

Something from Nothing

In the face of poverty, art speculators, and his own mortality, an emerging artist defies the odds

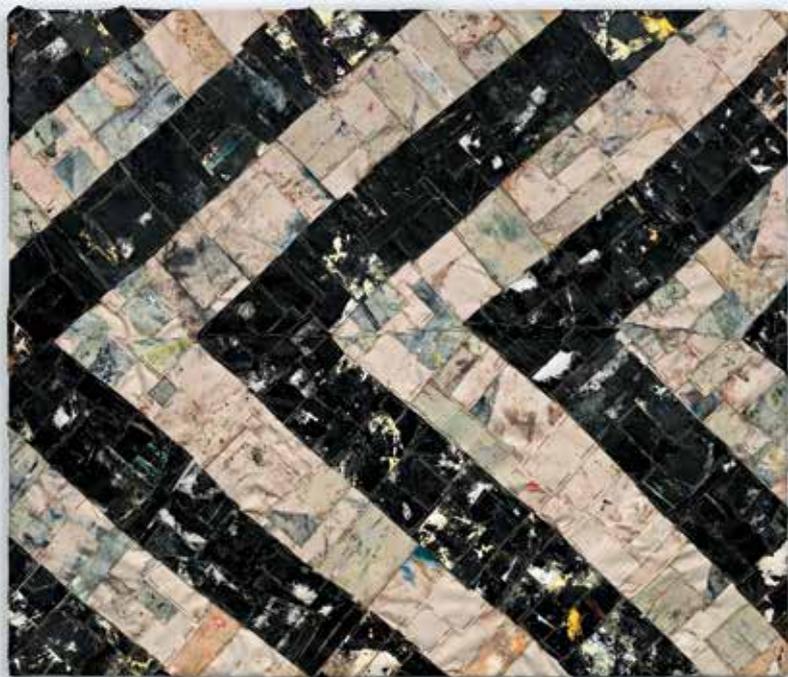
BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

A LITTLE MORE than a year ago, Graham Wilson was living in a heat-deprived Red Hook studio, reading by candlelight, eating Chef Boyardee off a two-burner stove, and sleeping on a four-inch mattress pad while freezing through the winter and constantly breathing in toxic paint and chemical fumes. “It was very bad,” Wilson recalls of the circumstances that allowed for a crushing polar vortex of depression to take hold. Ironically, those hardships would yield a suite of paintings that relieved him of the quotidian labors of an art-handling gig at Hauser & Wirth. Upon seeing the fruits of Wilson’s struggle, one of Hauser’s directors helped organize a pop-up exhibition for the young painter in

the back room of a DUMBO fashion boutique. The show sold out—as did everything in his studio—which led to waiting lists for established collectors and a gaggle of art speculators who foamed at the mouth over Wilson’s market potential. There was even a brief stint in which he partnered—then suddenly parted ways—with the controversial Los Angeles-based collector-adviser Stefan Simchowitz. “I hope he succeeds, of course,” says Simchowitz. “It is just more likely that without good counsel he will not, and with the decisions I have seen him make and my past experience I have had with artists, the chances of his success are somewhat reduced by, in my opinion, poor decision making.”

Graham Wilson
in New York,
2015.

BELOW:
Fork in The Road:
Left and *Fork
in The Road:*
Right, both
2015. Oil, twine,
and canvas,
each 60 x 70 in.



Perhaps, but since his emergence from the art-handler shadows, Wilson has received effusive gallery and art-fair support from the Hole in New York, Mon Chéri in Brussels, Parisian gallery Chez Valentin, and Brand New Gallery in Milan, where he'll have his second solo exhibition, "I Clocked Out When I Punched In," this month. Within the span of a year, the 27-year-old Kentucky-born artist has secured his own apartment and purchased 10 riverside acres outside his hometown, Louisville, for a new studio he hopes to build there. Still, he harbors no illusions about becoming a prince of the market.

"Before there was anybody paying attention, I was still on a deep inquiry for myself, and it had nothing to do with people coming to buy things," says Wilson. Back then, he was simply trying to be a painter in the mold of his heroes, Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly. (He has Victory tattooed on his left hand—after the latter artist's 1984 Neo-Expressionist masterpiece—while Baudelaire's name is scrawled over a heart on his right fist.)

However, after failing to achieve anything lasting with his own abstract expressionist works, Wilson destroyed them, soaked the cut pieces of canvas in mineral spirits, and scraped the paint chips off them; he would later use them for another series of paintings, dubbed "A.O." (for *Alpha Omega*). Once these previous efforts were obliterated, he reworked the adulterated strips into a bandagelike piece, which he then marked with over-pours of oil, spray-paint abstractions, even muddy-colored handprints, that evoked everything from Pollockesque patchworks (some of Wilson's works are hand-stitched together like quilts) to graffiti-bombed buildings and ancient cave drawings. "My investigation is in the end of painting. I desperately wanted to be a painter, but it came with the realization that there was almost nothing left to do in painting," Wilson explains. "Yes, I can paint great pictures, but what is that at the end of the day? That's nothing—it's so basic, so easy."

Of course, there's nothing easy or basic about the conception and execution of great paintings that create a wholly novel and wondrous visual vocabulary. In fact, there's nothing really novel in much of what Wilson does, from strip paintings (see Matthew Chambers) to chips paintings (see Kadar Brock), which Wilson renders like dark voids of spent confetti, to the floor paintings (see Lucy Dodd) he makes from the off-slough and paint-stained footwork used to create the other series. But if Wilson's work, which references everything from Leonardo's



Vitruvian Man to Joseph Beuys's 1961 "Horns" exhibition, defies being labeled derivative or weak, it does so by capturing that ever-elusive "soul power" Beuys tried to harness with his humble materials.

"Look, Pollock didn't make the drip paintings because he wanted to. He made them out of circumstance. He was faced with Cubism and the fact that he had to move forward, and that's sort of the same thing I'm faced with," Wilson argues, as a way of explaining his approach. "People are now making products, and I have to find a way not to do so." In a sense, Wilson's entire practice is based on recognizing his failure as the painter he wants to be, and he succeeds only by killing his darlings. Given the destructive nature of his practice, this process of devotional, bricolage-based works may soon meet its own death, as Wilson claims he's on a deeper quest than the market can provide.

Despite his syrupy Southern slang and athletic, heavily tatted physique,

Wilson speaks and acts like a hermetic autodidact. But growing up in the east Louisville neighborhood of Butchertown, he didn't play the intellectual as vocally as he does today. When he was 10, Wilson's mother brought them out of their impoverished surroundings to live in a carriage house on stately grounds that belonged to the late chairman of Brown-Forman, the liquor conglomerate that owns Jack Daniel's and Southern Comfort. "It was a very beautiful place to live, but I suppose I never appreciated it because I had a problem with class division. There was that barrier—people thought they were smarter than you or better than you because they had money," Wilson says. "Essentially, it's modern slavery, except that you don't get beaten all the time. But you don't get paid enough to save any money, you don't get paid enough to do anything of leisure, you pretty much work to eat, and I was very turned off by that."

At 16, bored by the curriculum, Wilson dropped out of high school and started making money on the streets selling

Tunnel Vision, 2015. Oil, twine, and canvas, 96 x 96 in.



drugs. His primary hope was to avoid another round of indentured servitude, but ultimately he was arrested for narcotics possession. Fortunately, his mother helped him avoid sentencing, and the week he was released from jail he packed a suitcase and left (with \$300 in his pocket) for New York, where he couch-surfed at the Bedford-Stuyvesant apartment of a friend from Louisville.

Wilson survived by working a string of “shitty jobs”—assembling furniture, construction, landscaping, plumbing, bussing tables, stocking shelves at Blick Art Materials (where he “learned the science of oil paint”)—while attempting to write on the side. “I was a very bad writer, but I didn’t ever want to paint because I loved art so much and I thought that would be very disrespectful,” he says, recalling that he got into some “tussles” with his roommate when he finally built up the nerve to start painting inside the apartment. “He kicked me out and I was pretty much rendered homeless that whole summer. Luckily, some graffiti kids let me bum off their couches sometimes. But then sometimes nobody answers the phone and you kinda sleep where you sleep.”

His venue of choice was East River State Park in Williamsburg, which was still under construction and easily accessible at the time. But Wilson was determined to get off the streets: he worked three jobs that summer to save up money for a studio. “I would pretty much go from work to work to work and sleep two hours on the train,” he says.

Such adversity early on prepared him for the grim news he received from his doctors late last fall.

After ailing in bed from November to January, Wilson was diagnosed with the autoimmune disease ankylosing spondylitis, with an X-ray revealing that his spine had fused to his pelvis. At first, he was given a powerful drug used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and told he would have just 10 years left to work as he now does in the studio before his vertebrae fused completely. “For a long time I was like, why is this happening to me? Why me? It was pitiful,” he admits. But after experiencing some side effects of the medication, he gave up the drug, and drinking, and started a rigorous yoga-exercise-meditation practice and a strict anti-inflammatory, blood-type diet under the guidance of two holistic doctors in Los Angeles. “I can’t worry about 10 years from now. I just have to worry about today.”

He’s busy making work for the Milan show, which will include a video of him digging his own grave from a goldleaf-filled plot (*Reaping Everything “I” Sew*) while wearing size 18 Timberland boots, both metaphors for realities he has yet to fill; a time clock that Wilson has punched every day in the studio (a reference to the eradication of “clock time” and a step into the “present” that he calls *Punch the Clock*); a pile of dirt that will be watered constantly and bloom midway through the exhibition (*One Reason Why Five Is*

Important); an installation on a blank wall consisting simply of a red clown nose at his current height (*Self-Portrait at 27*); a gestural installation where he drags a thick oil stick down a blank wall (*Where “I” Draw the Line*); and a mural-size installation of thin panels from the “A.O.” series, spaced equidistantly. Through their format and arrangement, the paintings are meant to argue for their own irrelevance, while highlighting the space between them, a space where the instruments of Wilson’s trade live among chaos and harmony at once. Though these panels might be the most commodified works in the show, Wilson doesn’t plan to sell them. In fact, none of the works in the show will be for sale, though he will allocate a few select paintings to the gallery to be sold under his direction, a response to the lack of market control he had under Simchowitz.

“When I make the works—strips, quilts, and chips—there is no one there but me, and I want to satisfy myself and, hopefully, prove that there is something still possible to be done with just oil, paint, and canvas,” he says, noting that when he worked at Hauser & Wirth, the number of Sterling Ruby spray paintings he saw “bordered on the outrageous. Not to take anything away from those works—I just could not see myself doing that.” Although he does still need to make some sellable work to fund his endeavors, he asserts that the market can be handled behind closed doors and on what he calls “a more sophisticated level.”

“This decision came about when I realized that I am an artist. Whether I make things or not, I am an artist. And I am just that because I won’t subscribe, I won’t compromise, and I will continue to work out my ideas as they come, and express those thoughts to people in a simple conversation, if that is my only medium, whether it be with a man on the street or Larry Gagosian, it doesn’t make a difference to me,” he says, admitting, “I’ve had a very easy road thus far, compared with people I admire who were on such a hard search, like de Kooning, Robert Irwin, Twombly, Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, James Lee Byars. I could make it easy on myself for sure, but that’s not really the point. Jack Kerouac said that when everyone began knocking on his door, he knew it was over. That’s a good metaphor for why I need to have a constant inquiry for my own self. It’s starting to push me in the direction of how do you make something from nothing. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I don’t have all the answers yet.” MP

A.O. #22 (5/50 sq) and A.O. #23 (5/50 sq), from the series “One Foot In, One Foot Out,” 2015. Oil, pigment, charcoal, paint scrapings, and canvas, each 50x50 in.