



Jane Wilson, Painter of Luminous Landscapes, Is Dead at 90

January 20, 2015

by Andrew Botsford

The painter Jane Wilson—one of the last surviving members of the celebrated group of artists and writers who gravitated in the early 1950s to the Cedar Tavern in New York and Long Island’s East End—died in New York on January 13, 2015. Known for her singular gifts in the rendering of light, color and landscapes, she was 90.



Jane Wilson in her studio, New York, June 4, 2000.
Photograph by John Jonas Gruen. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery.

Another member of the so-called New York School, Wilson’s friend [Jane Freilicher](#), also 90, died only five weeks before Wilson, on December 9, 2014.

The art world learned of Wilson’s death last week via a paid death notice in The New York Times placed by the DC Moore Gallery, which has represented the painter since 1999.

DC Moore Gallery president Bridget Moore and gallery director Edward DeLuca wrote: “A witty and insightful woman, Jane was an artist of prodigious ability and great integrity whose luminous paintings of land, sea and sky made her one of the leading landscape painters of our time.”

In a separate notice, the trustees and staff of the New Museum wrote that “Wilson will be long remembered for her exceptional art and as a pioneering force in the art world.”

Wilson, whose quietly successful career spanned more than six decades, was one of the most highly regarded artists in the community of renowned painters and sculptors who made the East End their home for at least part of the year since the middle of the last century.

Alicia Longwell, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, Art and Education, at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, wrote of Wilson in an email this week: “Her luminous canvases transmuted the effects of air, light, and water into shimmering reality and our vision has been forever altered by the way in which she saw the world around us. Her Water Mill home and studio were, for over 50 years, a gathering place for a dazzling circle of fellow artists, poets, and

friends—moments brilliantly captured by her husband, the photographer John Gruen. She will be greatly missed.”

Wilson was the subject of a solo show at the Parrish in 1996 entitled “Jane Wilson: Paintings 1985-1995.” She has also been included in numerous shows of works from the permanent collection over the years, Longwell noted, and her work is currently on view as part of the latest permanent collection exhibition, “Art. Illuminated”.

There are five Jane Wilson paintings in the Parrish permanent collection: *Trees at Mecox*, 1958; *Onions*, 1970; *Seven Green Apples*, 1981; *The Wave*, 1988; and *Untitled (L’Oreille et le Coeur by John Gruen)*, n.d.



“Seven Green Apples” by Jane Wilson, 1981. Oil on canvas, 20 x 25 inches. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, N.Y., Gift of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1981.16.

Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton has also singled out Wilson for special attention over the years. In 2001, she won the Guild Hall Academy of the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award in Visual Arts.

Museum Director and Chief Curator Christina Mossaides Strassfield wrote in an email: “I knew Jane’s work before I came to Guild Hall and then met her shortly afterward. She was a great painter, bright and full of energy and verve. I admired her for being an artist at a time when the art world was really a ‘good old boys’ club. She created the most magnificent lyrical works that transported you to a different place. She will be missed but will live on in her work and all the joy it has brought to so many.”

Wilson’s *Water Mill Fog*, 1966, oil on canvas, described by Strassfield as “an amazing painting,” is in Guild Hall’s permanent collection and was exhibited at Sotheby’s in New York as part of the March 2014 Academy of the Arts gala. The curator wrote that this work is one of her “favorite paintings ... soft and muted and really capturing the feel of the fog settled in over the fields.”



Jane Wilson’s “Water Mill Fog ,” 1966, oil on canvas, is included in the permanent collection of Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton.

Water Mill Fog was also included in the Guild Hall permanent collection traveling exhibition, “An Adventure in the Arts,” that toured the country for five years.

In 2008, Strassfield curated the Guild Hall exhibition, “Inspired by the Light: East End Landscapes,” a three-person show featuring the work of Jane Wilson, Jane Freilicher and April Gornik.



Work by Jane Wilson (above) was featured in the 2008 Guild Hall Museum exhibition “Inspired by the Light: East End Landscapes,” which also included work by Jane Freilicher and April Gornik. Courtesy Guild Hall Museum.



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The obituary for Wilson prepared by the DC Moore Gallery, excerpted here, noted that the artist’s most recent exhibition at the gallery in New York in November of last year featured “luminous landscapes that hover between abstraction and representation, inspired by the sky, sea, and land of the East End of Long Island, New York.

“Her art is focused on events of the natural world—seasons of the year, times of day, and the many moods of the weather. Evoking these constant occurrences, Wilson directed her energies to making the most passing phenomena visible, to capturing the effects of shimmering light, heavy air, and passing thunderstorms. In many of her paintings, the sky, which can just as easily be taken as an abstract field of pattern and color, is anchored by the barest rudiments of recession and a low horizon that is a juncture of light and substance.”



“Moon Rise” by Jane Wilson, 2001. Oil on linen, 38 x 50 inches.
Private Collection. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery.

In a 2001 interview, according to the gallery’s obituary, she explained that, “What I’m aiming for are moments of strong sensation, moments of total physical experience of the landscape, when weather just reaches out and sucks you in. And the challenge of trying to trigger those moments

with pigments of ground-up earth. When you think about it, it's really very mysterious.”

Jane Wilson was born on her family's farm near Seymour, Iowa, in 1924. Growing up in Iowa, it was the features of the landscape—the flat lands, low horizons, rich earth, and big skies—that shaped her artistic vision, a vision that carried over and evolved when she found her way to the East End of Long Island in the 1950s.

She graduated from the University of Iowa with a B.A. and M.A. in 1947. After teaching art history there for two years, she moved to New York City with her husband, the journalist and photographer John Gruen. The couple almost immediately immersed themselves in the downtown art scene.

It was at the epicenter of that scene, the Cedar Tavern, that Wilson was approached in 1952 to be a co-founder of the Hansa Gallery, an artists' cooperative that was first on East 12th Street and later moved to Central Park South. Among the other original members were Jan Müller, Richard Stankiewicz, Wolf Kahn, Allan Kaprow, and Felix Pasilis.

Wilson had three solo shows at Hansa, in 1953, 1955, and 1957, and also participated in important group shows during these years, including at Tanager Gallery, another of the most active artists' cooperatives, and in three annual exhibitions from 1953 to 1955 at the Stable Gallery on West 58th Street. In the mid-1950s, the DC Moore obituary noted, the Stable Annuals were major events that featured the work of both well-known and emerging artists, from Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning to Robert Rauschenberg and Helen Frankenthaler.

The same year that she joined Hansa, Wilson began working full time as a showroom fashion model on Seventh Avenue in the Garment District, later becoming a freelance showroom and runway model. Despite prevailing notions among Cedar Tavern regulars about the appropriate lifestyle choices for serious artists, she continued in this work and gained useful insights about the fashion world's “sculptural aspects,” which she found “fascinating.”

By the mid-1950s, according to the artist biography on the D.C. Moore website, Wilson was working in an abstract expressionist style, creating paintings that resonated with the energy of the moment. Later in the decade, she shifted to expressionist landscapes. Among the many artists with whom she became friendly were East End art world figures Fairfield Porter, de Kooning, Jane Freilicher, and Larry Rivers. Porter, older and more established, became especially important to her, as his commitment to modernist representational painting supported her return to landscape painting.



Willem de Kooning, Jane Wilson, and Julia Gruen, *Water Mill*, New York, 1962. Photograph by John Jonas Gruen. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery.

In the early 1960s, the Museum of Modern Art acquired a large landscape, *The Open Scene*, and

Andy Warhol commissioned her to paint his portrait, *Andy and Lilacs*, which he subsequently donated to the Whitney Museum of American Art. That year, she also joined Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which represented several of her friends and other, mainly young painters, including Frankenthaler, Rivers, Freilicher, Porter, Grace Hartigan, and Nell Blaine.

In 1964, Warhol chose her to be one of his Screen Tests and included her in his film “The 13 Most Beautiful Women.” By then, Wilson, Gruen, and their daughter, Julia Gruen, were living on East 10th Street, across from Tompkins Square Park, which led her to create atmospheric cityscapes of the park and surrounding neighborhood. She also painted the area around Water Mill, where she and her husband purchased an old shingled carriage house in 1960.

By the late 1960s, the painter was focusing on still lifes set in her apartment and studio, including paintings of worktables and artist materials. She exhibited with Graham Gallery, and later with Fischbach Gallery. She moved to the Upper West Side in 1968 and lived there for the rest of her life.

She returned to landscapes in the early 1980s, according to DC Moore, creating the first of the many distinctive works for which she is best known today. “Her radiant paintings of the past three decades evoke the rhythms of the natural world,” the gallery’s obituary notes, “marked by constantly changing dynamics of everyday events of the sky.”



“Retreating Storm” by Jane Wilson, 2004. Oil on linen, 40 x 60 inches. Private collection. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery.

In 1999, she joined DC Moore, where she had seven solo exhibitions. Reviewing one of them in 2009, Roberta Smith wrote in *The New York Times* that, “DC Moore is showing Jane Wilson’s latest luminous landscapes, which may be her best. They relegate land or water to a low-lying narrow strip to let light and clouds work their magic. The real subject here is color, which may make Ms. Wilson a postabstract Color Field painter.”

In her book, “Jane Wilson: Horizons” (Merrell, October 2009), Elisabeth Sussman, Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, wrote:

“What I find so remarkable about confronting Jane Wilson’s paintings in the 21st century is how elegiac they look and how they simultaneously recall the poetic sensibilities of mid-century, when the syntax was kept simple, when everyday renditions of land and sky or ordinary life could be once benevolent and metaphysical—simple situations redolent of the vagaries and complexities of the day-to-day. The paintings are at the same time a ‘non-space,’ an atmosphere in which we are lost, without perspective. The spectator is an observer, a navigator; the destination is drifting, like the clouds, and changing.”

The painter received numerous awards and honors during her lifetime, from organizations such as

the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Ingram Merrill Foundation, American Academy of Arts and Letters, National Academy of Design, and Guild Hall Museum. She was a visiting professor at colleges and universities across the country, including Parsons School of Design from 1973-83, and 13 years at Columbia University School of Art, where she was Acting Chair from 1986-88.

She was also a visiting artist and served on the Board of Governors of Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine from 1981-1990. Her paintings are in many museum collections, including those of the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Art Institute of Chicago, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Jane Wilson is survived by her husband of 67 years, the photographer and writer John Gruen, and their daughter, Julia Gruen, executive director of the Keith Haring Foundation.

RELATED: [“The Paintings of Jane Wilson”](#) published January 21, 2015.

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