

Tang hosts retrospective of American artist Fred Wilson— Art that questions museums and their biases

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. —The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College will present Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000 from Oct. 26 to Dec. 31, 2002. The exhibition will include nearly 20 installations and numerous smaller objects that showcase Wilson's fascination with the complex relationship between the art object and the museum.

Organized by Maurice Berger for the Center for Art and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Objects and Installations is the first retrospective to examine Wilson's artistic and theoretical research, as well as his knowledge of and influence on the museum community at large.

An artist and activist of African-American ancestry, Wilson draws on his own extensive museum experience to create beautifully realized mock art objects and faux museum installations that address issues of racial bias, gender, class, politics, and aesthetics. Taking the museum as his medium, Wilson mimics museum practices and techniques—exhibition design and display, lighting, curator's labels, wall color—in a process he describes as “a trompe l'oeil of curating,” in order to create unexpected and often startling artworks. For example, in a 1992 installation entitled Cabinet-Making 1820-1960, Wilson added a crude wooden whipping post to a grouping of elegant antique chairs. In Guarded View (1991), he dressed four brown-skinned male mannequins in the uniforms worn by the (often black) museum guards at four preeminent New York City museums. The mannequins are headless, as if to underline their anonymity in a museum world that has traditionally marginalized black artists.

Over the past 20 years, Wilson has applied his mock-curatorial perspective to such issues of art and history as Egyptian and classical sculpture, imperialism, and primitivism. He has hung portraits of the politically powerful upside down, exhibited skeletons of “friendly natives” in glass cases identified only as “Someone's Sister” or “Someone's Father,” and has labeled cultural artifacts “Removed from India to Europe, early 20th century.” For the mixed-media installation Colonial Collection (1990), Wilson gagged and blindfolded African masks with French and British flags.

Some of Wilson's most provocative and poignant works make use of the racially degrading African-American figurines popular earlier in the 20th century. In Mine/Yours (1995), Yours consists of eight stereotypical painted-ceramic figures: three Aunt Jemimas, an Uncle Tom, an aproned cook, and three Little Black Sambos, two of whom are eating watermelon. In contrast, Mine is a vintage photo of a rural black family whose eight members stand in calm dignity in front of their house. Explains Wilson, “I try to unlock the meanings of objects by juxtaposing and eliciting a conversation between them that creates an unexpected but essential thought.”

ABOUT THE ARTIST

“I grew up in museums. I went to the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan all the time,” says Wilson, whose father was a project engineer on the George Washington Bridge and whose mother was a schoolteacher who enjoyed art and music. He earned a B.F.A. at State University of New York College at Purchase.

As an educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the American Craft Museum and as gallery curator at the Longwood Arts Project in the Bronx, Wilson paid close attention to how museum practices influence visitors' reactions. "Curators really create how you are to view and think about those objects," says Wilson. "I figured if they can do it, I can do it too." Widely exhibited at cultural institutions throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Wilson has received many grants and awards, including a 1999 MacArthur Foundation grant.

Invited by numerous museums and cultural institutions to create reinstallations of their permanent-collection holdings, Wilson unearths and displays objects rarely exhibited, allowing visitors—and museum staff—to see the works in new lights and contexts. (For instance, *Cabinet-Making* was created for *Mining the Museum*, an exhibition Wilson organized for the Maryland Historical Society.) "I do jarring, upsetting things, like exhibiting slave shackles next to lavish silver museum pieces," Wilson admits. "But I try to ease people into these juxtapositions. I use beauty as a way of helping people to receive difficult or upsetting ideas. The topical issues are merely a vehicle for making one aware of one's own perceptual shift—which is the real thrill."

Three free public events will be presented at the Tang Museum in conjunction with Fred Wilson: *Objects and Installations 1979-2000*. They include an "artist's talk" with Wilson, beginning at 5 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 2, followed by a 6:30-8 p.m. reception for the museum's fall exhibitions. A curator's tour begins at noon on Thursday, Nov. 21.

The Wilson retrospective at the Center for Art and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, was made possible by support from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Peter Norton Family Foundation, Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, and the Maryland State Arts Council. The exhibition's presentation at the Tang is made possible with support from the Friends of the Tang.

The Tang Museum is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission is free. For more information on exhibitions and events, call 518-580-8080 or go to www.skidmore.edu/tang.

The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College offers a range of programs designed to explore cross-disciplinary communication among all areas of study through the visual arts.

Skidmore College, located in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., is an independent, liberal arts institution with an enrollment of approximately 2,200 men and women. The college offers the bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees in more than 60 areas, including majors in both traditional liberal arts disciplines and in such fields as business, the fine and performing arts, and social work. Skidmore is known for its interdisciplinary curriculum.