Artist William Wiley recognizes no limitations

His sculptures and paintings defy labeling

By Hunter Drohojowska

It takes time to absorb the art of William T. Wiley. His work doesn't conform to the hectic urban schedule.

His paintings and drawings, at the L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice through Nov. 3, are the antithesis of the quick-take aesthetic: They are miasmal maps of the unconscious, layered with complex skeins of curling graphite lines, colored mosaic patterns of paint, and cryptic, poetic writings around the edges of the canvas. Wiley's sculptures, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum through Nov. 25, are densely built combinations of arcane materials.

Whether in two or three dimensions, Wiley's recurring images are hearts, palettes, skeletons, masks, mystical hocus-pocus and puns. "Putting the Heart Before the Course" is his title for a steel contraption on wheels that bears an eyeball, a dog, a bone, a bell, a plumb line and a sun dial.

Wiley recognizes no limitations, categories or labels in his art. It's a sort of go-with-the-flow, feel-and-be-real, reality-is-relative attitude, a hangover from the late 1950s, sustained through the 1960s, which he refused to abandon during the selfish 1970s and now maintains in the mercenary 1980s.

When you ask this artist a question about the source of an image in his paintings, he answers in non-specific terms. For example, what does Mr. Unnatural, the "wise fool" character who appears in so much of Wiley's art, stand for?

"Hmmm," muses the artist, casting his eyes around the gallery, "Stand for? Well, like anything it's the multiplicity of possibilities, coming together intuitively from many things I was interested in."

Wiley is the kind of artist who puts question marks in the middle of his sentences to qualify potential truths. And in true cosmic style, he not only thanks his assistants, he thanks all the materials involved. "Woods, metals, and crystal, thanks for the loan," he writes in the introduction to a catalog of his sculpture.

Even in the unconventional world of artists, Wiley stands out as an eccentric. It's an attitude he can easily maintain in the seclusion of Marin County, where he lives with his wife Dorothy, and sons Ethan and Zane. He is a stereotype of the Northern California artist: lanky and stooped with long, drooping mustache and shaggy brown hair, dressed in unmatched brown corduroy jeans and jacket over a denim shirt. His soft brown eyes have a vague, amused glow most often associated with enlightenment, and long-time residents of the Bay Area. Although he is not wearing the conical dunce cap, he *is* the character who appears in so much of his work: Mr. Unnatural.

Wiley laughs when asked about his determinedly dated philosophies. "Yeah, people say, 'Snap out of it Bill, you're stuck in the '60s.' But those are just definitions that we give to things, masks that we all wear."

As if on cue, when the photographer arrives at the gallery, Wiley pulls from his pocket a paper Ronald Reagan mask and starts imitating the president. Wiley's work is often overtly political, and critical of the rightist, anti-environmental policies of this administration. For example, "Nomad is an Island," on view in Newport, was based a news report that 50 barrels of radioactive waste tossed into the ocean near San Francisco in the 1940s are now leaking. Wiley's sculpture includes a decaying steel heart as a base, surmounted by the barrels, people being struck by lightening bolts, and a couple of sorcerers, complete with conical caps, running about to save the day.

"We're all living on this tiny planet and all our actions affect each other," said Wiley. "You can ignore it, and a greater amount of time, you can deny it. But the evidence is within each of us, regardless of the kind of dialogue we've made. It's like looking out the window and being struck by a sunset. It's something that's moving you, and why shouldn't those feelings be acknowledged?"

Wiley was born in Bedford, Ind., but when he was 10, he and his family began a peripatetic life. His father worked in construction, and the family lived in a 25-foot trailer, spending a year here and there — the South, Midwest, Southwest — before finally coming to Washington. It was there that a high school teacher, Jim McGrath, encouraged Wiley's interest in art, and helped him organize the portfolio that earned him a scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute in 1956. In 1960, before Wiley had completed his master's in fine arts, he had a

solo show of his abstract expressionist canvases at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He was frustrated with his painting, however, and felt that teaching might provide new stimulation. He accepted a position at UC Davis, where his students included the talented Bruce Nauman and Steve Kaltenbach. "It was great because I liked what everyone else was doing more than what I was doing myself," he said.

A number of influences — Dada, Surrealism, folk tales, and Native American art — merged to create Wiley's current style. The greatest influence, however, was Zen Buddhism, which teaches that all opposites are reconciled when viewed as part of a continuous chain. He embraced his natural tendency toward selective inclusivity — and everything plus the kitchen sink made its way into the work. "I was always trying to select and make my work go in a certain way, and resisting the natural forms and urges that wanted to occur. I was editing them, thinking they were uninteresting or whatever."

Zen brought about his "shift in attitude." "Now I start with an idea, then it's not what I thought it was indicating, so it goes in some other totally unexpected direction. It's a dialogue that I carry on with myself and with the work."

Wiley calls Zen an "incredible tool for clearing out a lot of erroneous postures about what is and what isn't. Once (you're) in contact with something like that, it becomes continually useful for diminishing the dilemma we continually think ourselves into." Wiley denies the limitations that most people apply to their lives. "We are bombarded with incredible amounts of information. As (Spanish philosopher) Jose Ortega y Gasset said, 'We're born into a universe that is chaotic, frightening and terrifying, and death looks like the obvious result.' I saw a bumper sticker that said, 'Life is hard and then you die.' That's so staggering that over reality we draw a curtain of clarity. We use the curtain of clarity like a scarecrow to frighten away reality. That's where art, or creative imagination, can make other relationships with reality. It doesn't have to be such a stark, isolated view."

So Wiley trys to represent reality in all its loony, depressing, anxious and sweet complexity, as "an interesting psychic community visual bulletin board." "I include anything that's going on in my mind, or in the area," he explained. "It's packed with information. I just tried to find what really interested me and not think about it. I wanted to stop seeking it out and trust what I was feeling and seeing. Once I was able to trust, that was wonderful."