

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Heavy Light of Christopher Wilmarth's Drawings and Sculptures

For Wilmarth, light and life were inextricably linked — a connection that shone in his art of steel, glass, and paper.

Ken Tan | 18 hours ago



Installation view, *Christopher Wilmarth* (all images courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery)

Light was always an impetus for Christopher Wilmarth's work. In a 1974 statement, he wrote, "*I associated the significant moments of my life with the character of light at that time.*" He was known for his adroit use of glass and steel to evoke human essences through the sensuous qualities of light. The concise selection of modestly sized works exhibited at Betty Cunningham Gallery (*Christopher Wilmarth, September 6 – October 29*) display the different states of Wilmarth's mind, from

the start of his short, intense career, to the most melancholic moments before his 1987 suicide.

When I visited the gallery, the room was imbued with a soft autumnal glow, heightening the intimacy of the experience. Altogether there are four sculptures and eleven works on paper exhibited, the most monumental of which is just under forty inches tall. Wilmarth's view of light grew increasingly dark towards the end, and that darkness is expressed to full effect in the late drawings on paper executed in the final

year of his life. The first work I encountered was one of these intense drawings, "Untitled" (1987), part of a group of highly charged, private self-portraits executed in his final days that Wilmarth had kept hidden away and shown to no one.



Christopher Wilmarth, "Untitled" (1987),
graphite, ink and rabbit skin glue on paper,
30.75 x 22.5 inches

Dead center of an ashy penumbra is a harrowing black head rubbed on with graphite, desperately and forcefully. Perhaps this is the destructive black hole of Wilmarth's mind—I get the sense that all air and life are fast being sucked out. A few indeterminate scrawls of vertical lines emphasize the pull of his troubled thoughts. While, as with a series of blown-glass head sculptures executed several years earlier, the oval in this drawing might have been Wilmarth's response to Constantin Brancusi's egg-like "The Beginning of the World" (1924), there is no beginning here: Wilmarth's egg is malignant. To me, this paper felt heavier than any steel sculpture he ever made.

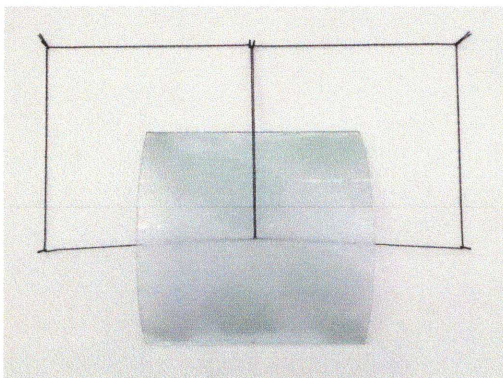
It had not always been like this. Wilmarth had enjoyed brighter days. He was born in California, but mostly lived and worked in New York and quickly went from a student at Cooper Union to exhibiting in Soho. Before the age of thirty, he had received an NEA and Guggenheim fellowship; he loved the conditions of light offered by the city, from its glistening glass skyscrapers to the coruscating dance on the waters of the Hudson River. Wilmarth first worked for Tony Smith, whose angular metal structures influenced the young sculptor. His allegiance was also to Matisse, the Constructivists, the Symbolists (their leader the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé inspired the writing and publication of seven poems titled "Breath"), Giacometti and Brancusi. Perhaps as a result of these influences, the best of Wilmarth's sculptures are more than just sculptures: they could be paintings, with their intuitive lines and handling; or poetry, pithy with light and dark passages.

Three of the sculptures in this exhibition were maquettes of seminal works. "Days on Blue" (1974) — the actual is in the permanent collection of and on view at SFMOMA — was his response to yet another Brancusi, "Gate of Kiss" (1938). Like Brancusi, Wilmarth wanted to evoke a sense of "place" which meant that the sculpture had to be large enough to provide a holistic immersive experience. "Days

Looking straight on, I was reminded of the luminous bandings of Rothko's late monochromatic works, or Matisse's "Porte-fenêtre à Collioure" (1914). With a simple gesture — placing the glass pane in the heart of the composition — Wilmarth rendered the heavy metal weightless. In a characteristic gesture, the glass pane is sensuously scarred with acid, and it diffuses a steel section behind into a less assertive, hazier apparition. An interesting illusion occurs with the glass: because of the gradual darkening of its ends, it seems to bend optically. Seen from above, the glass is indeed flat and placed at an angle against the straight steel frame, producing many visually arresting lines. This is Wilmarth in his most confident light.

John Roebling, engineer of Wilmarth's beloved Brooklyn Bridge, inspired the suspension of the show's only wall sculpture. The economy of material is magical: structural steel cables that hold a single icy-green curved glass pane are also the construction's defining rectilinear lines, so that Wilmarth is in effect drawing lines in space with steel cables. Anchored to the wall by four ordinary screws, the cable is looped through a small hole in the middle of the glass, then finally secured to itself in an uncomplicated knot. With the help of gravity, the glass is proportioned just right to maintain tautness, and thus overall form.

I found myself moving from side to side, enjoying the scintillating cinema of light on this acidified screen. The glass projects its shadow as a soft gray painting on the wall. Behind it, the steel cables are now diffused into a dreamy horizon. All over there are lyrical, sensuous moments for both eye and mind. Light and negative spaces are rendered palpable. He encourages the viewer to be more aware of the innate relationship between materials, shapes and physical forces.



Christopher Wilmarth, "Sonoma Corners"
(1971), Etched Glass and Steel Cable, 25.5 x 33 x
3.75 inches

What human experience, if not the artist's own, can be inferred here? We are given a clue in the title: "Sonoma Corners" (1971), which refers to Wilmarth's California This ethereal work evokes those youthful days and brilliant West Coast light. He generously extends that feeling to us, and invites us to bask in its blissful openness. I am reminded that often the best works stem from the artist's personal experiences. For Christopher Wilmarth, one of the more gifted American sculptors, that meant both life and death.

Christopher Wilmarth *continues at Betty Cuninghams Gallery (15 Rivington Street NYC) through October 29.*