



PHOTO BY BERNARD GOTTFRYD

Helen Miranda Wilson

an interview with **HAYDEN HERRERA**

Whether she paints a close-up of still-life objects—an orange stuck with cloves, for example, a leaf, a dandelion—or directs her vision to a vast, distant landscape of fields, hills, and sky, Helen Miranda Wilson’s work is both intimate and braced with a rigorous objectivity. The intimacy comes from the fact that for her, looking is a form of love. Like some irrepensible suitor, she comes back at her motif again and again, getting it down, getting it right. Her powers of observation are patient, persistent, devouring, and keen. There is a brilliant transparency between the artist’s eye and what her hand sets down on the small panels that are her chosen supports. The landscapes she painted between 1994 and 2001 could have been envisaged by the hawks and swallows that appear in some of her skies. The final image eliminates much of the clutter that can be felt in more obviously subjective works. Although her vision seems to go way beyond the subjective, like all great painters, Wilson transforms what she sees, and she is therefore present in every inch of the skin-like, matte surfaces of her paintings. In both her earlier representational images and the abstractions she has made since 2001, there is a tenderness and respect for the world she paints and for the process of painting that makes her art vivid and loveable.

She has lived in the same white frame house in Wellfleet ever since she was born, in 1948. Her attachment to every aspect of the Outer Cape—from the ocean and dunes to the trees, flowers, and vegetables (and beehives) in her garden—is deep. She is also attached to the people who live there, the community of artists and writers, the colleagues she works with in town government, and the large number of friends and acquaintances with whom she has contact in daily life. And she has strong ties to New York City as well, having for several decades spent the cold months of the year in a Manhattan loft she shared with her companion of thirty-seven years, the sculptor Timothy Woodman. Wilson’s first exhibition was at Wellfleet’s Cherry Stone Gallery in 1971. She shows regularly at the Albert Merola Gallery in Provincetown, and she is represented by DC Moore Gallery in New York City. Since the mid-1970s she has received much critical acclaim, and her work is included in the collections of several prestigious museums.

I interviewed Wilson, by phone and by e-mail, over a period of several months this spring.

Could you tell me why you turned to abstraction?

When we moved to Wellfleet full-time in 1999, I started working as a public servant on various appointed or elected Boards and Committees. Over the last eight years, I've served at various times on the Planning Board, the Selectboard, the Water Issues Advisory Committee, the Housing Authority, two Housing Task Force committees, the Shellfish Advisory Committee, and the Zoning Board of Appeals. Being mentally present during meetings is essential for deliberations and votes. Doing this is a far greater responsibility than making paintings, but the process of opening my mind to reality, so as to act, is much the same. And like any work done from observation, it's very stimulating.

My art practice had to adjust to all this or lose its meaning for me, and so, perhaps to stay in balance, I gradually lost my appetite for making pictures from what I saw in front of me. Starting with a series of valentines I made in 2001, I began to do patches of color, one next to another, first in gouache or watercolor, then in oil paint. I left out any illusion of space, subject matter, or descriptive drawing. I had had no deliberate plans to change my work. From a practical point of view, my still-life paintings and landscapes were still selling.

There was some precedent for this imagery. In 1981–83, I did a gloomy series of shapes, drawings in India ink and paintings, based on actual twists of cloth or paper that were equally abstract. While cleaning out the attic, I came across a crayon drawing of patches of color, one next to another, that I'd done in first grade, which I then stuck up in my studio. In the early '70s, I had also done some watercolor/gouaches that were based on quilts. I slept under a family quilt as a child. I bought a number of old quilts in the '70s, before the high-end market for them developed. I washed and repaired them and used them. I included them in some still-life setups and figure paintings. Being so radically beautiful, and mostly done by women, they gave me heart.

What is continuous between your earlier representational work and your more recent abstractions?

The size of the paintings—they're still small, although the surface of these new paintings is more casual, with occasional, slightly brushy, shiny patches. I still blend and blur the transitions between colors as I have been doing since I was twenty-five.

Why do you call your paintings with colored rectangles "calendar paintings"?

Just to identify them as different from some of the other series I've made: diary paintings, overlay paintings, landscapes, knots, skies, or still-life paintings. Gotta call them something so as not to drive the people at the galleries that show my work nuts.

To remember my engagements, I use an 8½ by 11 inch picture calendar printed by the Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank (where I've had an account since I was five). Each month has a page. The days are laid out in one fat rectangle next to another. When I'm doing them, I also think of quilts, flags, floor tiles . . . anything that has uncomplicated repetition without content. The choice to use "calendar" was casual. Now that I'm doing stripes, I think of rugs, but I think I'll just call them stripe paintings. "Rug paintings"? No.

After you finish a painting, how do you feel about it? Is the attachment to, or feeling about, one of your abstract paintings different from your feeling about one of your landscapes or still lifes?

I feel more or less satisfied when I finish any piece that I've made with my hands, whether it's a cake or a picture. It's completed when it's perfect. My favorite definition of perfection: something is perfect when there is nothing I would wish different about it—nothing more is wanted.

The famous, ultimate French dictionary, put out by Larousse, has a logo with a girl blowing apart a dandelion seed sphere with the words "Je sème à tout vent"—"I sow to all (the) winds." In that way, I make something, my enjoyment of its doneness ripens, and then, off it goes! No attachment.

I always like seeing them again though.



ABOVE: *TROPICAL*, 2007, OIL ON PANEL, 14 BY 11 INCHES, COURTESY DC MOORE GALLERY

FACING PAGE: *HELEN IN HER STUDIO*, 1993

The cowboy hat is worn to cut the glare of ambient light when Wilson works on a painting.

Do certain colors have specific associations or feelings for you?

Yes, but can I tell you what they are? Mostly not.

Except, maybe, blue. Blue was a color that my mother had around her a lot. For me, it's the color of goodness. Of sky and water. I thirst for blue.

Red is a color that I associate with Russian, a language I've learned, and so with that much-valued part of my psyche. The word for red in Russian is basically the same as the word for beautiful. And red is the color of warmth and of blood and so, of being alive, for vertebrate creatures like me.

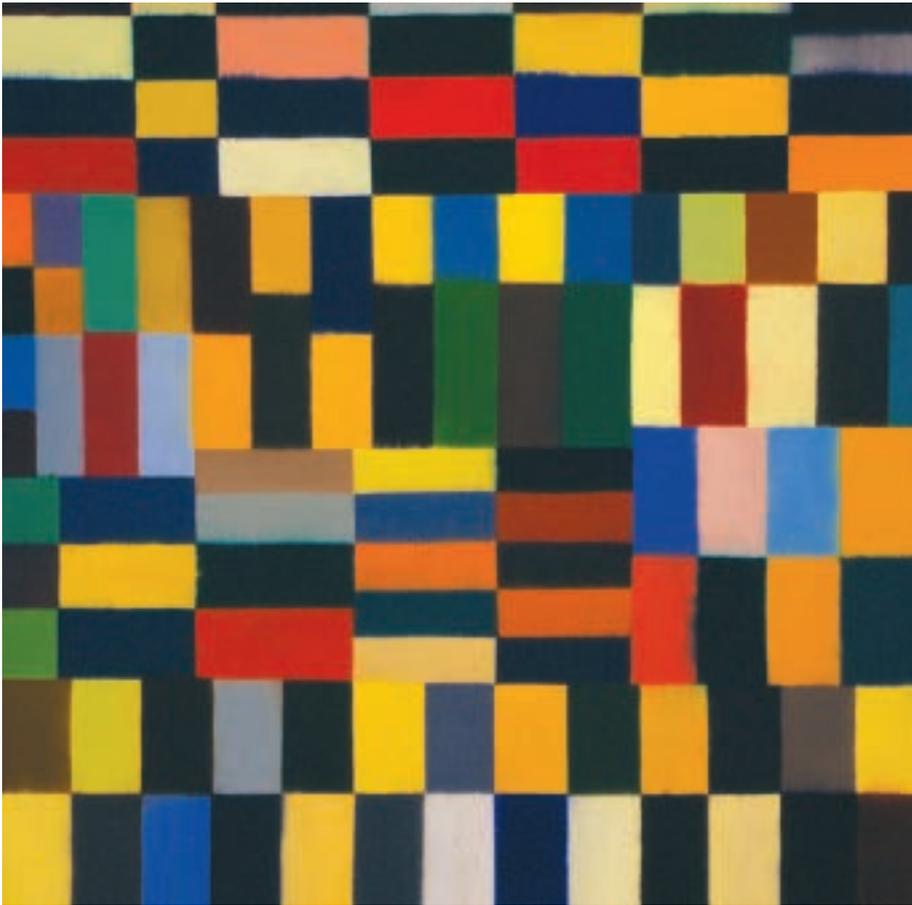
Green is the last color that we see as light fades. (I learned this from a theatrical lighting designer.) I treasure it. I have more greens for my palette than any other color. Viridian, Cadmium Green Light, Permanent Green Light, Permanent Green Deep, Cinnabar Green, Prussian Green: I feel like I'm outdoors in June, just listing them. Except for Cadmium Green Light, I can mix these colors, using various blues and yellows. But I like having them there in my paint larder. It gives me a sense of luxury and choice.

Can you describe your technique or painting process?

Well, there's the mechanics of it and then there's how to make the time for it and, most important, there's the quality of that time.

I sit when I paint or draw so my body is as relaxed as if I was reading. Some of my happiest times have been spent sitting still outdoors starting a painting with the ocean of nature moving slowly around me, trying to take it in, knowing that I would never get it all.

In the case of a quick drawing on a casual scrap, done when I'm out in the world, it feels like picking a bunch of flowers . . . I just gather what I can



REMBRANDT, FOR PAT LIPSKY, 2005, OIL ON PANEL, 12 BY 12 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

THE COLORS ON our palette betray us. The tubes of paint pigments available to us constitute a piece of humanist fiction. They are too warm, too happy, too easy-going: making it murderously hard to get even a bit of optical reality. It's a truism to say that paint was made for flesh, yes, but note that it is young and vibrant flesh that is privileged. Painters have always used an array of relational tricks, roughly spun out of ideas of film color, to do something about our all-too-jolly colors.

Reduce drawing and composition to minimums and concentrate almost solely on color—well, that's about as hard a job as any artist could want.

Wilson surprised me recently at a lecture by saying, several times in slightly different ways, that she chose to make these recent and beautiful color abstractions from a desire for privacy after years of using subject matter drawn from her life. I contend that these great paintings are to date the most public display of her most private desires. The most intimate discernment, the most rarified decisions, are in a sense listed here, one after another. Try—you will always finally fail—to find names for these colors and their relationships and you will see how rich and strange and full of meaning they are. Wilson said that one painting started with the colors implied by a friend's recipe for a fancy salad, and some in the audience took that as a sign of playful caprice, missing the point that it is at this level of thought and perception that we are most ourselves. Helen, you are exposed in these pictures.

And since we are on the Cape, I suppose we have to answer that one heavily accented question ringing over the dunes: "Does it work?" Looking at Wilson's new abstractions we see that question in all its mechanistic nastiness. Let's face it, in the world color always works and works perfectly. Her wonderful paintings—her colors—work because they are driven by her life.

— Thomas Nozkowski, *High Falls, New York*

and then feel more connected to what's around me.

I use oil paint with no medium. To clean my brushes I use an odorless solvent, but it's still toxic. I have an air filter that sucks up the fumes. I had to stop using my beloved turpentine because Tim became allergic to it (our studios are next to each other). I switched to synthetic brushes a few years ago and have never looked back. I'm glad not to be using natural bristles, a material whose production harms animals, like sables or badgers . . . although synthetic bristles are a product of the petrochemical industry! I usually listen to the radio while I paint, mainly National Public Radio. I used to prefer music, but about ten years ago I got very hungry for the news. I can also paint and talk on the phone at the same time, but not when I'm starting a new piece or when I'm very tired at the end of the day. I prefer natural light but sometimes am in there until midnight, using full-

spectrum, florescent bulbs. During the day, I like the sense of time passing in its unmanageable way. At night, unless there's a moon, the hours are all the same and I have a sense of unlimited, timeless opportunity. There's less urgency. It can take as long as it takes.

After five or six hours, my body starts complaining, but if I'm working wet into wet, like with the sky paintings or with what I'm doing now, I usually just keep going until it's done . . . ideally, nine to ten to twelve hours with short breaks for lunch or chores or visiting my cats.

Up until I began doing public service in 1999 I painted every day, with some notable exceptions. In the '80s, I studied with Margaret Israel, working with clay for two years at Greenwich House in the West Village. It felt like having an extramarital affair, stealing fire from my painting. I once spent six months learning about and working in film. In '91-'92, after Tim and I bought a piece of land (now sold) I spent seven months, all day, every day, designing two alternative houses for the site. This took me a long time because I wasn't an architect! Neither one got built, but I learned a lot and truly enjoyed myself. Now, with the Town work, there are some days when I don't paint at all, but I am refreshed by alternating between the two major activities. I can draw (sometimes during meetings). I do gouaches at home, interstitially. I don't seem to be less productive or motivated. In fact, I seem to thrive on doing more than one thing. Pleasure always finds time for itself. After all the meetings I go to, I am more than ever drawn to the alternative joys of being in my studio. It feels like a vacation from the right side of my brain.

Unlike many other artists, I don't have assistants, although sometimes, when I'm going through my mailing list or washing my brushes out in the middle of the night or cleaning the house, I wish I did.

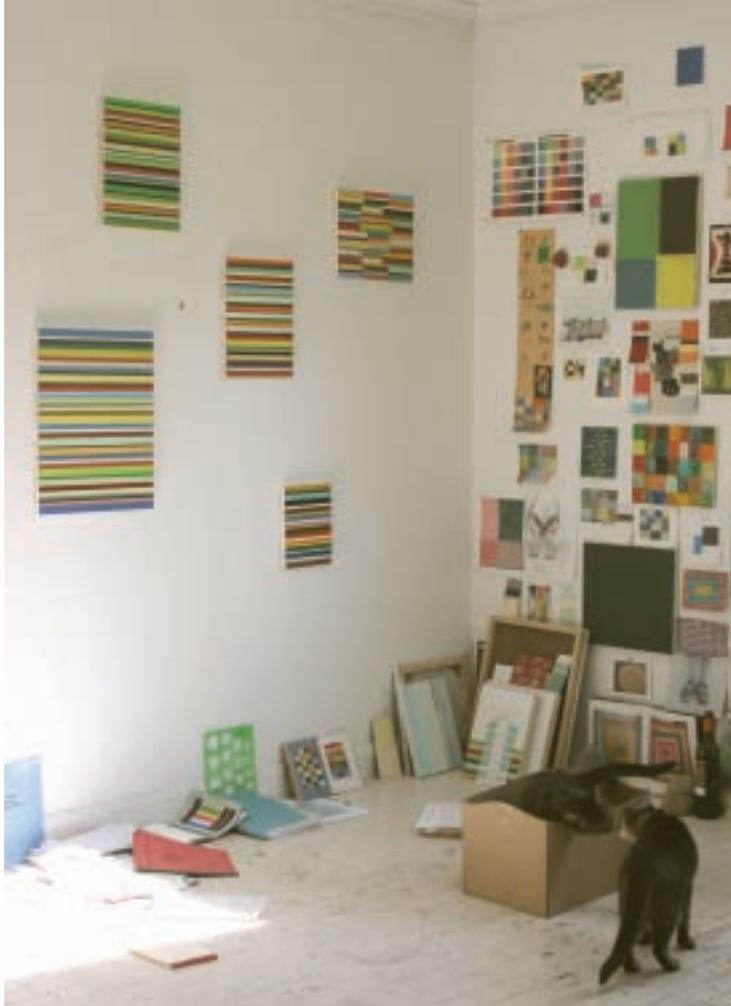
Could you talk about your creative process, as opposed to technical procedures? How do you begin? How do you compose? How do you make choices about shapes, colors, subject matter, or mood?

I can't give myself orders as to how or when I should paint any more than I can tell myself what to dream while asleep. I work whether I'm happy or sad. When I'm busy or when time goes by slowly. I don't think about what I'm going to paint or draw beforehand if I can help it. Just get in my studio, get in front of a surface, do the first thing that comes into my head, or pick up where I left off the last time. I even deliberately prevent myself from thinking about what I might make a picture of, or what I want to change in one I've been working on, unless I am right there doing it, or about to. No plans! No intellectual choices about what style or content I think I should use! I put way more thought into deciding what to cook for supper.

Since I have many things I want to make images of, whenever I'm ready, all I have to do is sit down and start. I prefer to make one picture at a time. I *dwell* in it until it's done. I get stalled only if I don't have enough primed panels, paper, paint, brushes, solvents, etc., at hand.

A big difference in how I work now is that the whole time I am in a mellow, one-color-at-a-time state. I don't need to maintain the electric attention that wild animals give to hunting for food, which I *had* to have when I gathered what I was looking at so as to bring it into an image when I was working from direct observation.

My low-key life as an artist doesn't permit me to have many shows in many places, but at least what I do release will always have a loaded, resolved quality.



WILSON'S WELLFLEET STUDIO, MAY 2007

when they're gone. Then, I want to make more . . . I usually start something new right away. I'm like a hen, filling her nest.

Installing a show, even someone else's, is perhaps the thing I like best of all about having exhibitions, a reward in itself. It's better than chocolate! (Happens much less often.)

Seeing the work in a gallery's neutral space helps me think about it. (As is the case for many artists.) It separates what I've made from the matrix of my home with its multitudinous matters . . . my studio is very messy. It's like working in the woods! I am fortunate in that most of what I've ever shown has been sold, so I also associate shows with making some money.

Why do you paint on small panels? In your work, what is the meaning of size versus scale?

I guess "small" is my natural size, my tendency. It's like a sexual preference. And I can sit down peacefully when I work, face-to-face with the surface. I don't have to step back all the time to see the whole thing, which I would have to do with big pictures. When I paint landscape, it's easier to pack an 8 by 10 inch panel up a mountain than to drag a great, billowing canvas along. And it's a lot easier to carry it down, wet. But look at Rackstraw Downes or Sylvia Plimack Mangold . . . they paint on big surfaces outdoors. Beekeeping or gardening for hours takes as much energy as that does. So I think that, really, it's just that I like it. It's my kink!

I have done some big pictures, usually on canvas: 8 by 6 feet, 9 by 12 feet, etc., and one 6 by 21 foot drawing. This was before 1983, when I had a long illness that made it painful to stand for hours. After that, Pavlov's dog didn't want to paint big anymore. It's neurotic, I know. But I didn't stop wanting to work, so I allowed myself to stop making large paintings.

Scale? If I indicate a tiny, definite detail in a small painting, it makes any larger part of that image look vast. It's never about the size of the surface—

What kind of response do you want the viewer to have when looking at your work?

I expect nothing. I have no desire to have a response. If my work gets visited at all, I am surprised and I enjoy it.

This isn't a chosen, rational attitude. Of course, I know that if I give my stuff to a gallery it usually gets shown and that people have their own reasons for looking at art and liking it or buying it, which have nothing to do with me. But privately, I am filled with wonder. Or at least, at this stage, I don't assume it will happen. This is not modesty or lack of self-esteem. It's that I make art to meet my own needs, not those of others. It's as if someone was fascinated by what I had for breakfast (coffee!): it's important to me, but why should they care? That said, I do realize that commercial success, which is based somewhat on people responding positively to my work, gives me more choice and more money, which I do like and need. So I organize myself to have that, insofar as I can and still remain myself. In any case, it's not all up to me.

What role does having exhibitions play in your work process?

It's nice to have a show on my calendar; it builds a fire under me. It always clears my head. And my studio! I love the bare, white walls when everything's all packed and shipped. I often have a herd of twenty to twenty-five pieces, so that's a lot of Empty



ME AND HIM, 2007, OIL ON PANEL, 11 BY 11 INCHES, COURTESY DC MOORE GALLERY



CHRIS SMILING, 1974, OIL ON CANVAS, 11 BY 13 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Christopher Walling, who also grew up in Wellfleet, is a famous jewelry designer. This is one of a series of heads done in 1974.



THE THREE OF US, 1978, OIL ON CANVAS, 7.875 BY 8.125 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

12 by 12 inches of vaporous sky with a frieze of trees less than an inch high along the bottom, gives the eye many miles of space.

Why do you paint on panels instead of canvas?

I like the smoothness and I like that there is no give when I lean into my brush. It means my hand has to be more poised and alive as the paint reaches the surface. I have to be more sensitive, more *there*. In small paintings, even the slight texture of the weave in a canvas becomes visually significant. I want everything in the end result to be useful to the magic of the image. I don't want it to be an object or even a reference to me. I want the material aspects of the piece to be relatively ignorable. I used to recess the strips I glued on the back so that the paintings seemed to float on the wall. They were very fragile like that, so I stopped.

With the panels I now use, I spend time making sure the priming paint drips over the wooden edges, which I then sand smooth to soften the way they look when seen from the side, where they meet the wall.



FRANCESCA'S BOX, 1983, OIL ON PANEL, 8.187 BY 12 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION
Tim's first cousin, Francesca Woodman, was a close friend of Helen's. Both women loved thrift-store fashion. This diary painting is about an afternoon spent trying on vintage clothes. The blue image on the wall is one of Woodman's caryatid blue prints.

What is the role of drawing in your art?

It's always been my best method to discover what I'm looking at. When I was twenty-four, living in Ithaca while Tim went to Cornell, I noticed that I was so dependent on line for describing things that I had little or no sense of tonality, of light and dark. And that color was a secondary interest. So, for a number of years, I mostly used only the side of a pencil when I drew and blurred the demarcations between colors in my paintings with my fingertips and, later, with fan brushes (which I still do). No lines! I rewired my brain and developed a better sense of color and contrast.

Do you ever wish you worked in a more free and spontaneous technique, for example, like the Abstract Expressionists? Why is control so important to you?

Control? That word perhaps means something different to you than "fear-based restraint," which is what it means to me.

If the question is "Do I want to paint more like Willem de Kooning?"—one of my favorite, life-sustaining painters—the answer is no. I don't wish to work in any way that is false to my temperament. I don't see the world as torn apart by my senses.

Rather, the more I look at something, the more whole it seems. I am calm with awe in relation to what I want to paint (even if it's only a single color) so my brush makes easy gestures, moving like you would around a cat or a horse. This does not contribute to an Expressionist, gestural style, which calls attention to the beauty of itself, rather than what's being painted.

Could I be more free or spontaneous in making my marks? The style of my pictures *does* appear very deliberate to me, very settled. Intense. I often find shapes the way a plow carves a row in the earth. But it's the opposite of censored. Perhaps that's not what you see because I don't leave every stroke I make for anyone to notice in the final state, but that's OK. I don't need to sell you on my desirable lack of control. I leave it up to you, the viewer, as I said earlier, to see whatever it is you see. I'm "painterly" only when I do the first layer on a landscape, outdoors, trying to get everything in as fast as I can. Or in the ink drawings that I did with a sumi brush in the '90s.

Having the skill to make a deliberate line or to sit quietly, breathing and letting my hand make marks that flow over a surface, is more a meditation than a management. Quiet isn't always restrained. Reticent isn't always fearful.

The diary paintings: What made you want to paint subjects close to your own life?

It was the best way to consider my life, as I was living it. It was a way for me to tell myself my own secrets.

And how close are the images to events and feelings in your life?

Sometimes the image is exactly what you would have seen if, for example, you had walked into a room with me in it, with or without knowing my circumstances. Other paintings are representative in the same way that a Madonna and child icon brings our thoughts to the long-ago life of Mary and Jesus. In that case, a woman holding a baby is emblematic of a universal, narrative legend. In my case, even if the scene was like no actual instant in my real life, it had some kind of personal, inner truth for me. No matter how specific my imagery was, what I was representing was always obscured because people bring their own stories to any picture, which is what lends any subject matter a dimension of glamour, giving it a power way beyond what any artist can put into it.

In some of your early paintings, especially the simplified beach scenes, the drawing of figures, and sometimes objects, is stylized in a way that could be called folkloric or primitivistic. Is there a reason for this?

I wasn't working directly from life in the beach pictures, so the lack of detail came easily. I used some of the visually emphatic idioms found in Persian and Indian miniatures, as well as those of Sassetta, a fifteenth-century Italian painter; early American limners; and, of course, two genres I grew up with: Russian icons and American comics. Stylization makes a figure less specific, more representative of anyone's mythologies. I liked the Everywoman flavor it gave my self-portraits in the diary paintings.

Now that you have turned to abstraction, do you see the landscape differently? Is your eye less hungry than it was when you were looking for, or at, potential motifs?

It is different now. When I'm looking at trees and skies these days, my eye is as hungry, but it doesn't taste as much when it eats. It's the difference between a musician playing a piece of music, note by note, or only hearing it. I am still way more able to experience what I see than if I had never spent years painting from observation. Now, however, I don't spend as much time visiting the many parts of what I'm looking at with my eyes. And so, later I can't remember it as well. My visual enchantment is limited. I also take in less with my other senses than I used to unless I slow myself down and get into the detail of it all, visually and otherwise. I practice that. Close my eyes and smell the apple or a handful of earth. Look at the color of leaves with the sun on them next to their color in shadow.

Many of your landscapes offer the viewer a vast distance to look at, yet there is also a feeling of intimacy. Is this because as we enter the space of your paintings our eye settles on some small detail such as a tree, a bird, or a pair of horses?

For me, intimacy is knowing someone or something without judgment. Scrutinizing or analyzing or trying to control does not make for intimacy. When I look at everything I can possibly see so as to record it, I get to really



THE RED CRANE, 1987, OIL ON PANEL, 7 BY 10.75 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

NEW YORK'S WATERY SELF would seem a natural and inevitable subject for painters, since so much of the city fronts on or is surrounded by rivers and bays—all, of course, flowing in and out of the Atlantic. But by the same token that seeing the water at our back door can come as a treat-like surprise for many New Yorkers, so there have been relatively few distinctive painters to embrace it as a significant subject. George Bellows was an exception, especially in muscular works from around 1910 where he makes it appear as though life along the Hudson River, seen, say, on a sunny morning after a snow, represented a natural part of a New Yorker's existence.

Helen Miranda Wilson is another exception. On and off over many years, and with particular emphasis during the second half of the 1980s, she made a number of masterfully atmospheric, characteristically small-size views of the Hudson and East Rivers and of the Bay of New York, all seen from high up and far away and marked by a beautifully pale and even-toned light. At the time, Wilson divided the given year with the colder months spent in New York and the warmer ones on Cape Cod. She is from the Cape, and is deeply attuned to and influenced by the natural life of the region. Perhaps she wanted to paint water when she was in New York because the city's abundant if generally overlooked marine identity made the place more Cape-like and homier. Working from convenient rooftops or from downtown buildings with good views, she certainly caught the way, depending on where you are situated, New York, like the Cape, can be a perch over an enveloping arena of soft, water-suffused light, a site to go to when you want time to run a little slower.

Like some of her other Hudson River pictures of the era, Wilson's 1987 *The Red Crane* is a view toward the workaday, semi-industrial, and unlovely opposite shore, in this case Jersey City. It is a place whose topography, in all its brownish-gray dinginess, has been clearly captured, an achievement since the painting is all of seven inches high. A collection of silhouette-flat shapes, the sprawl of buildings is also an abstraction in the making.

Unlike most of Wilson's small-size city panoramas, *The Red Crane* is marked by bits of brilliant color. We see, jutting in ever so slightly at the bottom of the picture, the top of the crane, which is a vivid red, and the top of a nearby cargo container, marked by yellow and green stripes. The jump from these bright, toy-like objects in the foreground to the milky gray, winterbound city across the water is spatial and psychological, and gives the picture its point. In a flash, the space between foreground and background—and our sense of where the artist, and we the viewers, fit in with it all—becomes wonderfully tense and uncertain.

The Red Crane probably wasn't a pivotal work for Wilson, but it suggests the many-sidedness of her thinking. It contains the painter of the subtlest effects of light and distance, and it looks forward to the painter who, in the mesmerizing abstract, checkerboard-like paintings she began doing a few years ago, gives a kind of poetic order to what for most of us are bewildering arrays of color. With its sly sense of space, *The Red Crane* more than hints at the wit, and the feeling for unusual, even awkward, visual conjunctions, that underlie much of Wilson's art. None of which, however, takes away from the specific subject at hand: New York's waterfront, covered here with acuity and affection.

— Sanford Schwartz, October 2006

know it. When I touch it with my eyes, I love it *all*. The details are a result of my physical pleasure in seeing them.

The product of this can, in a sense, radiate what I took in.

In your landscapes there is usually a lot of sky. You have also made paintings of the sky with no land below. What is it about sky that draws you so?



THE HEARTBEAT, HYDRA, GREECE, 1988, OIL ON PANEL, 6.5 BY 17 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

It's beautiful! It's the ultimate translucence, nothing solid, all the way out, forever, for always. The deepest space. And it's fugitive. At certain times of day, in certain weather, the light changes so quickly that I have to be *very* awake to paint it. It excites me. I've gotten an adrenaline rush while painting a sunset. Maybe looking at the sky has been placed into our genetic material as a way to know time: as a variation of light, never twice exactly the same. There's a reason we call what we see above us "the heavens."

In 1998 I had a show of just sky pictures at Jason McCoy. I had begun doing landscapes with more sky and less water or land in them, and at a certain point I lifted my eyes and left off all reference to land or water in painting after painting. The first ones were a number of large (for me) graphite drawings of the night sky and *Swallows* (1991).

And perhaps I'm drawn to looking into atmospheric space by personal

mythology. I am descended from generations of astronomers (the Struves) on the Russian side of my family, from the time of Peter the Great, up through the last century. When Tim was going to Yale graduate school, he took a course in astronomy. I got to look through the telescope at the observatory, and it remains one of the most profound physical experiences of my life. My hair stood on end. I wanted to stand there forever.

Can you describe the role of memory in your landscapes?

I got better and better at memorizing what I was working from outdoors so that I could continue to develop the painting back in my studio. When painting the more-detailed series of landscapes I made between 1984 and 2001, if I tried to continue on the same panel at the same site, on another day, even if the weather was the same, I found that I always had to start over, from scratch. I'd get confused. It was always a little bit different. But having only one shot at committing to memory a frieze of hills in Greece on one hot morning in July (with the smell of jasmine wafting around me) wasn't hard. After noting the exact chord of shades of blue Aegean sea in the foreground with loose strokes on the panel, I could revisit it at home. And reexperience it, which felt wonderful. I didn't want to delegate my experience to a camera and lose the chance to feel my brain around it, so I obtained it by seeing it intensely. After awhile, recalling it later was as easy as remembering a song or a sexual experience.

I recently saw MRI-type photographs that showed which parts of the brain are stimulated when our eyes *see* a place. Those sites are also stimulated when we later *remember* what was seen, only less so. This maybe explains to me why I got the same buzz, working this way.

Also, memorizing what I'm looking at brings out my inner chimp! Tetsuro Matsuzawa, a Japanese primatologist, has found that chimpanzees have a better "immediate memory" function than humans, who seem to have relegated the storage of much information to language or "learned symbolization."

What prompted the overlay paintings?

Maybe I was just lazy. The first one I did is a self-portrait drawn in thinned, white paint over a nocturne (night landscape) that I had kicking around in the studio on a day when I had run out of fresh surfaces, primed and ready to go. These paintings always include two layers of imagery, the first drawn in a palimpsest over the other, depicting landscapes, creatures, plants, as well as objects.

Do they come from looking through the inscriptions and drawings done with a diamond-point pencil on the windowpanes of the two houses I grew up in, to the trees and sky outside? Wanting to work with something more formally complicated than one-place-at-one-time? Do they come from my love of Miró's paintings?



PARTY NIGHT, WELLFLEET, 1985, OIL ON PANEL, 13.625 BY 13 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION
Painted after a dance party at the summer home of B. J. and Robert J. Lifton.

Maybe juxtaposing two sets of subjects was one way to make visible the dual activities of painting and thinking of something else at the same time . . . which is not special to me, of course.

Anyway, it was a short run. I only had one show of the overlays at the Jason McCoy Gallery in 1995, and then later had some in a three-person show at Tibor de Nagy (with Sharon Horvath and Rudy Burkhardt). Haven't done one since *Years*, in 1996.

They began to feel not straightforward enough. I had them framed before I showed them, which was unusual. Before, and since, I mostly feel that frames gild the lily. They can visually ruin my landscapes even if they protect them. Years ago I had an ink stamp made that I use on the backs of paintings. It reads "This painting is not meant to be framed."

How did you decide to become a painter?

In 1969, there was a turning point. I had an aptitude for learning certain skills and an aversion to others, like anybody else: I drew a lot, was very good at learning languages, spent a lot of time in high school writing poetry, cleaned houses from when I was twelve, had a green thumb, and relished any planning activity that involved coordinating many aspects of a whole. When I got older, I knew I had to support myself and realized that if I did something I had an appetite for, that I might succeed. I already knew what it felt like not to have a purpose, having been lost and sad for much of my adolescence. After I flunked out of Barnard College in my first year, I floundered, working at small jobs. It felt terrible.

Drawing from observation was the thing that was easiest for me at that time, so at the age of twenty-one I decided to go to the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, which was then the equivalent of a rigorous trade school. It featured an eight-hour day, five days a week, of straight studio time. Anyway, in painting I found something, although I didn't know that then, that I could stick with enough to do it one day at a time, for years. My subsequent well-being came from a delight in the reality of working from life, in a place before words. I changed how I drew. I learned how to use oil paint. I was living in the present for the first time since I was a baby. I felt undivided and physically effective and honest. And because I had grown up in a financially unstable, relatively bohemian environment (my father died in debt), having a regular, middle-class income didn't seem like a necessary part of being a grown-up. Having a vocation did.



SWALLOWS, WELLFLEET, 1991, OIL ON CANVAS, 11.875 BY 11.5 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

In the summer of 1970, after my first year at Studio School, I went to an art camp in Skowhegan, Maine, where I met Timothy. We hooked up and, within a year, we shacked up. He loved me for being an artist. Having love, sex, a lovely home life, and a professional soul mate to pinch pennies with really helped. And I had some good friends who were also coming up as artists, so being a painter didn't seem lonely, even if it meant being in my studio all day.

After two years at Studio School, I was out on my own, and began showing and selling my work. My first exhibit was with Sally Nerber and Liz Upham at the Cherry Stone Gallery in Wellfleet, which was also their first show! Having their support at that stage was crucial.



ANTELLA, SEPTEMBER, TUSCANY, 1989-1990, OIL ON PANEL, 9.875 BY 9.875 INCHES
PRIVATE COLLECTION



THE NIGHTINGALE, ANTELLA, TUSCANY, 1989, OIL ON PANEL, 9.875 BY 11.875 INCHES
PRIVATE COLLECTION



AT THE TRANSFER STATION, 1999, OIL ON PANEL, 9.125 BY 12.125 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

THE WELFLEET DUMP used to have a magnificent, tangled pile of trash, which was plundered by everyone. The DPW employees would fluff it up periodically with a bulldozer and occasionally cart it away. I pulled many useful items out of it over many years and used to walk around it greedily, hoping for treasures. The pale blue sofa was there, just as it is, in the vast parlor of recycling heaven. That stuff is now all put in a dumpster and so is much harder to scavenge, which many people mind.

The leggy, second-growth pines were once part of a thick patch that came up too close together, like weeds, from a bare slope. When she first saw it, Hayden told me that the black inside the uprooted catch basin on the left reminded her of certain paintings of the resurrection of Christ, where the mouth of his tomb is seen as a bottomless rectangle of darkness. I did see many versions of this when Tim and I lived in Italy in 1973, and in Russian icons, when I visited the Soviet Union in 1970. What I painted was there at the dump on that day, but I think she's probably right: the image has those associations for me, conscious or not. And is the broken hose *The Snake in the Garden*? Maybe so. I do know that while I was there getting it down on the panel, the heap reminded me of the tangled workings of Town government, which I had just begun to participate in.

The Town's solid waste is taken to an incinerator off Cape, thus, the Transfer Station. This is the last diary painting I've made, to date.

—Helen Miranda Wilson

Most of all, I suppose, I knew that my mother would (and did) love me for being happy in whatever I did.

Do you have any hobbies?

Let's say I have a *passion* for beekeeping! I've been doing it for eight years now, maintaining between four and seven colonies. I have finally begun to know more about insects in general . . . which is useful for one of my other passions, gardening. My fruit and vegetable plantings produce four or five times as much as they used to because they are so well pollinated. I also barter honey for shellfish. This spring I fell in love with a chicken, an Araucana hen who had been abandoned on Bound Brook Island. I brought her home and she gives me a beautiful, pale blue-green egg every day. I've found another hen to keep her company and I'm learning a *lot* about chickens, the same way I did about bees.

I'm also an occasional curator. It's another excuse to do installations! Most recently, I

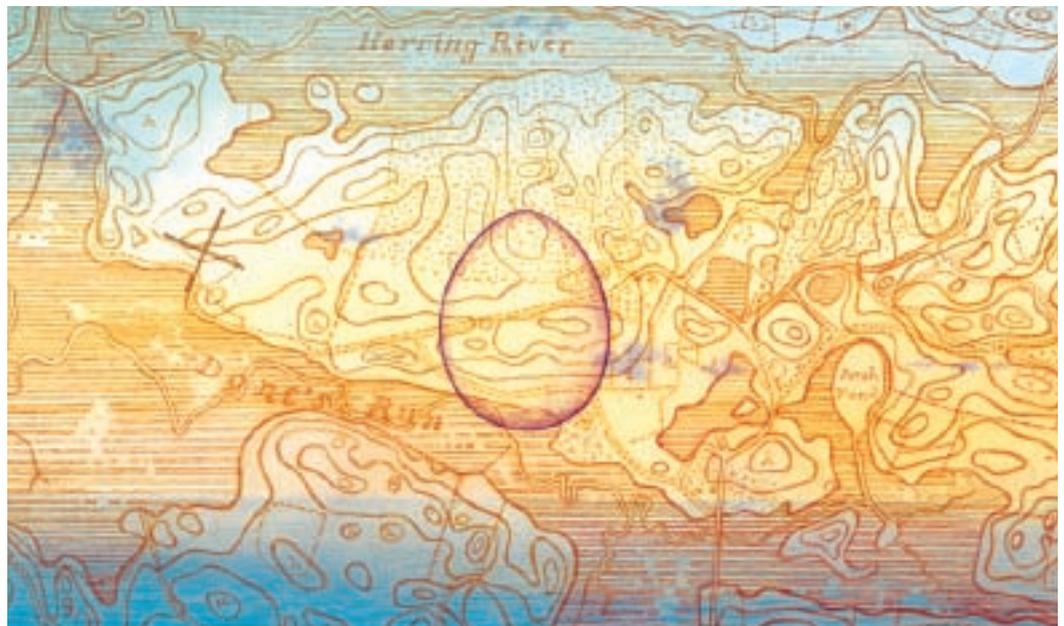
put together *The Art of the Definite*, a group show of so-called geometric abstraction in NYC at DC Moore.

Did feminism play an important role in your artistic development?

And how! Did and does!

I am guessing that you mean the feminism in America in the 1970s. When I was beginning to paint in those years, there was relatively very little work by women shown in any gallery, never mind in any of the museums. The generation of women a bit older than I am broke the ice, with my contemporary baby boomers coming along close behind them, in a wave of energy. I already knew how necessary the support and esteem for and from other women could be, because of my mother and my best friends.

I am privileged and white and so I was relatively protected in many ways from discrimination. Despite that, like most other women, I had already had a taste of the misogynistic conventions that have wasted women and killed our appetite to flourish, forever it seems. The glory given almost exclusively to young male painters when I was a young female painter was discouraging, when I let myself notice it. Because we worked to change this, by the '80s, more galleries were showing women and making money with them and so, we were cool! There were a lot of us and we weren't the exception. We were no longer relegated to the roles of wives or lovers of famous men, sitting in a corner at the Cedar Bar. How good it feels to say "we." Reading Eleanor Munro's book of profiles of women artists, or your book about Frida Kahlo, made a difference and this too was part of the feminism of the '70s. And I am still pleased to call myself a feminist, meaning simply that I'm aware of harmful social and economic inequalities between men and women and wish to change them while enjoying and accepting the natural differences between the sexes. I do my best to sort it out, as I go.



FAITH, 1990–1996, OIL ON PANEL, 7 BY 12 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The overlay layer includes a map done in 1848 of the land the artist was raised on.



ROMANCE (SECOND VERSION), 1995, OIL ON PANEL, 4.4375 BY 4.4375 INCHES, PRIVATE COLLECTION

Did your parents encourage you to be an artist?

No, but they let me have making pictures as my private pleasure when I was a child . . . they didn't inhibit me or attach what I did to their egos. Or at least, not so I noticed. When I started painting full-time, they both acted as if it was honorable work. A job. And my mother understood, deeply, what it meant to be a painter. She studied with Hans Hofmann in Munich when she was seventeen. Drew like an angel. Did commissioned frescoes. In her wild twenties, in the '20s in Paris, she studied with André Lhote, who had a famous atelier. Later, even though she stopped painting she seemed to have no disappointment in herself. I felt no pressure or jealousy from her when I became an artist myself. She worked at other things that she enjoyed. She made the rooms we lived in look and feel and smell wonderful. She understood that beauty in our surroundings was essential. This was an encouragement.

My father appreciated what it meant to be an artist, in the more general sense, and seemed to respect my wanting to paint. But his approval was never as informed or important to me as my mother's. He died when I was twenty-four, so who knows how supportive he might have been—or not—had he seen me develop. At least he got to see my first show and he paid for the two years at Studio School.

Has coming from a literary family affected your work in any particular way?

No. A literary family? That's an odd way to think about a family that has had only one writer (my father) that I know of, on either side.

On the other hand, growing up on a property that has one of the biggest, formally designed gardens on the Lower Cape has affected my life profoundly. Another question might be: do I really prefer gardening to painting? Living with the legacy of the extraordinary Betsey Freeman (1838–1935), who made this garden from nothing (and whose parents had the house we live in built) has been a constant inspiration. Maintaining what she started and adding to it has changed my life. Her passion for landscape design was all about being an artist . . . growing vegetables and fruits was something she did on the side. To be honest, I paint in part to support my gardening habit. For example, in the last few years, I have planted eight tree peonies and five magnolias. So far.

I do admit that being a second-generation artist is easier than having to break away from a social and economic milieu where having a life in art

seems not normal. Which my father, at least, had to do. I didn't have to invent the wheel. My mother's wealthy Russian-German family was so unusual that she wasn't really pushing the envelope by wanting to paint, except for the fact that she was a woman. Her influence had everything to do with my becoming an artist. I was and am affected by her European perspective, tempered by two world wars, her emigrant's sense of loss and freedom, her tolerance of eccentricity, and her otherwise deeply educated, spiritually grounded sense of life. And I believe that it affected my father: she was the first woman he married (he was married four times) who came from a background that accepted and encouraged scholarship and art.

Is there something in your past or in your psychological makeup that has any bearing on your keen powers of observation?

It's nice to hear that you think I have them! My appetite for looking closely (keenly?) at what's in front of me is probably physiological. It's more like a hunger or a thirst than anything else. And until I was in my forties, I had better than twenty-twenty vision. I suppose that being born with this is a big part of my penchant for making pictures (even though I now need glasses) in the same way that having perfect pitch could boost one's decision to be a musician or a piano tuner.

The ability to see what I'm painting with great intensity *and do it for a long time*, is another matter. Since I'm not perverse, permission to do this is allowed by my sense that there is nothing wrong with it: it isn't a disobedience or an escape. It won't isolate me. I do it as if I were a healthy animal, not a diva. Making pictures feels unconflicted and easy, unlike so many other things in my experience. It's like making a meal. Keeping bees. Going to municipal meetings where I can hang out with other people. My life is so simple. Love. Learn. Work. Play. Eat. Drink. Swim. Sleep.

HAYDEN HERRERA is a New York-based art historian and critic whose first book, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo (which served as her doctoral dissertation), was published in 1983 and in 2002 became the basis for a major motion picture. Her second full-length biography, Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2003, was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. She has also written several shorter artists' biographies: Mary Frank (1990); Matisse: A Portrait (1993); and Joan Snyder (2005). Currently she is working on a biography of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, and she is curating a Frida Kahlo centennial exhibition to open at the Walker Art Center this October and to travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She summers in Truro and was the cover subject of the 2003/04 issue of Provincetown Arts.



TIM AND HELEN, TIM'S ITHACA STUDIO DURING A BLIZZARD, 1975

DETAIL OF A PHOTO BY DAVID MORGAN