

**The
Bennington
Legacy:
Sculpture by
Willard Boepple
Isaac Witkin
James Wolfe**

Essay by Karen Wilkin

TOWER
GALLERY

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Opposite: Willard Boepple
Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard #4, 1999
Pine, graphite and wax, 51 × 40 × 27 inches (129.5 × 101.6 × 68.6 cm)



Introduction

Bennington College was the hub for prominent and groundbreaking artists during the 1960s. Paul Feely, Anthony Caro, and Jules Olitski all taught there. Kenneth Noland and David Smith lived in the region, and often visited the college. Exhibitions by Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock were held there, and Helen Frankenthaler, an alumna, often visited Bennington. I consider myself lucky to have been educated in art history at Bennington College, a school whose history has been so intimately associated with exciting, fresh developments in the art world and where groundbreaking advancements in art history have been established.

My feelings are the same as those shared by my fellow students and alumni. We are all fascinated and eager to further understand the historic contributions and significant role that Bennington College has played in the art world. This exhibition serves as a platform for reintroducing revolutionary ideas and forms that were developed at Bennington to a larger audience. The sculptors featured in

Opposite: Willard Boepple
Heath, 2012
Pine, 124 × 42 × 41 inches (315 × 106.7 × 104.1 cm)



this exhibition represent both the intimacy and the continuity of Bennington's legacy. As my collaborator on this project, curator and critic Karen Wilkin has written about Isaac Witkin, who taught sculpture at Bennington College during the 1960s. James Wolfe, who taught Witkin how to weld, worked as Witkin's assistant for three years. After working as Witkin's assistant, Wolfe moved on to work under Kenneth Noland, and Willard Boepple became Witkin's assistant at Bennington College. This exhibition was made possible by Karen Wilkin, Willard Boepple, James Wolfe, Nadine Witkin, William O'Reilly, FreedmanArt, and the collaboration of the Tower 49 Team. I am excited for the public to see these beautiful works, as well as for the opportunity to allow a wide audience to reflect on Bennington's role in art history that incorporated so many major artists.

Ai Kato
Director, Tower 49 Gallery

Opposite: James Wolfe
Dijon, 2013
Powder coated steel, 26 × 26 × 10 inches (66 × 66 × 25.4 cm)





Commons Building at Bennington College

The Bennington Legacy: Sculpture By Willard Boepple, Isaac Witkin, and James Wolfe

I In the 1960s and '70s, some of the most adventurous, innovative abstract art being made anywhere could be found in the environs of the picturesque New England town, Bennington, Vermont. From 1963 to 1967, the painter Jules Olitski taught at Bennington College. Between 1963 and 1965, the British sculptor Anthony Caro was artist-in-residence there, and in 1963, the painter Kenneth Noland moved to South Shaftsbury, a few miles away. The three young men – Olitski was 41, Caro and Noland, 39 – became close friends, frequenting each other's studios, influencing and cross-fertilizing each other's work. Together, they explored how disembodied line, radiant color, and economical compositions could delight the eye and wordlessly communicate profound feeling, radically changing conceptions of what painting and sculpture could be.

This exciting period in the history of modernism marked the beginning of a Bennington aesthetic legacy. Painting was taken to be primarily about ravishing color, detached from reference or illusion and turned into an autonomous, expressive element in its own right. Sculpture, in a conception derived from the "new tradition" of collage construction developed by Pablo Picasso, Julio Gonzalez, and the American innovator David Smith, was thought of in terms of resolutely abstract, open, assemblies of independent elements, sometimes intensified by the use of intense color. These constructions occupied our own space and resembled nothing pre-existing but had the unignorable presence of another person. Younger artists associated with the college and the region's vital art community responded to

the challenge issued by Caro's, Noland's, and Olitski's work. This exhibition explores the way three of the most significant of those younger artists, Isaac Witkin, James Wolfe, and Willard Boepple, expanded the Bennington sculptural legacy, absorbing the fundamental propositions of the Bennington modernist aesthetic and transforming those propositions in strikingly personal ways.

II When Caro left Bennington College to return to England, in 1965, the South African-born sculptor, Isaac Witkin, then age 29, replaced him, first for one year, then returning to remain as artist-in-residence through 1979. Previously, Witkin taught at St. Martin's School of Art, in London, where he had been Caro's student, in the late 1950s. (Between studying at St. Martin's and beginning to teach there, Witkin was Henry Moore's assistant.) Witkin was one of "The New Generation," a group of spirited young British sculptors who attracted attention for unprecedented abstract structures made of painted wood, glass, Plexiglas, and fiberglass, Witkin made sinuous, upward-thrust polychrome forms in fiberglass. The New Generation's bold approach was not a quest for novelty but, rather, a way of throwing off the constraints of the past through the use of new materials and the forms they engendered.

When he arrived in Vermont, Witkin brought his appetite for the unexpected and his independence of mind with him. He demonstrated that independence within a year, by abandoning the approach that had established his reputation to begin working in steel. There were practical reasons – the toxic fumes of fiberglass were affecting Witkin's health – but changing materials proved important to the evolution of his sculpture. "Steel was the key to spatial freedom," Witkin said in 1997. It permitted – or forced – him to explore forms and structures different from those he had used in the past and allowed – or forced – him to construct more directly and spontaneously. The assertive "unfolding" forms of works such as *Shogun*, 1968, its open volumes, delicately balanced, knife-edge planes, and especially, its gravity-defying thrust into space, are possible only with steel, which can be both thin and strong, and because of its tensile strength, can support itself over a long distance. As *Shogun's* athletic poise attests, steel unleashed a new spatial daring in Witkin.

Witkin worked in steel for the next fifteen years, finding the material ideal for embodying his formal concerns of the period. Yet, around 1980, his early interest in mass and volumetric form reasserted itself and he returned to such traditional materials as bronze, in non-traditional ways. His bronzes are assemblies of directly poured, swelling, independent elements, freely combined, so that they have the spatial audacity and authority of his steel sculptures.

III Witkin was able to work in steel, despite his unfamiliarity with the technique, because the college art department's Sculpture Assistant, James Wolfe, created a welding studio for him in a carriage barn, off-campus, in North Bennington. Wolfe was about 22 when he was hired by Bennington College, with skills honed as a theater Technical Director and stage set builder. When he began to work with Witkin, Wolfe taught him how to weld and worked with him on his first metal sculptures, which were exhibited at Robert Elkon Gallery, New York, in 1969. His own advanced technical knowledge notwithstanding, Wolfe describes his two years as Witkin's sculpture assistant as the time "when my education in sculpture began." That education was furthered when, in 1968, in Witkin's studio, Wolfe met Noland, Olitski, and the critic Clement Greenberg. Wolfe eventually moved into Noland's Shaftsbury house, as a sort of caretaker – Noland divided his time between New York and Vermont – and later became Noland's assistant when the painter, who had acquired some of his late friend, David Smith's, sculpture equipment and materials, began to work in steel. Wolfe was making small volumetric sculptures of his own, but he, too, began to use steel, employing Smith's equipment. On a trip to New York, Wolfe saw Smith's large *Australia*, 1951, an emphatic steel scribble, all cursive lines, arcs, and voids, at the Museum Modern Art. "That changed everything," Wolfe says. "I knew I wanted to draw with steel." The virtuoso gestures, their trajectories through space emphasized by rich color, that have characterized his animated, airborne constructions from then until the present, offer proof of how completely Wolfe realized his ambition.

Wolfe also worked closely with Caro, assisting him, in 1969 and 1970, when he returned to Vermont to make sculpture at Noland's studio, Wolfe played an important role, as well, in two of Caro's most

ambitious campaigns of sculpture-making: in 1972, at a steel factory in Veduggio, Italy, and in 1974, at York Steel Works, in Toronto, Canada. When, in 1978, Caro was commissioned to make a sculpture for the new, I.M. Pei designed East building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Wolfe fabricated the elements of the work from Caro's maquette and supervised the construction and installation of the completed sculpture. Despite these close associations with Witkin, Noland, and Caro, Wolfe's own sculpture always remained entirely personal, distinguished by his mastery of gesture. Whether exultant, elegant, or playful, Wolfe's "drawing in steel," with its suave polychromy, is as recognizable as a signature.

IV Willard Boepple, at 24, followed Wolfe as Witkin's assistant. Born in Bennington, but raised in California, he studied painting at City College of City University of New York, encouraged by Richard Diebenkorn, a family friend. After graduating in 1969, Boepple traveled to Bennington to visit his father, who taught in the college music department, and began working with Witkin, who taught the young painter how to weld. "I took to it immediately," Boepple says. He realized that "sculpture was where I belonged – a complete discovery, it happened overnight." He embraced a planar, additive approach, arranging unpainted steel in deceptively casual configurations whose scale was determined by human proportions. Boepple was soon hired as Sculpture Assistant by the college and helped Olitski, who was beginning new experiments with three-dimensional abstraction. Boepple also developed a close friendship with Wolfe. Like their predecessors, the two aspiring sculptors spent time in each other's studios and had passionate discussions about art. When Witkin moved to a new studio, Boepple took over the carriage barn and established his own welding shop, working for others as well as making his own sculpture, until 1977, when he began teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, there he created a welded sculpture program with such visiting artists as Wolfe.

In 1982, a serious illness compelled Boepple to change his working methods and materials, but his conception of sculpture as open construction inflected by the characteristics of the body remained unchanged. He has made, in wood or aluminum, works that

take as their point of departure such utilitarian objects as stepladders and shelves – "things the body uses," Boepple says – distilling their pragmatic responses to human needs into a wholly abstract language of geometric "containers," floating planes, hovering bars, and unidentifiable, vaguely industrial forms. Often as cool and restrained as Wolfe's "steel drawings" are exuberant – Classical, to Wolfe's Baroque – Boepple's series known as "Towers," "Shelves," "Looms," and "Trestles" are humanized and animated by the memory of the body's proportions. Complexities of structure are often clarified – or emphasized – through color. Recently, Boepple has returned to his roots as a painter by making monoprints, which he "constructs," superimposing layers of color, as if building a sculpture.

V Witkin's, Wolfe's, and Boepple's histories are intimately intertwined. Each, in different ways, has profoundly affected each of the others. The three are united by their common conviction that sculptures are abstract, evocative objects made by adding things together, with color used to intensify expressive power. But each makes sculpture that is completely individual and original. Collectively and separately their distinctive works enlarge our conception of how three-dimensional objects speak to us, continuing and expanding the Bennington legacy.

Karen Wilkin
New York, March 2015



Willard Boepple
Bradford, 2008
Aluminum, 27 × 66 × 17 ½ inches (68.6 × 167.6 × 44.5 cm)



Opposite: Willard Boepple
Ever, 2010
Pine, 127 × 44 × 36 inches (322.6 × 111.8 × 91.4 cm)



Willard Boepple
Colt, 2013
Pine, 70 × 137 × 42 inches (177.8 × 348 × 106.7 cm)



Willard Boepple
New Labour, 1997
Pine, graphite and wax, 36 × 64 × 16 inches (91.4 × 162.6 × 40.1 cm)



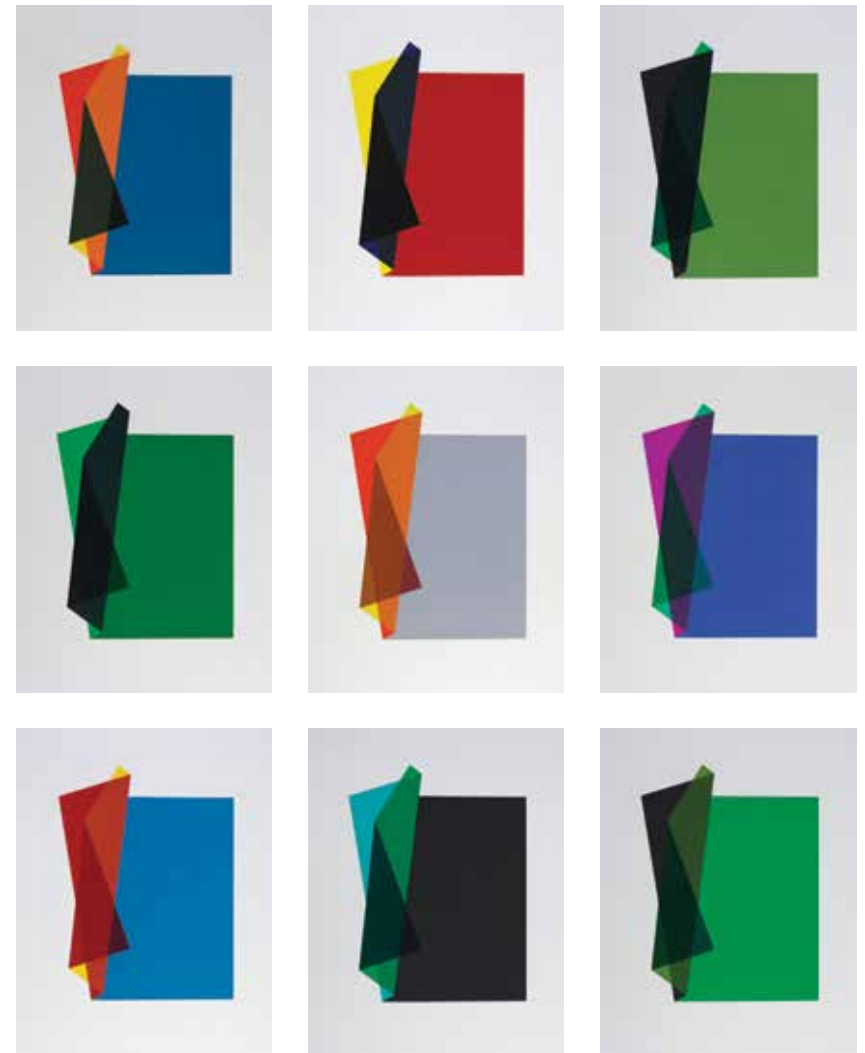
Willard Boepple
Casual Water, 1997
Pine, graphite and wax, 11 ¾ × 37 ½ × 12 ½ inches (35.6 × 91.4 × 30.5 cm)



Willard Boepple
Cucullan, 1998
Pine, graphite and wax, 18 × 58 × 19 ½ inches (159.4 × 34.9 × 59.1 cm)



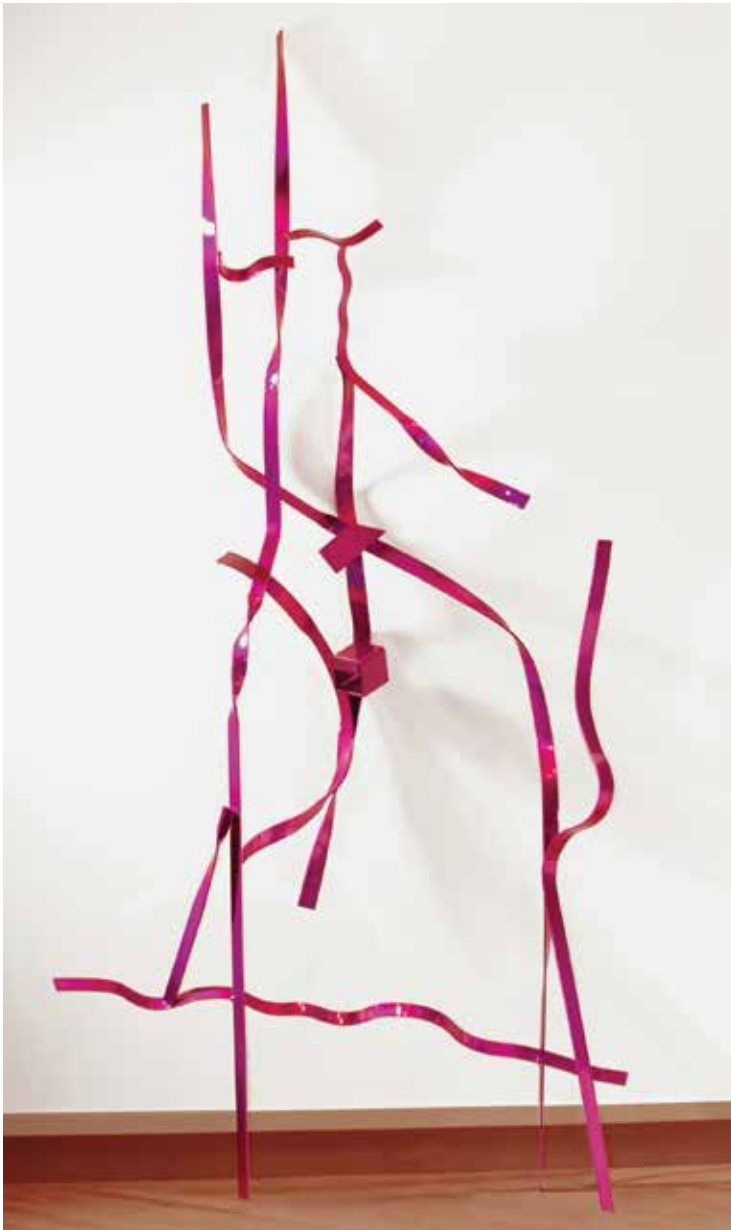
William Boepple
 from left to right: *Monoprints* (18214c, 18214w, 19214i, 18214u, 18214d,
 18214o, 19214j, 18214p, 19214g), 2004
 Silkscreen on Somerset, 13 ½ × 10 ¼ inches (34.3 × 27.3 cm) each



William Boepple
 from left to right: *Monoprints* (18214b, 18214m, 19214f, 19214d, 18214r,
 18214e, 18214a, 19214h, 19214e), 2004
 Silkscreen on Somerset, 13 ½ × 10 ¼ inches (34.3 × 27.3 cm) each



Isaac Witkin
Shogun, 1968
Bolted steel, 72 × 144 × 144 inches (182.9 × 365.8 × 365.8 cm)



James Wolfe
Quartet Purple, 2012
Powder coated steel, 112 × 60 × 17 inches (284.5 × 153 × 43.2 cm)



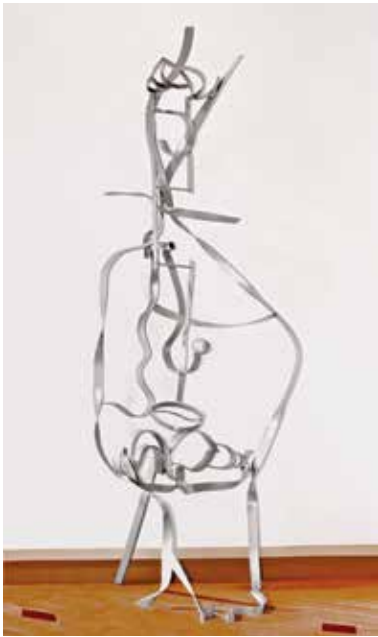
James Wolfe
Just Right, 2013
Powder coated steel, 32 × 32 × 14 inches (81.3 × 81.3 × 35.6)



James Wolfe
Could Be, 2013
Powder coated steel, 19 × 46 × 10 inches (48.3 × 116.8 × 25.4 cm)



James Wolfe
Tunnel Wickets, 2014
Powder coated steel, 24 × 38 × 13 inches (60.9 × 96.5 × 33 cm)



James Wolfe
Quartet Grey, 2012
Powder coated steel, 114 × 41 × 26
inches (289.6 × 104.1 × 66 cm)



James Wolfe
Wickets Tumble, 2014
Rusted and oiled steel, 81 × 96 × 55 inches
(205.7 × 243.8 × 139.7 cm)



Opposite: James Wolfe
Crowded Wickets, 2014
Powder coated steel, 53 × 38 × 15 inches (104.6 × 96.5 × 38.1 cm)



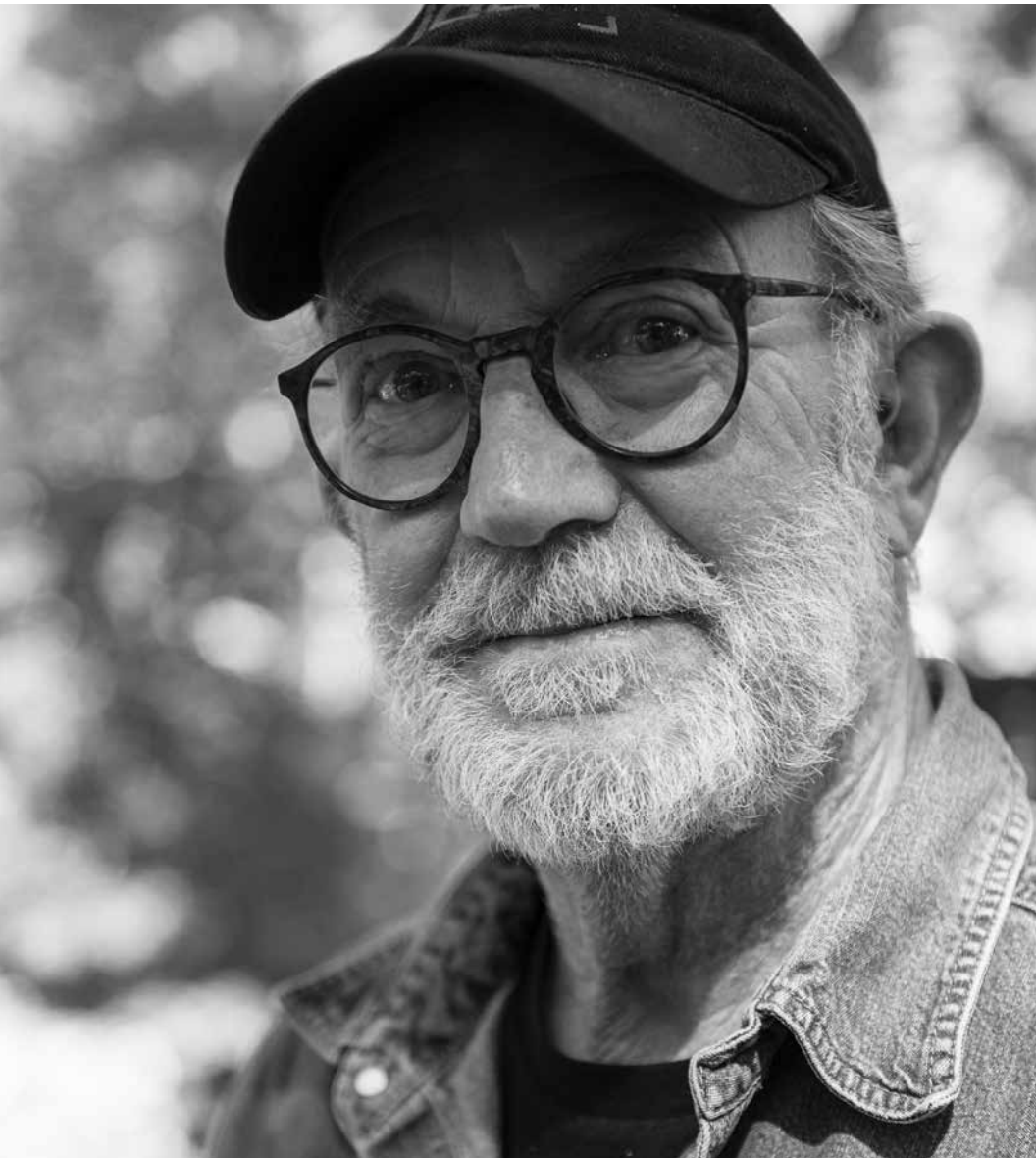
Willard Boepple

Willard Boepple was born in 1945 in Bennington, VT. Educated at the University of California at Berkeley, the Rhode Island School of Design, and City College of the City University of New York, he also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. In the early 1970s, he worked for Isaac Witkin, who was artist-in-residence at Bennington College. Boepple was later hired as sculpture assistant at the college and, subsequently, taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Boepple has exhibited widely in the U.S., Great Britain, Canada, Europe, and Africa. His work is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, the National Gallery of Botswana, Gaborone, and the National Gallery of Kenya, Nairobi, as well as many private collections. The recipient of numerous awards, Boepple was elected to the National Academy, NY, in 2001. He lives and works in New York and North Bennington, VT, with extended sojourns in the U.K.



Isaac Witkin

Isaac Witkin was born in Johannesburg, S.A., in 1936, and died in Pemberton, NJ, in 2006. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Witkin was part of The New Generation, an acclaimed group of revolutionary young sculptors, all former students of Anthony Caro at St. Martin's School of Art, London. After working with Henry Moore, Witkin taught at St. Martin's. In 1965, he emigrated to the U.S. to be artist-in-residence at Bennington College, where he remained for a decade. Witkin later taught at Parsons School of Design, NY, and Middlebury College, VT. His work has been exhibited throughout the U.S., Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. The recipient of such awards as First Prize at the Quatrième Biennale de Paris and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Witkin was elected a member of the National Academy, NY, in 1996, and of the Royal Society of British Sculptors, London, in 1998. His sculpture, including many publically commissioned works, is in private and corporate collections, internationally. Witkin is represented in the collections of the Tate, London, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, the Dallas Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, among others. In 2007, Rider University, NJ, inaugurated an Isaac Witkin Sculpture Park, an installation of six large steel sculptures on the campus.



James Wolfe

James Wolfe was born in New York City in 1944. In the late 1960s, he was sculpture assistant at Bennington College, where he worked closely with Isaac Witkin. Wolfe has also taught at the School of Visual Arts, New York, and the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. His work has been exhibited across the U.S., in Canada, and Germany, and is included in many private and corporate collections, as well as in the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, among others. Wolfe has been the recipient of many public commissions, most notably a competition for a sculpture commemorating the centennial of the Johnstown Flood, in 1989, he worked for an extended period in a Bethlehem Steel factory, producing ten major sculptures, now permanently installed along the James Wolfe Sculpture Trail, Johnstown, PA. Wolfe lives and works in Northport, ME.

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Tower49 was designed by the renowned architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and completed in 1984. The building, sheathed in mirror glass, rises forty-five stories and is located in the quadrant between Fifth and Madison Avenues and 48th and 49th Streets in the heart of Midtown Manhattan. Refurbished in 2013, by award-winning architects, Moed de Armas and Shannon, the grand lobby features soaring 24-foot ceilings allowing for a unique and dynamic space to mount art exhibitions that can be accessed from the open-air plazas on either side of the building.

Tower49 Gallery is one of New York City's significant and striking commercial art venues. The Gallery's mission is to originate exhibitions featuring acclaimed contemporary international artists, such as Frank Stella, Natvar Bhavsar, Shigeno Ichimura, and Jules Olitski, for the benefit of the general public as well as for the building's tenants. Illuminating these significant artistic contributions, Tower49 Gallery provides a sanctuary of contemplation for those who access this extraordinary space to discover the important role that art plays in our daily lives.

Open to the public: Monday through Friday, 9am – 6pm, or otherwise by appointment
For inquiries please contact Ai Kato at aikato@t49gallery.com

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Bennington College Photography by Cynthia Lockin, courtesy of the Bennington College archives
Works by Willard Boepple appear in the cooperation with Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York
Works by James Wolfe, Tom Jones for all except Wickets Tumble. Wickets Tumble, Olivia Turrell.

Design: Hubert & Fischer with Corey James