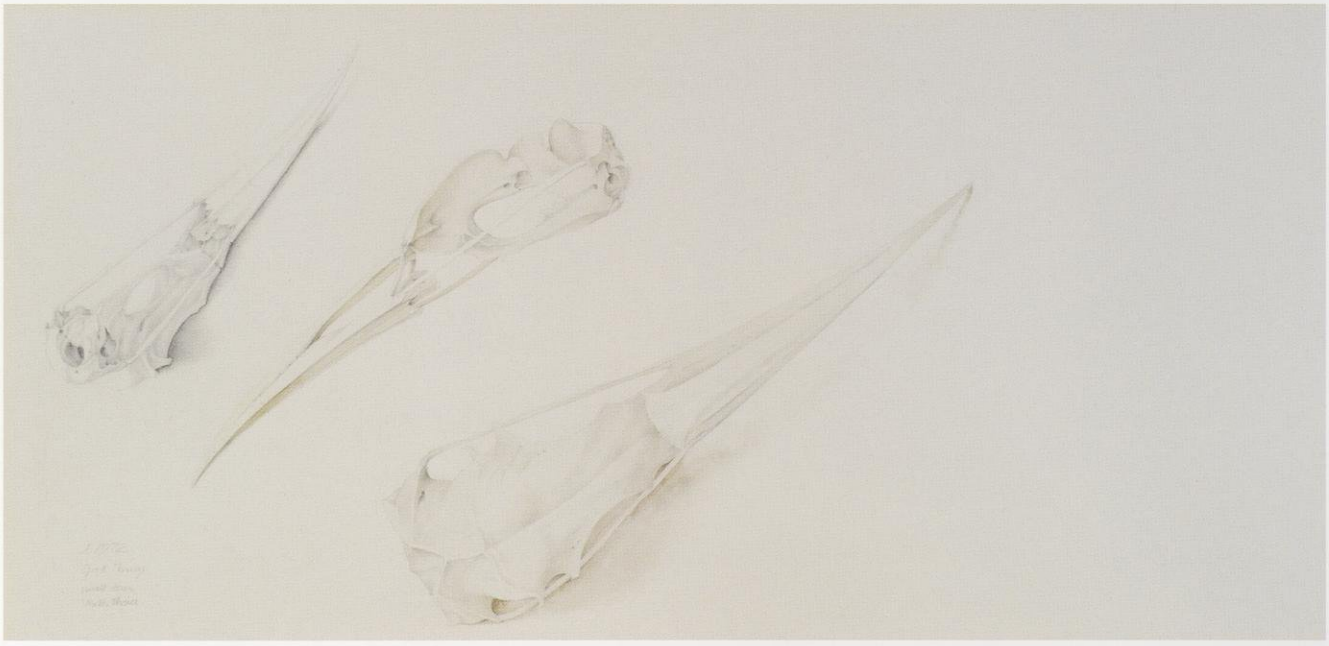


Color plate 4
The Kiss, 1961
Oil on wood
3 13/16 x 7 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 5
My Grandparents, 1962
Oil on wood
11 x 14 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection



Color plate 6
Limestone and Bindweed, 1965
Oil on wood
4 1/8 x 9 5/8 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection



Color plate 7
Good Things. Small Heron Skull, Thrice, 1972
Graphite and wash
9 x 14 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

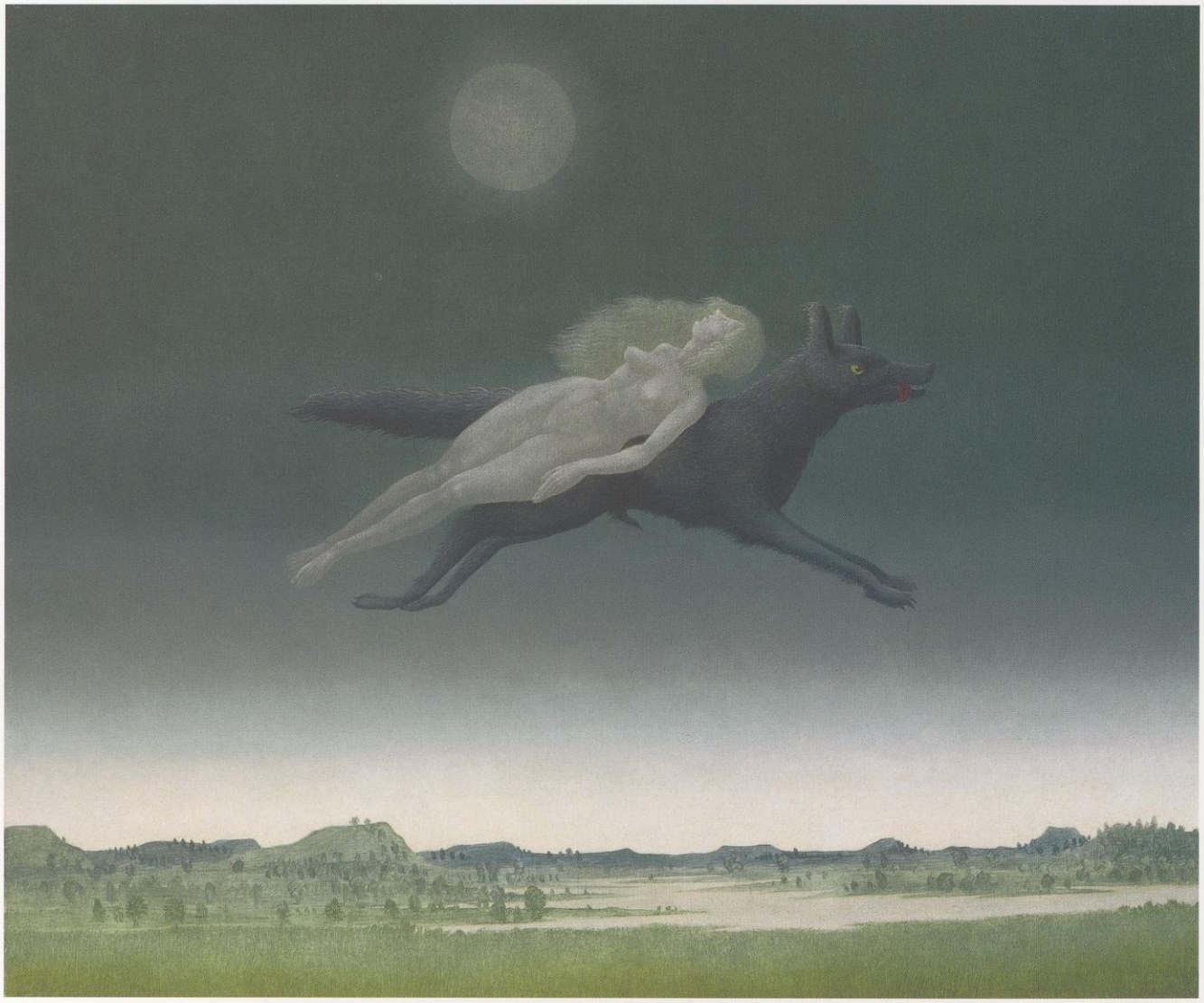
Color plate 8
Untitled (woman on a log), 1975
Oil on wood
8 x 10 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 9
9 Beans 2x, 1979
Oil on wood
4 x 8 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 10
Muss es Sein? Es Muss Sein! 1979–1981
Oil on wood
19 1/2 x 36 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 11
Celebration of the Month Series: July, the Green Basket, 1980
Oil on wood
16 7/8 x 20 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 12
Murder, 1983
Oil on wood
8 x 10 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

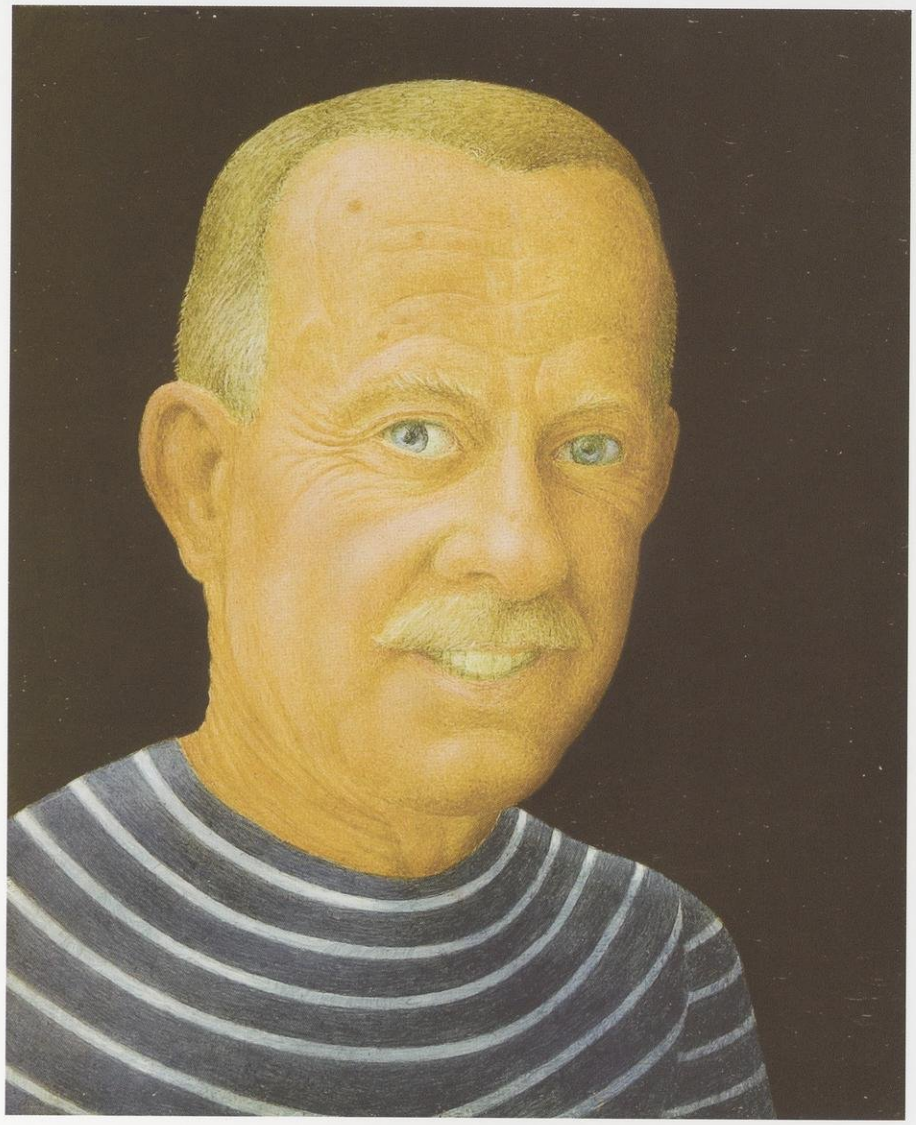


Color plate 13
The Great Dog of Night, 1984
Oil on wood
10 x 12 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 14
More Good Things, 1984
Oil on wood
13 1/2 x 16 1/2 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 15
A Costume That is Grown, Not Made, 1986
Silverpoint
14 3/4 x 9 1/2 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 16
Hats #4, 1988
Silverpoint
10 1/2 x 6 1/2 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection



Color plate 17
Bemused & Befuddled, 1990
Oil on wood
5 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 18
Nackte Fraulein #12, Mit Serviettenring, 1994
Silverpoint
5 1/8 x 6 1/2 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 19
Nackte Fraulein #20, Mit Birkerinde, 1994
Silverpoint
6 1/2 x 5 1/8 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

Color plate 20
Myself Æ 78, With Myself Æ 28, 1997
Silverpoint
11 1/8 x 6 3/4 in.
Gift of the William H. (Bill) McClain collection

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