Back and Forth
WENDEL ARNESON

SEPTEMBER 16–OCTOBER 23, 2011
Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College
When Wendell Arneson and I began to discuss an exhibit of his work, we both knew that it needed to be a retrospective of his artistic journey, and that it would necessarily be a large show, occupying two galleries and the main corridor in Dittmann Center. I felt that it could be no other way. Since 1978, Wendell has explored a variety of ideas using various materials. He is, and always has been, interested in ideas and questions that transcend time, and, therefore, move from painting to painting. One cannot look at his art without noticing the threads that weave through it. As such, this retrospective will be exhibited by relationships rather than in chronological order. I believe the visitor will enjoy finding connections, back and forth, between and among his works.

Jill Ewald
Director, Flaten Art Museum

Wendell Arneson

I am interested in work that resides both in the objective and non-objective worlds. I am as attracted to the gesture or non-descriptive mark as I am to the power and ambiguity of symbol and image. Paintings inhabit a place between the known and the unknown. Art, for me, does not provide answers but rather provokes questions and seeks possibilities.

These paintings use image and symbol to convey the internal. Beginning with an idea derived from memory and/or observation, these paintings are an exploration of questions raised through formal investigation and contemplation of the spiritual. I am an image-maker and interested in the juxtaposition of images that, for me, reference time, place, memory, fragility, strength, journey, and hope. Through the process of discovery I seek clarity while honoring mystery and ambiguity.
Wendell Arneson has produced remarkable art thanks to his capacity for taking risks and constantly venturing into new realms of creativity. As this retrospective reveals, there are persistent motifs and formal strategies in his art, whose consistencies resurface unexpectedly after disappearing for years or decades. The greatest constants are the way he has sought answers to the question of who we are relative to the rest of creation and how he has never been satisfied with the easy answers, as his Wisconsin farm origins might lead viewers to expect.

**ON THE SURFACE: WISCONSIN AND PUSHING AT THE BOUNDARIES OF ITS FRAME**

Wendell began as an artist dedicated to watercolor, a medium and outlook invented in the 19th century that he translated to the Wisconsin farm world he had lived in most of his life. He shows this in *7 O’Clock*, 1973 (Figure 1). Watercolor arose from efforts to anchor a fleeting, modern world in bedrock agrarian values attached to the reality of place, but the formal experimentation Wendell began in graduate school shows his initial awakening to adaptation and change. Laying aside his faith in objective truth, he started to play with expectations and investigate our power to create our own reality. He explored boundaries as well through how he framed and placed his realistic imagery on the paper, a technique evident in *Passing Glance Times Three*, 1977 (Figure 2). It triple-crosses our desire for a clean representation of grasses in a snowy field by interjecting the artist's own existence contemplating the world. We see three inset views of the imagery that draw attention to how Wendell decided what to depict and where to place the imagery in this world of his

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**Figure 1. 7 O’Clock, watercolor, 1973.**

**Figure 2. Passing Glance Times Three, watercolor, 1977.**
creation. Throughout his career, he has returned to variations of multiple framed imagery, right up through his most recent juxtaposition of what could be autonomous images that become a decorative pattern in his *Journeys* series paintings (Figure 3).

By this point in his life, Wendell had expanded his own frames of reference beyond Wisconsin, and the watercolors he was now producing of streams and grasses reveal this shift. They are now partially about a moment of pause in a world subject to flux that the snow, subject to blowing in the wind, signals in *Passing Glimpse Times Three*. While the scene could be found near his family’s farm, these subjects now could, and did, exist other places. Wendell himself had moved beyond the Wisconsin farm world that had nurtured him and where convention expected him to return. With his parents’ blessing, he had moved on. After being a high school art teacher not far from his home, he had obtained an advanced degree and taught at St. Olaf College. He met Beth Christensen there, whom he married in 1980. He was venturing on to a new life with another in the intellectually stimulating atmosphere higher education offered.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE: NEW YORK AND LIVING MORE DEEPLY IN HIS OWN WORLD

In a conversation I had with Wendell, he cited his 1985 sabbatical in New York City as an unusually important turning point in his career. It’s when he made collage-like work such as *Streetwise*, 1986 (Figure 4). This is some of his less well-known art, perhaps reflecting its limited success in conventional terms. Yet that inadequately explains the deeper success of this move in terms of a central lesson he constantly teaches students. A serious artist needs to take risks and approach the world in new and vital ways. Wendell not only threw himself into an urban world visible in the cacophony of advertisements and high art, he also overturned bedrock principles of watercolor by exploring...
collage. Collage involves tearing things up. It calls attention to the artificial, two-dimensional nature of art in opposition to spatially deep, illusionistic realism. Collage requires improvisational call-and-response and privileges design and formal properties over representational concerns. With a collage, the artist composes the whole thing as meaningful artifice.

Wendell metaphorically ripped up much of what he had originally learned to value in art and tore himself far from his homeland. More upheaval would follow in the form of personal sorrow. His father died the following autumn, and Wendell remains surprised by how that affected him for years. He found that he couldn’t complete a painting for months, yet his grief and all the changes that had taken place in his life also opened him to the successful exploration of oil painting and drawing and a new depth in his art that he has enjoyed since then.

For a while, only dark, brooding imagery surfaced on canvases. The landscapes slowly grew lighter and are usually recognizable as locations around Northfield, Minnesota, where he lives. They exhibit rich, expressionistic, surfaces one can see in Spring Again, 1993 (Figure 5). His change to oil paints proved crucial. Oil paint can record the seismic patterns of an artist’s inner thoughts and pent-up emotions, translating those to canvas in response to the creator contemplating the world. Wendell was now exploring the rural, Midwestern landscape where he lived in expressionistic dialogue with his psyche and past. He also painted pure abstractions with a cathartic letting go, producing enigmatic, abstract motifs that make appearances periodically in his paintings.

THE WILD WEST: A RENAISSANCE DISCOVERED IN ITALY, SANTA FE, AND WITHIN

The full success Wendell would achieve in the complex, mythic oils he has created subsequently required more knowledge of the medium and mastery of narration. He tackled both through summer study with Nathan Oliveira and Gregory Amenoff at the Santa Fe Art Institute master classes around the time he also embarked on a sabbatical in Italy. Both took him far from the Midwest and forced him to search even more for himself within than he had previously. They also set him studying masters’ paintings old and new. Oliveira and Amenoff encouraged him to let go and throw himself more fully into painting and drawing, while at the same time helping him discover his passion for modern artists as diverse as Henri Matisse and Max Beckmann and lessons their narrative and formal ideas taught.

The farm fields of Northfield flattened and turned from dark green to colors one might associate with the desert, yet they also show a purely abstract handling of color and space. They are not so specifically tied to geography as his earlier landscapes had been. By activating the sensuous vitality of pure color, Wendell invites viewers to lose themselves in creativity itself in paintings such as Newborn, 1994 (Figure 6). Ghostly visages of isolated objects or lone figures populate these canvases and call to us the way figures in dreams often do. As the title of this painting alludes, Wendell and Beth were planning to start a family, yet this imagery also calls back to archetypal motifs from Wendell’s farm days, evoking the birth of animals each spring. There tends to be a sparseness in the paintings around 1994 as Wendell translated the desert realm into pure paintings and an existential no-space that would serve him well to this day. They also initiate a new exploration of narrative abetted by his study of Renaissance paintings and, even more, works by Max Beckmann, Henri Matisse, and Philip Guston.
The sparseness of these early narrative paintings steadily gives way to complexity and greater psychic depth in impressively polymorphous paintings such as one not in the exhibition, *The Gathering* from 1996 (Figure 7). A carefully constructed lattice of yellowish paint strokes contain freer slashes of dark blue near the center, evoking turmoil as well as water sloshing, trying to flow free. One need not know the personal iconography of how the central cylinder references an old, abandoned well where his father disposed of dead animals to grasp the mythic struggles about life and death and discipline and order or insanity and vitality evident in the painting. The transformation Wendell had begun almost a decade ago had reached maturity in the risks he was now willing to take, his ability to open himself to what he had experienced in life, and the skills he had attained in making sense of all of this through drawing and painting.

**BORN A NEW, CHILDREN AND RELIGION**

Steadily over the years that followed, Wendell’s life and paintings became noticeably fuller metaphorically and literally. A welter of marks, masks, furniture, and other things started to populate the surfaces of canvases usually defined by a single, intense primary color such as the blue washing over the 2000 painting *Reaching For the Stars* (Figure 8). By this time, he and Beth had two young children. If the previous set of paintings began with lone figures and objects set in desert-like no-space, this newer turn and much of the work that has followed, locate us in the heavens and in strange, beautiful, yet sometimes hellish rooms and structures. In title, structure, and imagery they take us from mundane yet complicated realms of everyday life to dream-like (and sometimes nightmarish) worlds populated by free-floating material from Wendell’s childhood and unconscious. Many also transport us to the graffiti-filled streets of modern cities and simultaneously to a transcendent world often conjuring in imagery and
titles religious quests and mysteries evoked in Jacob’s Ladder, 2000 (Figure 9). Wendell’s deep involvement in his own immediate family has simultaneously opened him more fully to his early family life as well as the wider world and universe his daughters and the future represent. His newer outlook of thinking locally and acting globally becomes very evident in Village, 2005 (Figure 10). His understanding of a need to hold the two in tension helps explain how the late, young, black, Haitian-born, graffiti artist and heroin addict, Jean-Michel Basquiat, could become such an inspiration for the older, white, mainstream artist from rural Wisconsin. Their paintings teach us that the world doesn’t offer itself up in a way that makes meaning in plain or tidy ways derived from a single point of view.

NO TURNING BACK
I always look forward to late August because Wendell will have a new body of summer work that will surprise me with all the transformations from the year before. Certain colors he has favored show anew. Some recurrent iconography will be there, though I never know if what resurfaces will be from the year before or decades prior. What I can count on is that the paintings’ themes, specific subject matter, and spatially defined relationships will likely be different from previous years. This is how he has created art for decades now. Not many artists or individuals have the courage to open themselves up so much to change. For some of us, even a modicum of success is reason to hunker down when we experience it, but not Wendell. He understands that we will always have much to learn about our complex universe.

No single life provides enough time to learn it all, and Wendell seeks as much knowledge as he can attain in the time allotted him. He knows that as wonderful as a secure and stable home is, the world is always in flux. He has disciplined himself to embrace the expansive, constantly changing universe the modern world provides us. In that process, he has discovered that the more distant you are from the past, the more deeply you will likely think about it. That journey back helps you come to know the world in greater depth.

Wendell goes forth on his quests not just for his own reasons, but in an effort to convey this knowledge to those he loves and all who view his art. His art makes good sense in a formal way, thanks to his skill as a painter and his belief that the universe itself must be sensible. At the same time, his paintings and drawings show his honesty about the complexity, confusion, and nonsense that prevents people from knowing all. The newer work that this retrospective emphasizes underscores the unwavering vitality fueling his career. May this essay help viewers grasp some of the biographical and artistic factors that have been important in shaping it.
Two St. Olaf College sculpture students, Anders Nienstaedt ’12 (left) and James Wilson ’12 received research grants this summer to create art that interprets Wendell Arneson’s work in a three-dimensional way.

WENDELL H. ARNESON
1946  Born in Barneveld, Wisconsin

EDUCATION
1995  Santa Fe Institute of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico
      Study with Gregory Amenoff
1994  Santa Fe Institute of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico
      Study with Nathan Oliveria
1978  M.F.A., Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio
1970  Art Education Certification, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin
1968  B.A., Luther College, Decorah, Iowa

Currently Professor of Art
St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota

GRANTS AND AWARDS
2009  Named the Oscar and Gertrude Boe Overby Distinguished Professor for inspiring teaching, influential art, and service to St. Olaf College
2007  Research Grant, St. Olaf College
1999  Research Travel Grant, Italy and British Isles, St. Olaf College
1994  Research and Development Grant, Santa Fe, New Mexico, St. Olaf College
1993  Art in Embassies Program, Oslo, Norway
1992  Research Grant, Italy and Ireland, St. Olaf College
1990  Art in Embassies Program, Rwanda, Africa
1985  Research Travel Grant, France and British Isles, St. Olaf College
1984  Major Painting Award, Watercolor USA, Springfield Museum of Art, Springfield, Missouri
1978  Drawing Award, Van Wert Museum of Art, Van Wert, Ohio
1978  Major Drawing Award, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio
EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2011
Groveland Gallery, Red, White, and Blue, July 2011, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Groveland Gallery, Old Friends, New Talent, August 2011, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Flaten Art Museum, Back and Forth, A Retrospective, September–October 2011, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota
Grace Chosy Gallery, New Work, November 2011, Madison, Wisconsin

2009
Grace Chosy Gallery, Journeys, Madison, Wisconsin
Groveland Gallery, Journeys, Minneapolis, Minnesota

2007
Grace Chosy Gallery, Men in Black, Madison, Wisconsin
Groveland Gallery, Uncovering, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Woodwalk Gallery, Discovering, Egg Harbor, Wisconsin
Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota

2005
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2004
Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota
Peace Prize Forum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota
Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota
Groveland Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Northfield Arts Guild, Northfield, Minnesota

National Oil Painting Exhibition, Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, Kansas

2003
International Peace Price Forum, Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota (group)
Guenzel Gallery, Peninsula School of Art, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota

2002
National Small Oil Painting Exhibition (group), Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, Kansas
9/11 Remembered (group), Rochester Art Museum, Rochester, Minnesota

2000
Seestland Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota
Rochester Art Museum (group), Rochester, Minnesota
Groveland Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

1999
Lutheran Brotherhood, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Edgewood Orchard Galleries, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
Luther College, Decorah, Iowa

1997
Northfield Arts Guild Gallery, Northfield, Minnesota

1996
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
Witter Gallery, Storm Lake, Iowa

1994
Lands’ End Corporate Headquarters, Dodgeville, Wisconsin
Edgewood Orchard Gallery, Fish Creek, Wisconsin

1993
Edgewood Orchard Gallery, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Bridge Square Gallery, Northfield, Wisconsin
Luther-Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

1992
Waseca Arts Center, Waseca, Minnesota
Minnesota Landscape Invitational, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
Seestland Art Museum, St. Olaf College

1990
Kohn Gallery, St. Paul, Minnesota
Edgewood Orchard Gallery, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

1989
Edgewood Orchard Gallery, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Seestland Art Museum, Northfield, Minnesota

1988
Seestland Art Museum, Northfield, Minnesota
Kohn Gallery, St. Paul, Minnesota
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

1987
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

1986
St. Norbert College, DePere, Wisconsin
Seuferer-Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

1985
Edgewood Orchard Gallery, Fish Creek, Wisconsin
Kohn Gallery, St. Paul, Minnesota

1984
Kohn Gallery, St. Paul, Minnesota
Rockford College, Rockford, Illinois
Luther College, Decorah, Iowa
In this retrospective, the viewer will witness Wendell Arneson’s artistic journey from the 1970s to the present.

Two St. Olaf College sculpture students, Anders Nienstaedt ’12 and James Wilson ’12 received research grants this past summer to create art that interprets Arneson’s work in a three-dimensional way.

OPENING PARTY:
Friday, September 23, 6-8 p.m. Flaten Art Museum with music by jazz musicians Dave Hagedorn and Kevin Clements

GALLERY TALK:
Saturday, September 24, 10 a.m. Flaten Art Museum

MELLBY LECTURE: WENDELL ARNESON, REMEMBER TO REMEMBER
Wednesday, October 19, 7:30 p.m. Buntrock Commons, Viking Theater Followed by a reception in Dittmann Center

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FLATEN ART MUSEUM
Dittmann Center, St. Olaf College

HOURS:
MTWF, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.;
Th, 10 a.m.–8 p.m.; SSu, 2–5 p.m.

SPECIAL HOMECOMING HOURS:
Saturday, September 24, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.
Regular hours on Sunday.

CLOSED FOR FALL BREAK,
OCTOBER 15–18

Dialog series, ink, ongoing, 2007–present.