



William Bailey. Photo: Ford Bailey. Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York. April 20, 2020 at 8:50am

WILLIAM BAILEY (1930–2020)

William “Bill” Bailey, the longtime educator and contemporary American painter known for his serene but austere still lifes featuring eggs and vessels of different shapes and sizes—as well as his female figures and landscapes drawn from memory and imagination—has died. He passed away on April 13 at his home in Branford, Connecticut, due to complications from an existing illness. The artist was eighty-nine years old.

“The world just kind of stops in Bailey’s paintings,” wrote Jeff Perrone in the March 1979 issue of *Artforum*. “The types and styles of pottery seem deliberately chosen for their anonymous, context-free timelessness. They are the most tastefully simple and humble of objects, absolutely nonopulent. Anything excessive, any overt emotional or economic quality, would ruin the unchanging standard, which the paintings hold as virtue.”

Born on November 17, 1930, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Bailey moved around constantly with his family due to his father’s job in radio broadcasting. He studied art at the University of Kansas but never received his degree. He departed school to enlist in the Army and served in Korea and Japan. Following his military service, Bailey returned to the United States and enrolled in the Yale School of Art and Architecture, where he took courses with Josef Albers and earned his BFA in 1955 and his MFA in 1957. He had his first solo show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in Manhattan in 1968.

While Bailey's paintings were featured in the 1970 survey "Twenty-two Realists," at the Whitney Museum of American Art—which also included works by Alfred Leslie, Philip Pearlstein, and Sidney Tillim—the artist did not want to be labeled as a realist, especially since he preferred to work from memory rather than life. "I admire painters who can work directly from nature, but for me that seems to lead to anecdotal painting," Bailey once said. "Realism is about interpreting daily life in the world around us. I'm trying to paint a world that's not around us."

Bailey joined Yale's faculty as a professor of art in 1969 and was named dean in 1974. According to the university, during his nearly thirty-year tenure, Bailey was "essential in fostering a sense of academic continuity" as the institution underwent a transformation in 1972, splitting into two entities: the Yale School of Art and the School of Architecture. Bailey was a prominent member of the academic community and worked in the department of painting until his retirement in 1995.

Despite the prevalence of gestural abstraction in the mid-twentieth century and Bailey's attempts to embrace it, in 1960 he almost stopped painting entirely and realized that he needed to take a different approach. "There's so much noise in contemporary art. So much gesture," Bailey said of the shift. His signature style began to emerge after his travels to Southeast Asia, Athens, Paris, and Rome in the 1960s and '70s.

A conversation with Conrad Marca-Relli about purity of form led him to ruminate about the egg as an object. Next came his famed ovoid still lifes, in which he played with the luminosity and hue of their shells. The eggs were soon joined by other objects including jugs, bowls, cups, and a myriad of other ceramics and enamelware. "As far as my work goes over the years, for a long time I felt that the challenge in the still lifes was never-ending," Bailey said in a 2010 interview. "That however much it looked as though I was doing the same thing, for me, I was never doing the same thing."

Bailey's work can be found in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; and the Art Institute of Chicago. Last September, Yale University Art Gallery staged the retrospective "William Bailey: Looking Through Time," which showcased paintings, prints, and drawings and featured some of his most famous still lifes including *Still Life—Table with Ochre Wall*, 1972, and *Plateau*, 1993.