



NEARER TO THEE

HILARY WILDER

February 21–April 5, 2008

Curated by Marisa C. Sánchez

The Edge of the Evening

Acrylic on canvas, floorcloth, panel, and wall
100 x 120 x 45 inches

Two Sunsets that Changed My Life and Three that Didn't

Giclée print on Somerset Velvet, Edition of 10
20 x 16 inches

Call and Response (Jim Weatherly and T.S. Eliot)

Giclée print on Somerset Velvet, Edition of 10
20 x 16 inches

The Great Day of His Return

Acrylic on canvases and wall, and metallic tape
160 x 260 x 100 inches

Breaking Even (for Pattie)

DVD, 3:32 looped, Edition of 3

Nearer to Thee

Acrylic on canvas and wall
90 x 120 inches



OPENSATELLITE

A RESIDENCY PROGRAM FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

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WISH YOU WERE HERE...

by Marisa Sánchez

Throughout her body of work, Hilary Wilder explores time, place, and memory using the genre of landscape as a constant metaphor for human experience. Wilder directly confronts the viewer with a variety of environments—a tumultuous vista of four volcanoes erupting or five images of setting suns—all of which are devices to highlight the constructed nature of experience. The landscape in its various states, often calm and idyllic, but at other times turbulent and destructive, becomes a stage for the positioning of nature and culture as opposing forces. Wilder accentuates this confrontation in her use of the sublime and examines the possibility or impossibility of attaining enlightenment through an encounter with nature.

In the six works exhibited at Open Satellite, Wilder subtly employs a number of narrative devices, often the theme of a journey or pilgrimage, in order to question the common perception and expectation that a voyage will necessarily lead to enlightenment. In *Two Sunsets that Changed My Life and Three that Didn't* (2008) the artist challenges the notion that two individuals can share the same encounter. In this work, Wilder presents five photographs of five different sunsets taken by the artist in five undisclosed locations. The title promises that two of these views were life-altering in the artist's experience of them. The viewer desires to share in this moment and

hopes to decipher which two sunsets encapsulate a monumental turning point in the life of the artist. Unfortunately, the search goes unanswered: Wilder does not reveal which images changed her life. In doing so, she reminds us of the failure inherent in any attempt to make an experience universal and she questions the claim that we can understand an experience through its representation. In many ways, this work functions like a postcard image that masquerades as reality by offering an idyllic view of a distant place and bears the sentiment "Wish You Were Here!" In this exchange of an idealized, but also generic image, the recipient of the postcard longs to share in an experience of that place, which is offered through a representation that in reality is also an illusion.

Wilder acknowledges landscapes as constructions, and recognizes that they are never neutral sites. Instead, they are embedded with the residue of human experience. She typically represents the extremes of the natural environment, with disaster imagery figuring prominently in her work. As early as 2003, she started appropriating newspaper photographs that document floods, earthquakes, car accidents, mudslides, and more specifically, the breaking of the St. Francis dam outside Los Angeles in 1928. These images and the stories behind them provide the artist with an opportunity



top: *Nearer to Thee*, installation view, 2008.

bottom: *Long, Long Year*, acrylic on canvases, acrylic and latex on wall, 120 x 240 inches, 2005; *Elephant Island*, installation view, acrylic on canvas and wall, 84 x 150 inches, 2006.

to investigate both the power of nature over the man-made and the collective memory of these events as they relate to individual experience. An early installation, *Courting Disaster*, was realized in 2006 at the Atlanta Center for Contemporary Art. The series of paintings Wilder created on-site was informed by the heroic journey of Sir Ernest Shackleton, who in 1914 set sail with his crew from London for Antarctica on the ship *Endurance*. *Elephant Island* (2006), a three-panel painting within that installation, illustrates the lone ship lodged within the arctic landscape. When viewed in light of the actual events that occurred—the *Endurance* sank before Shackleton's adventure concluded—the name given to the vessel is unbelievably ironic. It was not the ship that endured, but the will of the human spirit. Shackleton's quest is a lauded saga that became a testament to the endurance of the will to live. By employing this narrative, Wilder proposes a hopeful version of the individual's struggle to survive against all odds in a vast and treacherous landscape. At Open Satellite, however, the mood may be said to be melancholic since the references Wilder makes through the installation offer a very different memory and engagement with the landscape.

Nearer to Thee, a quiet and poetic title that Hilary Wilder gave to her ambitious installation at Open Satellite, references the nineteenth century Christian hymn, *Nearer, My God, To Thee* and is said to have been the final song played on the Titanic when it sank in 1912. Wilder's selection of this text as source material for the title of her installation, which includes three large-scale paintings, two works on paper, and a video, reinforces the themes the artist explores throughout her body of work: the passing of time, memory, and the sublime. By appropriating the title of a hymn that has now come to be most closely associated with one of the most devastating events in the twentieth century, Wilder reveals herself as an artist who prefers to reinterpret profound historical moments of great tragedy, or alternatively, acts of heroism that continue to resonate in our collective memory. Yet, in her use of history, such as an earlier work based on her father's travelogue, Wilder examines the individual's place within a historical framework. This at times seems distant and far removed, but is contextualized within her work in order to question and emphasize individuated experience. She uses historical events as an exploration of the self within a larger narrative of time and place.

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Nearer to Thee (detail), acrylic on canvas and wall, 2008.

She also takes into account the architecture of a specific location, allowing her wall paintings to adjust to the scale and conditions of a space. Because Wilder's paintings are most often realized on site, they are impermanent and in keeping with her view of experience as ephemeral.

Sincerity, skepticism, and often, melancholy are embedded in Wilder's work, and she conveys these moods most often through the title of her paintings, such as *The Edge of the Evening* (2008), *The Night Comes Down* (2007), *Passing Hours* (2007), and *A Long, Long Year* (2005). Rather than attempting to be critical or ironic, the artist is entirely sincere while also remaining cautious in her use of certain visual tropes: the turbulent sea, impressive mountain ranges, idyllic snow-covered landscapes, and inspiring sunsets that cast delicate rays of light throughout a composition. She also takes into account the architecture of a specific location, allowing her wall paintings to adjust to the scale and conditions of a space. Because Wilder's paintings are most often realized on site, they are impermanent and in keeping with her view of experience as ephemeral. Her insistence on the here and now is reinforced in *Call and Response (Jim Weatherly and T.S. Eliot)* (2008), also on view at Open Satellite, for which she appropriated a passage from T.S. Eliot's six-part poem *Ash Wednesday*: "... I know that time is always time/ And place is always and only place/ And what is actual is actual only for one time/ And only for one place...."

Wilder's title for this installation alludes to and critiques the belief that in times of uncertainty comfort can be found in religion. By editing the hymn's title so that it becomes *Nearer to Thee*, she has eliminated the reference to a higher power. She instead emphasizes *Thee* and positions the individual or the human subject at the center of her discourse. Further, Wilder prefers to think of culture as "lived religion", which is an idea borrowed from T.S. Eliot whose work has influenced Wilder's own practice. Eliot's writings are said to be anti-romantic, which does not mean that they aren't filled with emotional intensity, and the same can be said of Wilder's

work. This dynamic is expressed in *Call and Response (Jim Weatherly and T.S. Eliot)*. Wilder juxtaposes the first stanza of *Ash Wednesday* with the lyrics of Jim Weatherly's song *Midnight Train to Georgia*, made popular in 1973 by Gladys Knight & the Pips. Although dramatically different in a number of ways, both lyrics offer her an opportunity to address two types of devotion or love: the religious and the secular. Weatherly's *Midnight Train to Georgia* is about a life-changing journey out of Los Angeles. A woman chooses to follow her lover, who has abandoned his dreams of stardom in LA. The woman remarks, "He kept dreamin' that someday he'd be a star/ But he sho' found out the hard way that dreams don't always come true." Upon making the decision to join her lover, she knows, "I'd rather live in his world than live without him in mine." In the end, after reconciling that in order to live in his world, she must say goodbye to her own, Weatherly's narrator "romantically" boards the midnight train to join her lover. This departure, addressed in the final verses of the song, is bittersweet and one can't help but feel that she has resigned herself to the will of nature. This state of resignation is also echoed in Eliot's text.

Often, in an attempt to foreground the illusion of painting, Wilder allows electrical sockets and architectural elements to become part of the overall composition, which further accentuates her critique of painting as a representation. Never denying the illusion of the painted surface, she often emphasizes it to reinforce the very fact that her works are constructions. In both *The Edge of the Evening* and *The Great Day of His Return* (2008), Wilder allows elements of the image to literally spill out onto the floor. Sometimes she employs trompe l'oeil effects, including passages of faux wood grain to heighten the constructed nature of the image, as in *A Castle Dark, Sunset*

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above: *The Edge of the Evening*, 2008; video still from *Breaking Even (for Pattie)*, 2008.
opposite page: *The Great Day of His Return*, 2008.

(2007). Wilder even playfully exaggerates her representations of the natural landscape by, for instance, including three suns in *Sundown: Bandera with Some Rectangles* (2006). In *The Great Day of His Return* she embellishes nature by offering the viewer a landscape that includes not one volcano, but four miraculous eruptions dramatically composed to mesmerizing effect. For this work, Wilder found inspiration in nineteenth century British painter John Martin's apocalyptic painting, *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851–53), one of three paintings in a series on the Book of Revelation. Wilder's reference to Martin's painting offers further insight into her conceptual process, whereby she firmly roots her work in a tradition and then seeks to make it problematic in the embellishment of common motifs within the genre.

The geometric square is another recurring element in Wilder's work. In *A Long, Long Year*, the artist repeated a nested square sixteen times, the squares functioning solely as decorative elements. However, in *The Edge of Evening*, she created a variation of this by painting a field of geometric patterns directly onto the wall, which then became the structural base or architectural frame that visually supported the canvas. Wilder's motif calls to mind Kasimir Malevich's squares, whereby the artist sought to give form to the idea of the void, or Josef Alber's series *Homage to the Square*, which began to strip away the notion of the transcendental in painting. Wilder's work references the pursuits of these early modern artists, specifically in thinking about the use of abstraction as it relates to a spiritual quest. She draws on this modernist tradition and uses it as a device to critique contemporary painting and to complicate the distinction between realism and abstraction. The minimal, hard-edged geometric form allows Wilder to investigate binary states: logic and intuition. When juxtaposed with the immersive, atmospheric environments of her landscapes, Wilder's motif reveals her interest in both the analytic and the emotional.

Although the artist created films in the past, this is the first time she has presented a video alongside her paintings. In this initial attempt to offer a dialogue between the two mediums, Wilder successfully weaves a compelling narrative throughout the imagery she employs. In the video *Breaking Even (for Pattie)* (2008), she presents an image of waves struggling to crash on a shore in Iceland during a turbulent wind storm. The soundtrack is an instrumental version of Eric Clapton's *Bell Bottom Blues* (1970), remixed by

Her work critiques representation, which she explores primarily through the language of painting, and most recently, photography, text, and video.



the artist with an instrumental version of Clapton's *Wonderful Tonight* (1977). These three elements combine to create an evocative experience of longing. Wilder filmed the footage of waves in December 2007 while in residence at SIM, Reykjavik, Iceland. One evening, during a powerful wind storm, Wilder stood in her studio apartment looking out at the ocean. In that seascape, the wind appeared to struggle with the water, holding the waves in a constant state of tension. Every effort to complete the natural, rhythmic cycle of a crashing wave was denied, a Sisyphian attempt to attain the goal at hand. Once again, as in the artist's other works, the sea becomes a space representative of human experience. In *Breaking Even (for Pattie)*, the experience is accentuated by Wilder's adroit use of song lyrics. As the artist notes, it is ironic that Clapton's *Bell Bottom Blues* and *Wonderful Tonight* are structurally the same song, and yet when one listens to the lyrics, he is expressing opposite emotional states: unrequited love and an experience of the rewards of love. Wilder frustrates the emotional state of these two experiences by overlaying the songs so that they play at the same time, almost in

conversation with each other. She pushes this further by also offering a static seascape where time seems to stand still.

Wilder's work is personal. Yet the intimacy of our encounter with the personal is always filtered through the lens of landscape. In her use of this genre, she is very much aware of the larger painting tradition preceding her and the role of landscapes in giving expression to a variety of emotional states. Her work is informed by the heroes of Romantic landscape painting, including Casper David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner, and yet her approach remains cautious of the very notion of the romantic these artists sought to portray in their awe-inspiring landscapes. For Wilder, the romantic impulse within this tradition must also be understood as a construction and an illusion. Furthermore, the language of the landscape tradition is a mechanism the artist uses to create a dialogue about life, death, love, loss, and longing.

At its core, Wilder's impressive and ambitious installation investigates the ability of nature and culture to open up a dialogue about human experience. Her work critiques representation, which she explores primarily

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through the language of painting, and most recently, photography, text, and video. Through the lens of landscape, she introduces narratives and compositional devices that are held in tension between fact and fiction, order and disorder, stability and chaos, and the real and ideal. In thinking about language, perception, and image-making as they pertain to her work, Wilder has written, "Our culture abounds with subjects—particular people, places, lifestyles, aesthetics—that are romanticized and idealized, and thus draw attention to the ways in which our own experiences are, by comparison, dull and uninspiring. However, if, as T.S. Eliot wrote, culture is lived religion, it would seem that—somewhat paradoxically—we rely on these illusions to provide our lives with meaning and stability." If we understand this approach to be true, then we necessarily must create personal narratives in order to live in our own reality, which calls to mind Joan Didion's observation, "We tell ourselves stories in order to survive." Hilary Wilder successfully establishes this view as the foundation of her work, allowing for vivid narratives to arise that are genuine and leave no trace of the artificial.