

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

MUSE

Detail of a stop-action animation still from T.J. Wilcox's 10-channel video installation *In the Air*, 2013. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.



Careful Looking

by T.J. Wilcox

IN THE AIR, my installation at the Whitney Museum, is about New York City, as are many of the works from the permanent collection that I've selected for the show. But more broadly, they are about careful looking.

My studio—this crazy space high above Union Square—has an unusual attribute. Located at a midpoint of Manhattan, it offers a 360-degree view, presenting the city in the round. My studio is defined more by its sight lines than by the space within its walls, or by its scale, which is relatively small.

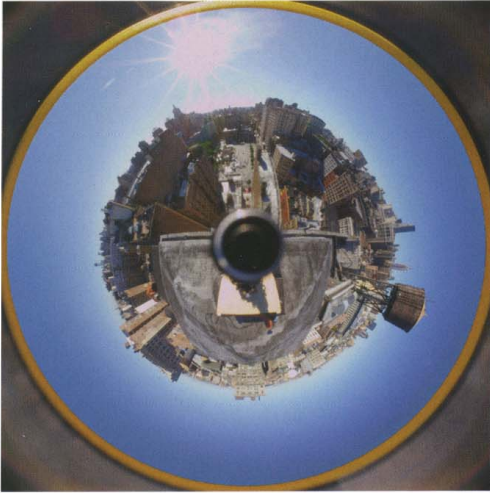
It's fascinating how often a work is influenced if not actually determined by the studio it was made in. That original meaning may be lost as time passes. Before Jackson Pollock had money to renovate his barn in the Springs, he was painting in one of the upstairs bedrooms in the farmhouse. While we generally think of Pollock's drip paintings as stemming from his desire for something huge and heroic, the early ones basically reflect the modest size of that bedroom.

Making films with rather low budgets, I've always had to take advantage of special opportunities. Here, I decided to film continuously from the roof of my studio, using a special camera attachment. We see a single day in New York City from dawn to sunset, unfolding in about half an hour. The wraparound screen is 8 feet high, with a 35-foot diameter. So within Marcel Breuer's great, hulking, squarish space with its gridded ceiling, I've placed an ephemeral circle of light—a floating, immaterial thing.

Onto this panorama, we have superimposed six of my short films, each relating to the part of the screen on which it's shown. For example, where we see the Empire State Building, a film about that monument is shown over the view. This particular film is about the planners' intention to use the building as a mooring for transatlantic zeppelin traffic—to tether those enormous airships to its top and then lower gangplanks that would unload passengers about 1,300 feet above the ground. Such a modern, can-do attitude is among

T.J. WILCOX is a New York-based artist. See Contributors page.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Two photos taken on Wilcox's roof for his panoramic installation *In the Air*. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

the best of that era's enthusiasms. While there's a lot of stock footage shot from behind the pilots, there's no film of the one time—briefly and unsuccessfully—a zeppelin tried to dock, so we don't know how that looked. Apparently the air currents rushed too wildly up, violently jostling the ship, so the dangerous idea was abandoned. When I got to that part of the story, we had to fill it in, using stop-action animation. I tell the story and then, basically, a lie.

At the Whitney, I asked the curator of my exhibition, Chrissie Iles, to show me every work in the film and video collection that used New York as a location or concept. It turns out there's an incredible wealth of material from nearly every decade of the museum's existence. It was extraordinary to see just how malleable the idea of New York is, and the wildly different purposes it has served.

The Whitney is closely associated in my mind with the Breuer building. I thought a great deal about how the museum's move is going to affect the works of art, and wondered if the meaning of some of them might be in jeopardy. Morgan Fisher, for example, created the 16mm film *North Light* for the Whitney in 1979. Through a gap in one of the northern walls—I think it was an air-conditioning vent or grille—he filmed an apartment building across the street, sort of like Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Looping, it's shown on a screen placed exactly where the camera's lens was, as if the screen were a window. The apartment building is still there today, but trees interrupt the view—so in his film, you are seeing across time, as well as space.

There are so many great works in the collection, Morgan's among them. Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* (1966) is a live stream of the New York City sky, shown on a monitor. When I first saw it, years ago, the image on the screen was a solid gray. I admit I thought the monitor was broken, until I read the

wall label. We have also included a beautiful photograph by Weegee taken at the moment a lightning bolt hits the top of the Empire State Building. But the works are not all about New York: on view, for example, are the very moving photographs by Felix Gonzalez-Torres of footprints in the sand. He was looking down, just as Yoko Ono was looking up.

One video that I don't believe the Whitney has ever shown was made by Tony Oursler on September 11th. He lived near the World Trade Center, and that morning he grabbed his videocamera and ran outside. Speaking to people as events unfolded, he captured the terror, chaos and misinformation of that day, when everyone was in a state of shock and befuddlement. Oursler himself is so alarmed that the camerawork is quite poor; he'll knock the camera into something, and you'll see the digital code for a minute, as if the camera were getting hold of itself and shaking itself back to life, repeatedly. It's quite a visceral first-hand account of the experience.

As a kid in Seattle, I saw Woody Allen's films regularly, with my parents. I liked his movies to a greater or lesser degree, but I fell in love with the city via his mythologizing camera. I moved to New York when I was 20 and have essentially spent my adult life here. I chose New York.

My work is often set in faraway locations—in France, China, England—or is based on historical events and biographies. *In the Air* is an elaborate installation for me, much more than I generally take on, and I think it got this big as a result of my thinking about New York as this fantasy location that I desired and acquired. There's just something about looking at this place that I've called home for so long and trying to make something out of it. We're all directors of New York City, in a sense, every day that we're here. ○

—As told to Faye Hirsch

OPENING
THIS MONTH
"T.J. Wilcox: In
the Air," Whitney
Museum of
American Art,
New York, Sept. 19,
2013-Feb. 9, 2014.