

# The New Criterion

## Art

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### Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On "Christopher Wilmarth" at the Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York.

The sculptures of Christopher Wilmarth, an artist who took his own life in 1987 at the age of forty-four, resist idle chatter. "If you can dream, whoever you are, dream with me." Christopher Wilmarth offered this *invitation au voyage* as a final amendment to an artist statement he wrote in 1980. But dreams seemed far from my mind when I first encountered "Christopher Wilmarth," an exhibition of frosted glass and bent steel sculptures from the 1970s, at a reception the other day at Betty Cuninghame Gallery [\[1\]](#) "For those without an interior life or without an access to it," Wilmarth once remarked, "my work, at best, remains on the level of 'beautiful' and can give no more. The rest, which is the most, is not released." This was not a hollow threat. Wilmarth's sculptures are, by design, guarded creatures. They do not willingly give up their secrets. "It is an instrument of evocation," Wilmarth said of his work, "and requires as catalyst the soul of a sensitive person to engage its process of release, its story, its use." With a wine-filled dixie cup, that appurtenance of gallery soirées, and in something of a holiday daze, I found myself unable to engage that process.

The next morning, I called up a person long sensitive to Wilmarth's "catalysts of the soul." As a critic, Paula Deitz, now the editor of *The Hudson Review*, has been writing about Wilmarth since the 1970s. Through the poetry of her late husband, Frederick Morgan, she also became a friend. A collaboration between Morgan and Wilmarth in the early 1980s on a book of seven Mallarmé translations, which became known as "Breath," inspired an entire family of sculptures, drawings, pastels, etchings, paintings, and poems by Wilmarth. In a letter to Morgan, Wilmarth wrote in 1982 that their collaboration "has been one of the great events (continuing) of my life and it is thanks to your translations and your belief in me that it all came about." Wilmarth's sculptures for "Breath," crafted from hand-blown bulbs of glass—the literal "breath" of the artist—formed the idiom that he would follow through the rest of his brief life. In his final depressive years, Wilmarth darkened the bulbs of his breath, which finally became somber, impenetrable globes of black glass.

I returned to Cuninghame later that same day. "I have tried to make sculptures that evoke a spiritual disembodied state close to that of a reverie," Wilmarth once said, "the kind of perfection that I have found during my 'revelations' or 'epiphanies.'" The gallery was empty and the lights in the exhibition room were switched on as I walked in.

While looking through material for another show on view this month—Morris Louis at Paul Kasmin—I came across a statement by John Elderfield that might be equally relevant to Wilmarth: "Light is to the Symbolist painter what silence is to the Symbolist poet—where the intellectual core of his art is to be found. As such, it is necessarily an idealized, disembodied light situated in an unlocatable space, never fully defined in its relationship to the object or shapes that appear in it, as

Cubist space, say, is always so defined.”

Wilmarth was a sculptor from the generation of Minimalism, and superficially his work might resemble the sculptures of other artists of the period. Minimalist sculptors were often called “literal” or “object” or “ABC” artists, but Wilmarth was the opposite of that. In fact, Wilmarth saw the certainties of Minimalism as “a disease, this materialistic ‘what you see is what you see’ denial of the spirit (but a perfect vehicle for trade).”

For Wilmarth, what you see is *never* what you see. He was a lyrical artist, a Symbolist in Minimalist guise who found inspiration in the veiled poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé—“to depict not the thing but the effect that it produces.” Wilmarth likewise viewed his own work as “a physical poem in which the romance surmounts its containment.” The monumentality of his sculpture was designed to lead to intimate experience. The literalness of his forged creations—the real presence of bent steel and chipped glass—frame the “spiritual disembodied state” that his sculpture is meant to evoke. “The materials I use are a vehicle for poetic metaphor,” Wilmarth noted, “the medium is light, and the subject is experience.”

Back at the gallery, with the sun now filtering in through a massive skylight, the silence and the light were the elements missing from the night before. Deitz arrived carrying a copy of an essay she had written for *New York Arts Journal*, a publication now long gone, which she handed to me. The piece was called “Constructing Inner Space”; the date, 1978.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Wilmarth was a regular exhibitor in New York. The Museum of Modern Art organized a retrospective survey of his work just over a year after his tragic death. In 1978, Wilmarth had two shows running at once, one at the Grey Art Gallery of New York University on Washington Square, the other at his own Studio for the First Amendment. Wilmarth had created this exhibition space in SoHo in response to the commercialism of the art world, which he deplored. His feelings on this point ran deep. After one drunken night in 1976 at Fanelli’s, the SoHo watering hole, Wilmarth noted in his journal that he went out into the streets and shouted at the studio lofts, decrying “the subversion of poetry in art to materialistic ends signified by (to me) the commercialization of the arts in our ghetto SOHO.” (If only he could see it now.) While picketing a show of his work in 1978, Wilmarth bemoaned how “the spiritual sinks beneath the greed. It is because I refuse to enter this arena of spiritual death that I picketed the resale exhibition of my sculpture.”

Wilmarth’s sculptures are notably architectural. His steel is bent with precision, repeated at regular angles. Wilmarth used Roebling wire to hold the glass and steel together in place, evoking the suspension cables of the Brooklyn Bridge—a monument that had a special place in Wilmarth’s relationship with his wife, Susan. (She once “gifted” the bridge to Wilmarth by writing his name on it. He created a sculpture for her in return called *The Gift of the Bridge*).

At Cuningham, the first sculpture on display is *Invitation #1* (1975–76), a large floor piece of dark steel with a sheet of glass positioned vertically within it. As with nearly all of his works, Wilmarth had etched the clear glass with acid, frosting it with painterly gesture. This glass becomes the translucent veil concealing and revealing sculptural space. The hazy green glass and the swirling gestures of the etching, divided by a horizon line formed by the steel support, all brought to mind a seascape, a window on another world. The veiled cavities in the work become the estuaries of protected space. Wilmarth saw the spirit as art’s common bond. “When art is Art (and not all art is) it is of the spiritual,” he wrote in 1978. Glass set Wilmarth apart from his Minimalist contemporaries. His translucent surfaces protected light and spirit.

Here was Wilmarth’s offer: spiritual shelter. His sculptures demand much in return—more than most art does today. His work looks inward; the sharp steel structures surrounding his glass elements are

not so much invitations for entrance but barriers to keep us away. Wilmarth's disenchantment with the art world of the 1970s—his utopian concerns of a simpler time—might also seem removed from the crass commercialism that artists must contend with today.

Wilmarth maintained a private language in his art. He followed shapes from drawings to sculpture and back again in an articulation of connecting patterns. The wire bisecting *Long Memphis* (1973) was not only a bridge-like support but also a reference to the painted line—a drawing carried over into physical form. And then there was the rigor of work such as *Normal Corner (Yard)* (1972), *Is, Was (Chancing)* (1975–1976), and *Gnomon's Parade (Side)* (1980), where the literalness of a metal shape in front of glass on one side is repeated as a shadowy image behind the scrim on the other: one side “is,” the other “was.”

The exhibition ended with two epiphanies. One was *Everly* (1969), the earliest work in the show. Consisting of a line of glass disks, some etched, some clear, arranged on the floor and connected with a single steel rod running through them, this work does not appear in “Christopher Wilmarth: Light & Gravity,” the monograph by Steven Henry Madoff published by Princeton University Press in 2004. This gem-like object formed a transition piece from Wilmarth's early wood circles of the 1960s to the glass sheets of the 1970s. The circular shape also echoed later work for “Breath.”

The other revelation concerned the latest work in the show, *Portrait of a Memory* (1985). Here a black glass bulb hovers over a sharp bronze screen. In the upper left corner, a V-shaped tab has been peeled down from the upper layer of metal. Five years before, one of the sculptures Wilmarth created for “Breath” was called *Saint* (1979–80), after the title of one of the poems. In that work, a clear, frosted blub is positioned safely within the V-fold of a steel sheet.

“Go back and look at the poetry,” Deitz whispered, which I did. I came to realize the connection of this late work to the Mallarmé poem and the sculptural program Wilmarth created for it. Here is how Frederick Morgan translated the second half of “Saint”:

at this stained-glass monstrence, brushed  
fleetingly of a harp formed by  
the Angel in his evening flight  
for the finger's delicate ply

which, without old sandalwood  
or ancient book, she balances  
above the instrument of plumes,  
musician of silences.

Wilmarth associated certain shapes with each of the seven poems. For “Saint,” it was the triangle, the open space between the V. The triangle was both the “ancient book” and the safe embrace for the “breath” head above it, a feeling that Wilmarth, in his depression, had lost by the mid-1980s. By *Portrait of a Memory*, the shapes are still there, but the breath has gone out. A dark head hovers disembodied. The sadness of the artist is intimately felt. “The poems had a common denominator,” Wilmarth observed of “Breath”: “Mallarmé's own separateness. . . . His work is about the anguish and longing of experience not fully realized, and I found something of myself in it.”

Wilmarth created work that was a shelter for his own separateness. But no art could protect him from anguish. In the end, he chose to escape to silence and light, essential elements that now infuse the work on view at Cuningham.

## Notes

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1. “Christopher Wilmarth” opened at Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York, on November 29, 2007 and remains on view through January 19, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

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