

NIC WILSON
PAVILION OF SHADOWS



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Curated by
Wayne Baerwaldt

Essay by
Wayne Baerwaldt



Visionary Poetry

Space – the syntactical play between exterior and interior – deserves closer examination in Nic Wilson’s exhibition, *Pavilion of Shadows* at the Art Gallery of Regina.

The exterior space under Wilson’s consideration is the park surrounding the gallery building. A potentially bucolic yet understated green space, its foliage is starkly limited and restrained, its vistas of little consequence. There are no blind spaces or hidden zones into which the viewer may fully withdraw from the surrounding city. The space of the park is bare, lacking distinct cultural markers. The existing public art billboards and metal sculptures have a tentative feel to them. As one approaches the gallery’s main or side entrance, Wilson’s towering intervention causes one to pause.

Wilson activates the park’s potential by erecting a sculpture entitled *Half Mast*. The thirty-foot (9.14-metre) flagpole, replete with a 4 x 6-foot (1.2 x 1.8-metre) flag, appears to be an item of ordinary civic furniture. On a breezy day, the flag will unfurl, displaying its heraldry: a photographic image of a royal purple teddy bear seated on a dry, strawberry-coloured background.

Attached to the limp teddy bear’s ear is the ubiquitous brand name tag of “Ty.” You might recognize “Ty” as the brand of teddy bear striving for universal cuddliness and popularity, part of the toy trade by the maker of “Beanie Babies.”¹

1 The creator of the “Ty” teddy bears, H. Ty Warner, popularized them as Beanie Babies. The Babies were produced with synthetic materials, a tag with website address attached (a first for internet promotions launched in 1993) and were purposely under stuffed so they could be easily posed to sit and “look real,” according to Warner. Is Wilson’s chosen Beanie Baby the *Lady Diana* memorial bear with a white rose embroidered over the bear’s heart?

Can we read the Beanie Baby flag the same way we read “official” symbolic flags, as portals to meaning and presence? Not really, and Wilson knows this.

National, provincial, city and corporate brand flags, for example, use colours, slogans, images of flora and fauna, and so on to announce a claim to the governance of space. Wilson’s sculpture however provides a curious counterpoint to viewers’ expectations of the flag’s symbolic power to proclaim jurisdiction. Its floppy teddy bear is, if anything, a sign of crass sentimentality above the cultivated topography of the park. It doesn’t invite reverence for honour, commerce or space, but I would suggest it testifies to Wilson’s aesthetic tolerance. It operates to initiate the viewer to a separate, elevated language.

Half Mast opens a space for the poetic threads that structure Wilson’s exhibition. It suggests Wilson has proposed a very thin veil between some outside force and some very solid grounded force. The veil, however transparent, is where Wilson introduces the instant of the poetic. In an instant of visual arrest, *Half Mast* announces itself as a sentry/sentinel for the mixed media works found in the main gallery.

Half Mast is an entry point to a secret, largely wordless language to be addressed in the interior gallery. The gallery floor is dominated by *Monument*, comprised of a 10.5 x 19-foot (3.2 X 5.8-metre) rectangle of mottled gray ash with found objects embedded – a chunk of marble and Tyndall stone, a wax candles, a CD by Elton John, a tribute to JFK vinyl recording, a memorial Beanie Baby, an enamel pan with an orangey residue (embalming fluid?) – these and other commercially sourced memorial items appear to float as detritus on a family-size burial plot.

Monument causes me to recall the snow encased ‘death zone’, a site where hundreds of bodies of failed climbers and guides are



Monument (installation view), 2020, sifted ash, compact discs, stuffed toy, vinyl record, Italian marble, Tyndall stone, plastic flowers, pyrex baking dish, water, red food dye, clove oil, 10.5 x 19 feet

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

strewn across the immense summit of Mount Everest, which Wilson contemplates in his 2019 text “Two Mountains.”² Wilson’s gallery installation is an ash heap of history with objects as obtuse footnotes set amidst fragments from pop culture civilization; inanimate, ruinous bits that refuse to decompose. Wilson’s chosen objects are the remnants of a human presence and living culture collected and juxtaposed to suggest that the viewer’s contemplation will be rewarded with new associations and meanings. The intended message, however, is of coming into one’s life consciously, in a way that needs various explanations. As artist and viewers, we try to find these explanations from our first encounter with *the permanence of objects*. The haunted objects in *Monument* testify, and in so doing, they testify as an instance of language. For this viewer, *Monument* invokes the words of William Carlos Williams, “But the words made solely of air or less, that came to me out of the air and insisted on being written down, I regret most — that there has come an end to them.”³

Wilson’s photography is an understated poetry. It’s a record that someone was there and now is not there. It is the blurred image of a bouquet of flowers in *Blurry Chrysanthemums (After Fantin-Latour)* that most suggests the presence of Wilson himself. The flowers reference the 19th-century French studio painter Henri Fantin-Latour whose floral arrangements against plain backgrounds were curated in combinations to be read as studies in abstract musical harmony. Wilson pitches himself forward in the photograph, not as his foregrounded shadow in a family snapshot, but the blurriness of the image serving as a certificate of presence. It is Wilson’s eye seeing things, observing, and, more complexly, involved with getting the inside on the outside. It is making “the words that came to me” a way for Wilson to think *with* his photographs and their references to the weight of tradition and rhetorical practice. Wilson’s photographs in the exhibition, including *Blurry Still-Life Flowers (After Monneyer)* and *Blurry Hubble Image*, are particular and echoing, and Wilson makes a communal art of them.

2 Wilson, Nic. *Still Life With Dying Flowers*, self-published chapbook, 2019, 7.

3 Williams, William Carlos. “Journey To Love.” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: 1939-1962*, Vol. 2, New Directions Publishing, 1991, 325.



left: *Blurry Chrysanthemums (After Fantin-Latour)*
(installation view), 2020, framed digital print, 16 x 16 inches
right: *Blurry Hubble Image* (installation view), 2020,
framed digital print, 16 x 16 inches

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY





Pavilion of Shadows (installation view), 2020
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the most moving and challenging preoccupations in Wilson's exhibition is *A Dying Hare*, his 480-minute video presented on a modestly-scaled flat screen. *A Dying Hare* "documents" multiple interior scenes that begin with a hand igniting a collection of provocative candle figurines, one wick after the other. The fantastically kitschy objects include a provisional assemblage on spindly wires attached to green Styrofoam base, an olive, a tableau comprised of rabbits, 10 flowers, red roses, a white skull, and a single blue and white striped candle. (Spoiler alert: the chunk of florist's foam eventually catches fire.)

In each scene, the candles burn down in real-time; only when each candle is entirely consumed by the flame does the next scene unfold. As a viewer, you may never again feel so isolated. As the artist, Wilson may momentarily contemplate the perishability of the viewer and ponder having no audience.







Emily Dickinson hid from people all the time and didn't want to be seen. She even hid her work, unsure of her audience. Wilson may be suggesting a comparable trajectory of shyness and social discomfort as his comfort zone. His elusive *Half Mast, Monument*, the blurry photographs and the publication, *What I Saw*, rendered untouchable by Covid-19 may, however, be an attempt to find a form of a visual word that is utterly self-sustaining and autonomous. That doesn't need a reference to locate it or a meaning apart from its evident being as its definition.

Could the real-time being be that self-sustaining word? Wilson renders a complicated structuring of space and time that lends itself to rethinking space as a complex of poetic assemblages. I suspect Wilson spends all his time beating against the edge, trying to realize this word, knowing it will never be accomplished in the human imagination, yet that's where he finds himself.

Wayne Baerwaldt

What I Saw
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What I Saw was written between 2010 and 2020. Parts of this collection were presented at the 10th Annual Festival of the Americas, Manzanillo, in an exhibition. Eric Horvath and Sam Winkler first tried to publish this work, but we will have better than that. Contact us at don@greywolf.ca for more information.

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What I Saw

Nic Wilson

My mother and I drove grandma's abse to southern Ontario from Fredericton, New Brunswick and took a detour through Medicine Territory in the Rockies Mountains. Together we stood with our hands on a steep incline and looked out across the seemingly endless expanse of stretching valleys and overlapping mountains. They reminded the interested fingers of hands clasped together or knitted in prayer. In Western art history, when the blurring of landscape used to convey distance in images it is referred to as Atmospheric Perspective. Both of us attempted to capture

to and images and metaphors, in an image extra of itself. A year-struck with cobalt and an oval farrow - has the depth age captured in the Hubble Space. Almost every one of us carries two nothing did and liquid around our spine and could, void, the pupil. It felt to compare something as small right insignificant as a human eye to an immense as a gas giant and you had there are most likely more gas anywhere than there are human eyes within this personal cosmology, connection to my mother and my eye. We are a three-generation-long eye per among brown and green. For many, and many others including sugar addition, I see myself in a way with those two other bodies, a future is certain. I imagine myself had them, reflected in their bodies, their turns, a phantom in their make: my grandmother aged, years long

to fall away from her life. She would call me by my mother's name. She would refer to my mother as her sister. Generations were opened or closed and their predecessors took their place. As her dementia progressed, it was like the steps of Saturn falling away from her. The recent relationships in her life had the least gravitational pull and so they were the first to go. This included my sister and I. The next were her children and after that her brothers and sisters. For the last few years of her life, there seemed to be no one left to love.

What I Saw

"I am what I am and what I am is what I am." - Rumi
From *The Poem of Amos* by S. Nigam, 2018

I think a bead of sweat drip from a golden Khan and fall into my eye, blurring my vision by its sticky sting. If I look again, gathering from this time, and close the gap between my bodies once more before you get up to shower and leave. As I lay there, holding the memory of your gaze resting mine, I look like all those moments will be lost to time, like tears in rain, and I make a list of what I have seen: a popliteal bone, can flame, countless wordless explorations in the dead of space; two hearings by the light of fireworks; the moon in all of its phases. I saw a crystal bead slip from a trembling hand and split into a thousand pieces and a moon

splattered by the impact of an asteroid. I have seen black water spill over the sidewalk and shed fabric from the cotton fluff. I have seen a vintage pop the skin of a Corned beef and pull its insides out. I have seen a dog sit on its own afterbirth and an Icelandic man pull his arms apart on both sides. I have kissed your eyelids in the afternoon and asked you "What is the difference between looking at someone's eyes and looking into someone's eyes?" I once heard a comedian say: nothing at something for a long time with other people in what makes something art. Together, we capture art by looking.

I have seen bearded fruit piled up in a dark sky, waiting for someone to eat an eye. I have seen the raw sky of Arizona and New Mexico, dried and closed and strained and pressed into links to bake in the sun. On the same day I saw the horizon bend and quiver in the heat. One spring I stood in a field under the midnight sun and watched a cruise ship on a pleasure voyage to the arctic circle pass slowly. I have seen a sinking ship surge in half and

plunge into the North Atlantic and another roll onto a rocky outcropping and accumulate two and a half years of Mediterranean drizzle. I have seen the storm surge of a tsunami in dark, dark low resolution. In September I saw a prison cry stars of their own blood and his prostate, over a pile of cabbage. I've seen things you people would believe.

I have seen a king dejected - his head thrown into a churning crowd and his fresh blood hit a wily child. I have seen a cow's eye die by a race. I still like to look at people in airports and I like to see bearded peaches pushed through a very fine sieve. I like looking at a painting knowing that it is changing imperceptibly in front of me; or a difference like that but changing more the less.

A Landscape Photograph

Instead of mine went to the attic to an attempt to track the nearly twenty-four summer weeks with her camera. Her several also featured between rocky shores, long peninsulas, and an antique sailboat and steep rolling seas surrounding the sand archipelago. For almost the entire day, the sun was obscured by dense fog and

the sun with the lens cap of her camera left on. The resulting image, a large black square, is a tribute to the atmospheric, the opacity of embodied experience, and the limits of looking. During its short life, the photograph has been overwhelmingly affected by eudaimonic or documentary activities. The celebrity fan pic is not only evidence of the material existence of celebrities but also a document of a fan's physical presence in them. A selfie can be a proof of life or the promise of a reality to come. In any case, the photograph remains a fragment of the past.

In his 1980 treatise on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes expresses his amazement at photography's ability to convert

the unseeable and the metaphysical. In the late 19th century, spirit photographers like William Mumler explored the subliminal potential of the new science to image the living and the dead on the same picture-plate. Many debates about the legitimacy of this activity would call photographers like Mumler frauds but only because he presented them as evidence of an athletic, rather than representative of a A couple of months before I graduated from my undergraduate degree, I applied to and was rejected from a prestigious residence program in Austria. I proposed a project in which I would attempt to take a picture of the future. I was not able to provide any concrete plan about how I would do this except to say

darkness, my friend made a photograph with the eye of her camera shut. In this action, the camera generated a picture of its own obscured attempt to make an image. I wonder if this makes a more honest representation of a such an inherently playful? Brian Crozier, "Dream Machine" is a good use to extend one's perspective. It is a cylindrical column of paper with a pattern of holes cut out. It is placed on a record player and a light is hung into the center of the column. When the record player is turned on, the pattern cut into the paper comes a tube which is meant to be looked at with your eyes closed. This flickering is a nod of disorientation. *Her photograph, she offers the possibility of -*

Corrected Vision

When the first images came back from the Hubble Space Telescope after three years of development, funding setbacks, engineering breakthroughs, and millions of years of light traveling from distant galaxies - these visions of the universe revealed the reflection one might see in a large bathroom mirror. The brilliant points of light at the edges of the observable universe were blurry dots because the clouds of -





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Nic Wilson

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