



## T. J. Wilcox/MATRIX 198

### Smorgasbord

June 16 – July 28, 2002

University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum

MATRIX

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“My work is informed by the different ways we experience film, from movies in the cineplex or National Geographic newsreels in the classroom, to the mini-epics we construct, surfing through the TV channels, remote control in hand. Though I understand the tricks of movie-making, I still believe in its magic and I use it to pay homage to people or ideas I wish to preserve.”

—T. J. Wilcox<sup>1</sup>

T. J. Wilcox is among a growing number of installation artists who are fascinated by film. For this New York–based artist, the physical means of showing a film is part of cinema’s magic. The film viewer’s fantastic voyage begins immediately upon entering the gallery in which Wilcox’s installations are presented. One has only to see the screen and hear the projector for cinema’s promise to be announced.

Wilcox creates films that are laboriously pieced together, frame by frame, from vintage and new film clips and animation. He starts by filming in 8mm, copies that film onto video for editing, and then transfers it back to 16mm for projection in the gallery. Wilcox explains, “The labs think I am losing image but I always feel like I am gaining something new with each step in the process.”<sup>2</sup> This results in grainy, deliberately low-tech films that feel like handmade physical objects: flickering, kinetic paintings.<sup>3</sup> It is a physical manifestation of his attraction to the complex and layered nature of film, an essentially ephemeral medium made of light and color.<sup>4</sup>

Inherent in Wilcox’s films is a nostalgia for the power of filmic fantasy, what art critic Bill Arning called “an over-the-top romantic swooning for the unique quality of celluloid.”<sup>5</sup> They confirm that multimillion-dollar budgets, high-tech gloss, and special effects are not necessary to deliver pure sensation and emotional investment. His films reflect a nineteenth-century taste for artifice. Indeed, they feel as if they were made for a different time, perhaps the era in which film was invented and first seen.

Wilcox is attracted to stories, particularly historical tales that have been passed down for centuries, losing some veracity and gaining texture with each retelling. His narratives are often fantastic, fetishistic riffs on historical personalities, among them Marie Antoinette, Marlene Dietrich, and the Roman Emperor Hadrian. The films are short, yet they require patience. Some footage is extremely slowed down, and the narrative unfolds at a time-warp pace. Viewers must offer themselves over completely to the filmic experience Wilcox offers. What they gain in return is a quixotic, revelatory, sensual experience.

Wilcox’s MATRIX exhibition features three films: *The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China* (1997), *The Little Elephant* (2000), and *Ladies’ Room*

COVER: Photograph of the film “The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China,” 1997; r-print; 16 x 20 inches; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



(*Twenty Questions*) (2002).

*The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China* is a combination home movie, travelogue, and National Geographic special. The story is based on historical and anthropological accounts, passed down for centuries, of the unbelievably grand tomb of the first emperor of China. Legend suggests that the emperor tried to recreate his own version of the universe inside his tomb. All of the constellations are said to have decorated the ceiling. The floor of the tomb was a complete relief map of China through which rivers of mercury flowed; the body of the emperor was supposedly placed on a boat and set to sail on one of these rivers eternally. The legendary accounts became more plausible, and are thereby more mysterious and seductive to Wilcox, with the 1974 discovery of the third-century-B.C. life-size terracotta warriors discovered in Xi’an, which were thought to be guarding the tomb.

*The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China* is a visit to the emperor’s tomb as imagined by the artist. The film is silent with subtitles in both English and classic Mandarin. It begins in front of Mann’s Chinese Theater in Los Angeles and includes touristic footage shot by the artist in the Chinese tea palace in Potsdam, Germany; stop-action animation created by the artist; and bits from other movies, including Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990), and *Fellini’s Casanova* (1976). In Wilcox’s highly personalized and idiosyncratic tomb, the ceiling becomes the newly restored Zodiac ceiling at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan; the mountains and valleys are collaged from Chinese scroll paintings, photographs, and drawings; the soundtrack features Japan (an early-eighties English pop band) performing a song called “Canton”; and Donald Sutherland, who played Casanova, takes on the role of the first emperor.<sup>6</sup> Wilcox extends a brief image of Sutherland rowing into an elaborate slow motion scene that distorts not only time, but also color and clarity, taking on the weight of memory. Sutherland becomes *our* emperor, rowing on a river of mercury. The film is sweet, hopeful, and poetic. As is the case in most of Wilcox’s works, fact and fiction are blurred in a modest and intriguing way.

When he was a child, Wilcox told me in an informal conversation, he recognized

Photograph of the film “The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China,” 1997; r-print; 15 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



*Babar* as one of the better books, chic and special in its refined simplicity. Many people forget that the book begins with an extremely violent moment: as a little elephant, Babar is riding on his mother’s back when she is shot and killed. Babar quickly flees from what was an idyllic world into the town and faces instant acculturation. Wilcox’s film *The Little Elephant* is about the transition from naiveté to adaptation.

Wilcox has said that “his Babar” is the Elephant Man limping through the 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Indeed, *The Little Elephant* is as much about David Bowie as it is about the character from the children’s book. It includes a number of scenes from various films featuring Bowie, including the visually and emotionally evocative scene in *The Hunger* in which he learns he will not live forever. The most abstract of the three films included in the MATRIX exhibition, *The Little Elephant*, running just over four minutes, offers a hypnotic visual passage: a ride between the natural and the fabricated.

The subtitles are infused with a childlike innocence, but the accompanying images reveal the complexity of all interactions—alien/human, human/animal, and by extension, human/human. In this film, as *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter writes, Wilcox is “mixing high and low forms, playing with all kinds of conventions, often teetering on the edge of the over-the-top comedic but in the end delivering a surprising emotional punch.”<sup>7</sup>

The baroque quality found in Wilcox’s works comes to the fore in his most recent project, his first shot with a digital video camera. The small size, portability, and easy operation of digital video facilitate an intimate mode of recording. In *Ladies’ Room* (*Twenty Questions*), Wilcox chose to record conversations between himself and two women, one in her sixties and the other in her twenties. The artist characterizes the women as female dandies—divas who “star” in their lives.

The video is structured as a parlor game. Each topic is introduced by the artist as a word written on a note card. He selected subjects that he knew would elicit a dramatic reaction, in-depth response, or at least contemplation. When Sarah draws the card that reads “love,” for instance, she sighs, bats her eyelashes, falls back

*The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich*, 1999 (film still); 16mm film; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



against a couch pillow, and sips champagne from the glass that she holds...but fails to answer. With Wilcox these women discuss perfume, homosexuals, cocktails, cats, and women they admire (Elizabeth Taylor in particular). The conversations are interspersed with archetypal cinematic scenes featuring Taylor, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis. Occasionally, Wilcox can be heard off camera, laughing, concurring, and encouraging. His adoration of his friends is apparent as each segment visually and audibly flatters the subject. Wilcox suggests that each of us casts our life in the way a director does, requiring our friends to play particular roles. His extraordinarily performative friends personalize iconic film characters, bringing them into his life in an intimate way. The last line of *Ladies' Room (Twenty Questions)* sums up the way these two women approach life: "Melodramatic, yes. But true."

For Wilcox, film is a memorial to lost things that should be remembered—monumental or minute, grandiose or mundane, the profound in the subtle and transitory. He says, "My films give me an excuse to collage together bits of visual information that I personally cannot get rid of."<sup>8</sup> His films are about reconstituting memory, authoring tributes, assuring history.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Artist in conversation with the curator, March 18, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Fogle, "Interview," Walker Art Center catalogue, 1998, n/p.

<sup>3</sup> Holland Cotter, "T.J. Wilcox: Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *The New York Times*, Friday, November 10, 2000, p. E37.

<sup>4</sup> Fogle, n/p.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Arning, "T.J. Wilcox at Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *Art in America*, April 1998, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Fogle, n/p.

<sup>7</sup> Cotter, p. E37

<sup>8</sup> Fogle, n/p.

*Hadrian and Antinous*, 2000 (film still); 16mm film; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



T. J. Wilcox was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1965. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1989. He then attended the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, where he received his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1995. Wilcox lives and works in New York. T. J. Wilcox / MATRIX 198 *Smorgasbord* will be his first one-person museum exhibition.

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2002

"Oh my GR-DVMS, oh oh, GR-DVMS," Metro Pictures, New York, NY

2001

Sadie Coles HQ, London, U.K.  
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany  
Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna, Austria

2000

Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY  
Kunsthhaus Glarus, Glarus, Switzerland

1999

Neu, Berlin, Germany  
Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY  
Sadie Coles HQ, London, U.K.  
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany

1998

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, U.K.

1997

Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany  
"The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China," Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2002

Metro Pictures, New York, NY

2001

"W," Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dole, France  
"The Americans—New Art," Barbican Art Gallery, London, U.K.

Photograph of the film "The Little Elephant" [ii], 2000; r-print; 16 x 20 inches; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



2000

"Greater New York," P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York  
"The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–2000," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

1999

"Moving Images," Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, Germany  
Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

1998

"El Niño," Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany  
"Dialogues," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

1997

Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy  
"Sunshine and Noir: Art in Los Angeles, 1960-1997," Louisiana Museum of Art, Humlebaek, Denmark;  
Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany; Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA  
"Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

1996

"Hollywood," LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions], Los Angeles, CA  
"Persona," Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
"Affairs," The Institute for Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria  
"Studio 246," Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany  
"Sampler II," David Zwirner Gallery, New York, NY

#### Selected Catalogues and Books

*The Americans—New Art*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, U.K., 2001.  
*W*, Musée des Beaux Arts de Dole, Dole, France, 2001.  
*T. J. Wilcox*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, U.K., 1998.  
*Persona*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland, 1996.

#### Selected Periodicals

Michael Archer, "T. J. Wilcox—Sadie Coles HQ," *Artforum*, April 2001, pp. 149–50.  
Bill Arning, "Review," *Art in America*, April 1998, p. 116.  
Amra Brooks, "A Conversation with T. J. Wilcox," *Zingmagazine*, Summer 1998, pp. 88–95.  
Holland Cotter, "T. J. Wilcox," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2000, p. E37.  
Holland Cotter, "Cinema à la Warhol, With Cowboys, Stillness and Glamour," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2002, p. E31.

Photograph of the film "The Little Elephant," 2000; r-print; 16 x 20 inches; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.



Dan Fox, "Straight to Video," *frieze*, October 2001, pp. 68–71.  
Martin Herbert, "Review," *Flash Art*, October 1999, p. 117.  
Sarah Kent, "Review," *Time Out/London*, October 21-28, 1998, p. 43.  
Dale McFarland, "T. J. Wilcox — ICA London," *frieze*, no. 44, January/February 1999, p. 81.  
Lawrence A. Rickels, "The Loss Generation," *Art/Text*, February 1999, no. 64, pp. 32–35.  
Charles Ruas, "T. J. Wilcox at Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *Art in America*, June 2001, pp. 126–27.

#### Work in MATRIX

*The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China*, 1997  
16mm film  
11 minutes, 44 seconds

*The Little Elephant*, 2000  
16mm film  
4 minutes, 38 seconds

*Ladies' Room (Twenty Questions)*, 2002  
Digital video  
13 minutes, 24 seconds

All works courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

#### Please Note:

On Thursday, June 27, at 6:15 p.m., UC Berkeley Professor of Film Studies and Rhetoric Linda Williams will join MATRIX Curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson for a walkthrough of *T.J. Wilcox/ MATRIX 198 Smorgasbord*, a screening of Wilcox's *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich*, and a conversation about Wilcox's work.

MATRIX Curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will lead an additional walkthrough of the exhibition on Sunday, July 21, at 3 p.m.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM Council MATRIX Endowment, Ann M. Hatch, Eric McDougall, Glenn and April Bucksbaum, and Christopher Vroom and Illya Szilak.

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*Ladies' Room (Twenty Questions)*, 2002 [DVD still]; digital video; courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.