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ART REVIEW

Living a Day in Half an Hour

'T. J. Wilcox: In the Air,' at the Whitney Museum



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

T. J. Wilcox: In the Air This installation at the Whitney Museum features a filmed, sped-up panorama of a day in Lower Manhattan, along with city-specific works.

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“In the Air,” T. J. Wilcox’s dazzling panoramic film installation at the Whitney Museum, is an ode to New York and to film, and to their mutually enhancing entwining. Mr. Wilcox is equally enamored of both. His new work makes you realize anew that the metropolis and the moving image were made for each other.

This piece centers on an in-the-round bird’s-eye view of Lower Manhattan that was shot from the artist’s studio,

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on Union Square, and compresses the passing of one day into 30 minutes. Like the old-style panorama, it appears on a circular screen, one that is about 7 feet high and 35 feet in diameter. Hanging about four and a half feet above the floor, it's like a giant lampshade.

“In the Air” is something of a departure for Mr. Wilcox, 47, who has always come across as a kind of Romantic miniaturist. He is best known for films only a few minutes long (and often looped) that are pieced together from all kinds of existing footage. Sometimes he would reshoot the found film several times to achieve grainy, fog-of-memory textures; still images and brief, tabletop sequences that he shot himself were other staples. These works were intimate, handmade reveries, cryptic yet resonant with outsize themes: history, death, love, fame. Mixing fact and fiction, they conjured historic figures like Marlene Dietrich or Alexander the Great, but could also be autobiographical.

While Mr. Wilcox's early efforts were most memorable when projected small, with “In the Air” he goes big, and it works. He seems to have done this almost reflexively, spurred by the astounding 360-degree view from his studio, to which he moved from a lower floor in the same building two years ago.

Paralysis was his first response to this spectacular sight. He has said more than once that he initially spent so much time looking at the view that he thought he might stop making art altogether. But, in the end, he used the beautiful, implacable city as the setting and also the motivating force for a half-dozen miniaturist narratives, expanding his collage aesthetic without sacrificing its intimacy.

After considerable trial and error and some uncooperative weather, Mr. Wilcox was finally able, in July, to shoot about 15 hours' worth of one day in the life of New York City. It took several weeks for conditions to align. Consistent with his preference for lower-tech gear, he downgraded his equipment from five complicated cameras to the same number of relatively small, rugged, inexpensive [GoPros](#). He also switched from filming to shooting stills, which improved resolution. And he prayed for sun, attended by skies that were not completely cloudless and boring.

He ended up with 60,000 stills, shot at a rate of one per second. These were individually processed, and then animated and sped up using a computer program that seamlessly

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stitched the views together, eliminated distortions and evened light levels.

The majesty and clarity of this wraparound vista is stunning. The city looks older, almost timeless, without the details of street traffic and storefronts. The sights include the [Con Edison clock tower](#), Zeckendorf Towers, Freedom Tower and the West Side, with glimpses of the Hudson and New Jersey. The sun appears and sets; clouds of many different shades and shapes push their shadows across the masses of architecture; airplanes arrive and depart; the lights of the city come on and then dim, as the sun returns.

This flat-footed documentary approach evokes Andy Warhol's deadpan, all-but-motionless 1964 classic, "Empire" — that [eight-hour stationary shot](#) of the Empire State Building — but Mr. Wilcox is too much of a storyteller to leave it at this. Superimposed on the panorama are six short cameo-films — in a way, details — that pull us from one place or era, one event or personality to another, across varying film methods, between color and black and white. The cameos appear one at a time on different parts of the screen, each with its own title, forming a carefully linked loop of narratives.

Some draw on Mr. Wilcox's life. "On the Horizon" remembers [the prominent fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez](#), stringing together images of his work and film footage and stills of him and also of break dancers performing in his studio. A book of Mr. Lopez's drawings and Polaroids that Mr. Wilcox saw as a teenager ignited his desire to be in New York, but by the time he arrived, the scene that attracted him was being ravaged by AIDS, which took Mr. Lopez's life in 1987, at the age of 44. Looking through this volume recently, Mr. Wilcox recognized the Con Edison tower in the backgrounds of some images of the break dancers: Mr. Lopez's former studio was across the square, within sight of his.

"John" stars the superintendent of the building where Mr. Wilcox rents his studio, centering on a different wave of death. In a single, minimally edited shot, he stands on the penthouse terrace, with Lower Manhattan spread out behind him, talking movingly and un-self-consciously about watching the Sept. 11 attacks unfold.

"I threw up right here into this drain," he says, glancing down. Welcome silence follows John's wrenching soliloquy in the form of "Manhattanhenge," a soundless scene of the setting summer sun almost perfectly centered on a crosstown street between dolmenlike buildings.

The remaining three vignettes, all in black and white, explore the city as the focus of mass spectacle. "Silver Cloud" gives us Warhol and friends inflating the first of his silver helium pillows — a very phallic one — on the roof of his original Factory studio on West 47th Street (the Union Square address came later), possibly on the day that Pope Paul VI, the first pontiff to visit America, was in New York.

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“Futura” uses old newsreels to revisit the brief public infatuation with silent, silver dirigibles and their promise of glamorous air travel, which ended with the crash of the Hindenburg, one of the first catastrophes captured on film and widely seen. And “Precious Mettle” retells the story, with more newsreels, of Gloria Vanderbilt, the heiress, socialite and epitome of New York glamour, as well as the object of a bitter custody battle between her mother and her paternal aunt, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the museum in which “Up in the Air” is being exhibited.

To complete this exhibition, which was organized by Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney, Mr. Wilcox has selected 15 works from the permanent collection to be shown with “In the Air.” They range from a 1931 painting of a fantasy roof garden, by Florine Stettheimer, to a ghostly 1998 photograph of the Chrysler Building’s silvery crown, by Hiroshi Sugimoto, and include films by Helen Levitt, Jack Smith, Tony Oursler and Jem Cohen that reiterate New York’s magnetic energy and distinctive denizens. But it may be hard to tear your eyes from Mr. Wilcox’s mirroring of his city and his medium, and their poignant dance of glory and loss.