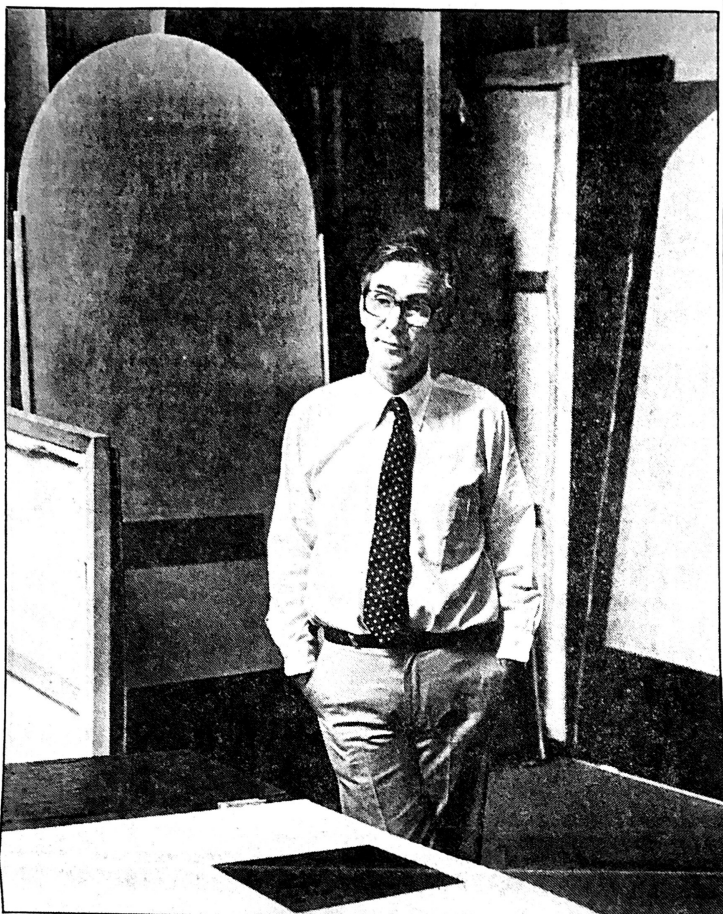


ARTIST'S NEW DEAL



Nicholas Wilder, a legendary figure in the Los Angeles art world, has turned, relatively late in life, from dealing to creating.

The legendary Nicholas Wilder now creates works instead of selling them

By Hunter Drohojowska

In all art worlds, there emerge legendary figures, characters who appear larger than life, whose every action spawns an anecdote or a rumor. Artists are typical candidates, but collectors and art dealers also accumulate such renown and notoriety.

In Paris of the 1920s, you think of Gertrude and Leo Stein as among the first to buy Matisse; in New York of the same period, you think of photographer/impresario Alfred Stieglitz. During the 1950s, art dealer Betty Parsons and Peggy Guggenheim are fondly recalled as early supporters of abstract expressionism. Later, Leo Castelli and curator Henry Geldzahler were some of the first to understand the new pop art.

Becoming a legend in art has little to do with monetary success. History remembers those dealers or collectors with an extraordinary devotion to the newest art, with perspicacity and a natural comprehension of the forces working on the artist. One such figure in the history of L.A. art is Nicholas

Wilder.

The Nicholas Wilder Gallery opened on La Cienega Boulevard in 1965, during the first stirrings of contemporary art in this city. He showed Bruce Nauman, Dan Flavin, Agnes Martin, Cy Twombly, Joe Goode, John McCracken, David Hockney, Don Bachardy, William Brice, Ron Davis, Jo Baer, Alexis Smith, Richard Yokomi, Robert Graham, Jules Olitsky, Kenneth Noland, Richard Tuttle, Helen Frankenthaler, Tom Holland, John McLaughlin, Sam Francis and others whose names ring familiar now, but who were not well-known then.

In 1971, he relocated to Santa Monica Boulevard, where the James Corcoran Gallery stands today, and where Wilder is now having an exhibition. This time, he is not showing the art of others — Wilder closed his gallery in 1979 — but paintings of his own.

When an art dealer turns artist, any critic's first reaction is customarily a groan of dismay. But most art dealers aren't legends. Betty Parsons successfully turned to making appealing assemblages and constructions late in her life. And Wilder has composed some lovely,

serene paintings.

In form, they are minimal and geometric; in color, they are the radiant jewels of cobalt violet, sap green, block's blue, cadmium yellow. Talking about the pictures, Wilder refers to each color by its correct name, as the specific tools used in building a painting. To eyes familiar with L.A. painting, the most obvious influence is the late John McLaughlin, one of the city's most rigorous, talented painters during the late '50s and early '60s. The mention of McLaughlin does not disturb Wilder.

"As his friend and dealer, I learned as much watching him work in isolation, coming out as a painter late in his life, I got more out of talking with him..."

Wilder's voice trails away. His slender hand rearranges his glasses and passes through his brown hair. His erect posture slumps just slightly as he remembers an old friend. After a moment of pensive silence, he resumes talking in typically all-encompassing arcs of thought.

"I'd been doing studies with

Wilder

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colors ever since school," he says. "As you look at a lot of art, you can't help but think technically about it. Over the years, you see art that means something to you in a special way. At a certain point, you decide to make some for yourself. It's a threshold you cross."

Wilder's not naive about the response his show might receive. "When I started making these paintings in New York, I kept my mouth shut. Then Jim (Corcoran) came and asked if he could show them. The chances that things will be misinterpreted are a reality and an eventuality for some people. That I introduced the dealer to his wife and that I am the godfather of their child, that it's an old-boy network. ... Well, criticism won't be some kind of massive deflating experience. It is certain to happen. It may be a circuit malfunction or something, but I'm not nervous.

"These are not hopeful paintings," Wilder adds resolutely. "I knew what I wanted to get in the paintings. I wanted to see if I could get it. There was nothing mythic about it. You have color in front of you and you make choices. Sometimes they don't work and you have to find out why. It's very straight."

Wilder's decision to paint also came from his repeated visits to Italy. Many of his paintings are arched in the manner of cathedral windows or early Renaissance trip-

tychs. One painting hangs face down from the ceiling, inspired by the shape of a 16th century Mil-
anese painting.

"You know how notions gather. It's not all lost on us what we intersect as we go along. I started realizing that things are really more similar than different from the past. To be a painter today or in the late 15th century, you encounter the same problems or something is missing in the art. Today, you sense the range of what the people who made art believed in. You notice that some didn't believe in what art could do as much as someone else did. Van Gogh's paintings don't smell like paintings that made you rich and famous. There was no one harder to take 100 years ago and no one more popular today."

Wilder grew up in Rochester, N.Y., the son of one of the inventors of Kodachrome and Ektacolor film. Wilder was introduced to art while working as a guard at Amherst College, where he also sold his first painting. He knew the gallery was ready to prepare for sale a Thomas Sully portrait a visitor was interested in buying and negotiated between the two parties. In 1960, Wilder entered Stanford Law School, but left after three years to work for the Lanyon Gallery in Palo Alto. Two years later, the 25-year-old dealer moved here and opened with an exhibition of stain paintings by Edward Abedisian.

Changes in the style of the art market helped propel Wilder out of the gallery business and into the private consulting and sales he does

from his Manhattan home today. "In my day, I didn't suffer from people leaving my gallery. I grew with the artists, there was no better place for them to go. Today, the one hope they have is that a dealer will do a good job so the artist can leave them and go to another dealer. That equation doesn't work for me.

"The '60s were different, there wasn't the money sweep," he adds. "Money changed attitudes toward art."

As he holds forth, the reason for Nick Wilder's legendary status is suddenly clear. You imagine the impact of such talk on a nascent art collector. Wilder speaks in digressions, qualifications, descriptions, definitions. A listener sits utterly engrossed as he launches into another tangent.

"Is art only for bright people?" he asks rhetorically. "If you believe in the great questions that interconnect all the arts, then you must believe art can communicate that in its fullest to someone with a very low IQ. Kids from the Bronx can go to the Met and get the full shot of Rembrandt, come away sensing what is curtailed for the 140 IQ guy. Knowing that helps you understand what we are looking at when we go to a museum. The critical apparatus can get in the way of looking at paintings. If you believe that art can only be great, you are selling it short. It can be wonderful, full of wonder. There is always more there."

Hunter Drohojowska regularly writes about art for the Herald.