



ART REVIEW: William Stewart Commits to Abstraction in Watermill Center Show

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by Charles A. Riley II

Lulling the sensibility as gently as the oar strokes of a veteran gondolier, William Stewart's 21-part "Venice" series is a subtle exhibition of works on paper at the [Watermill Center](#), a sanctuary for the interdisciplinary creation of art under the aegis of the internationally renowned avant-garde theater maestro [Robert Wilson](#).

Quiet typically reigns at the Watermill Center, except during scheduled artist-in-residency presentations and open house events in the "off-season" or the blowout gala on the last Saturday of July, when celebrities and gawkers descend like migratory birds. Wilson's silences and slow movement are his signature onstage. Offstage, at the gateway to the Center's main building, even the rocks underfoot seem intended to slow the visitor's pace, demanding a slower pace that is just right for viewing Stewart's contemplative works.



"Venice Series III" by William Stewart, 2016. Monoprint on Rives paper, 29 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Watermill Center.

Stewart was an artist in residence at the Center for two weeks this winter, using the generous space of the gallery where his works hang as a studio and enjoying the eight-plus acres of terraces, woodland walks and sea grasses, one of the most inspiring gardens in the Hamptons.

Stewart's ethereal souvenirs of Venice would struggle for attention in a busier environment. They are framed uniformly and aligned along the long walls of the main building's lower space. Here they share the visitor's attention with some of the highlights of Wilson's exquisite collection of chairs, vessels and ornamental carvings from Indonesia, China, Africa and the Southwest. Like the watercolors, the installation is fastidious, maximizing focus on the individual object or work.



"Venice Series V" by William Stewart, 2016. Watercolor on Rives paper, 27 x 19 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Watermill Center.

Just before visiting the Watermill Center to view Stewart's exhibition I had been to see the [Frick Collection's](#) generous offering of [J.M.W. Turner's](#) works on paper, including both watercolors and etchings, some of which also featured Venice. The kinship between the two was immediately obvious in the suggestive economy that balances color and the blank of the sheet.

The essence of Stewart's series is conveyed in a trio of monoprints consecutively numbered *VIII*, *IX* and *X*, which riff on a central pair of columnar strokes bridged by a lyrical passage that combines colors often found in Twombly or early Guston—roseate blooms of pink and maroon that mingle with pale greens and lavenders. In *VIII*, the flanking strokes are a malachite green on the left and an oceanic blue on the right, leaning like windswept willows and dashed off with the kind of speedy elan that only comes with long experience. The palette cools down in *IX*, and I particularly admired the silvery grey on the right that responded to the Mediterranean blue across the meaningful gap that Stewart uses in most of his compositions, an opening to the blank of the paper.



"Venice Series VII" by William Stewart, 2016. Watercolor on Rives paper, 29 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Watermill Center.

Side by side in the installation are two watercolors with more "information" than the slighter monoprints, numbers *XII* and *XIII* in the series. The pyramidal construction of *XIII* is particularly intriguing, in part because it is reminiscent of the blue framing device [Cezanne](#) often used for the watercolors (and oils) of his bathers. The central blank is similar to the portal-like feeling of *IX*, and in both the watercolors Stewart bathes the "sky" in a golden haze that was a welcome reminder of the Turner watercolors I had seen at the Frick.

These works on paper were actually made before Stewart's Watermill residency, during the artist's [Emily Harvey Foundation](#) residency in Venice. The 21 works were sent ahead to Watermill for framing and hung by Watermill curator Noah Khoshbin.

As Stewart said in a phone interview, the residency on the East End was nonstop inspiration. "In Watermill it was wonderful to get to the Shinnecock Reservation and to the sea, to Springs to see [Pollock's home and studio](#), to use the wonderful library at the Center, enjoy the collection, and especially to meet with other artists. It has been important to my current work." As Stewart lives and works in Taos, the seaside interlude was particularly valuable.



"Venice Series VI" by William Stewart, 2016. Monoprint on Rives paper, 25 x 21

inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Watermill Center.

“I’ve been more figurative, or worked directly from nature in the past,” the artist said. “These became completely abstract, even if the colors are from nature.” A certain amount of curatorial credit goes to Khoshbin for devoting a whole show to a breakthrough series, Stewart’s initial foray into abstraction after a career as a figural and landscape painter. The residency has confirmed his intention to continue in the abstract direction.

Stewart and Wilson share a long history – their parents were friends back in Waco where they grew up, and they reconnected when both were in Manhattan when they were young and part of the avant-garde scene in the 1960s. At that time, Stewart was showing his more figural work at the famed [O.K. Harris Gallery](#) in Soho, as well as Rudolph Zwirner Gallery in Koln, Germany, and more recently at [Prince Street Gallery](#).

As Stewart discovered during his two-week residency, there is something salutary in the air at the Watermill Center, where all seasons favor the cultivation of art from initial ideas to works that are ready for stage, gallery, publication or performance. A program of open rehearsals, studio visits, lectures, and artist talks is presented to the public throughout the year, including the [“In Process”](#) series (the next date is May 20, 2017 with Sebastian Escalona, [Stacey Goodman](#) and [Aneta Panek](#)), and the Discover Watermill Day on August 13, 2017.



“Venice Series XVI” by William Stewart, 2016. Monoprint on Rives paper, 29 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Watermill Center.

As the author of a book on the Jazz Age, I often lecture on the dream team of artists, composers and writers gathered by Sergei Diaghilev to create Ballets Russes productions, and a frequent question is whether such collaborative wonders, marshaling an A team of talent, are possible today. Where Diaghilev would convene his geniuses in a Mediterranean villa (there is a scene in the movie [“The Red Shoes”](#) that captures the excitement), Wilson’s gift for assembling talent and giving it the right soil, light and nourishment at the Watermill Center is on a comparable level. Luckily for William Stewart, and art lovers who can visit the grounds, the place alone is inspiring.

BASIC FACTS: “William Stewart: Works on Paper” is on view March 25 to June 14, 2017 by appointment at the Watermill Center, 3939 Water Mill Towd Road, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.watermillcenter.org.
