Western Unorthodox

NOW IN HIS LATE 80S, CALIFORNIA PAINTER PAUL WONNER IS STILL DEFYING CATEGORIES. BY JONATHON KEATS PORTRAITS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

In the corner of Paul Wonner's San Francisco studio rests a small cot, ready to accommodate a mid-afternoon nap. At 87, Wonner tires easily and no longer has the strength to paint large canvases. Yet the artist, whose voice resonates with calm certainty, sees his age as an advantage. "One of the good things about being this old is that you can do whatever the hell you want," he says, tracing the lines etched in his face with knobby fingers. "When you don't have to worry about what someone else is going to think, it's a lot more fun to paint."

Wonner has never cared much about other people's opinions. For more than five decades, he has confounded critics and curators with paintings that upset orthodoxies. From his '50s involvement in the Bay Area Figurative School through his '70s engagement with 17th-century Dutch genre painting through his current exploration of allegory—often referencing ancient myths—Wonner has consistently transformed the retrograde into the avant-garde.

Wonner has abundant classical training on which to draw. Born in Tucson, Arizona, in 1920, he was tutored in high school by an old Spanish academician who had relocated to the small town—still little more than a train station—as a treatment for tuberculosis. Wonner's Beaux-Arts training continued at the California College of Arts and Crafts after his working-class father concluded that he must be an artist because he wasn't suitable for anything else. "First we had to draw from plaster casts, which was called 'antique,'" he recalls, "and then we graduated to life drawing, which we referred to as 'pink antique.'" Nor was antiquity limited to classical poses: Wonner's instructor had been a pupil of Jean-Léon Gérôme.

After Army service in Texas and several years as a cosmetics packaging designer in New York, Wonner returned to school in California, pursuing a master's degree at the University of California, at Berkeley. While only several miles down the road from CCAC, Berkeley was as far from Beaux-Arts traditionalism as any school in the world in 1950. "Abstract Expressionism was what you did there," Wonner says. "If you wanted to do anything else, you were asked to leave." He learned what he could from the push and pull of action painting, but found it as unfulfilling as Academic dabbling. "I began to feel as if Abstract Expressionism was talking about art, that it was always about the process," Wonner explains. "And I looked around me and I began to think that there are a lot of things in my life that I'd like to talk about in my painting. So I went outside and started

COURTESY JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO.

Paul Wonner's "Imaginary Still Life with Slice of Cheese" (facing), 1977–81, oil on canvas.

"Tulip," 1966–67, oil on canvas. "Bather with Towel" (below), c. 1959, oil on canvas.

painting Mt. Tamalpais, even though it still looked like Abstract Expressionism at first. The school thought I was out of my mind."

But Wonner wasn't the only one edging away from full-bodied abstraction. In 1951, the well-respected Bay Area Abstract Expressionist David Park submitted a figurative painting called "Kids on Bikes" to a local competition and won first prize. The general consensus within the avant-garde was that he'd lost his nerve, but several other prominent Bay Area Abstract Expressionists, including Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff, were in sympathy with Park's curt declaration of independence: "I'd like to break the damn picture plane!"

"David was always supportive, telling me it's all right to do what I was doing," Wonner recalls. Diebenkorn and Bischoff were equally integral to his evolution, especially after Wonner and his partner Theophilus Brown rented studio space in the same building as the other two artists and they started hiring models for weekly drawing sessions together. As the dual strands of Wonner's artistic path merged, his distinctive aesthetic—fusing keen observation with forthright representation of the painting process—drew notice, garnering him solo exhibitions at the de Young Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and lucrative sales through the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles. He quit the day job he'd taken in the library at the University of California, Davis, accepting temporary teaching positions in Los Angeles.

Yet Wonner has a stubbornness that sets him against his own past accomplishments as readily as it resists conventions established by others. In the early '60s, as his heavily worked figuration began to feel rote, an assignment that he gave his students (a standard lesson in still-life rendering) caught his interest. "It occurred to me that everything I'd been doing was so

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generalized that a lot of the time you couldn't tell if a figure was a man or a woman," he says. "I decided that I was going to paint as realistically as I could." His chosen subject: The still life.

In his small studio, Wonner began painting a series of crisp acrylics depicting vases, bowls and bottles, often in groupings of several dozen objects, brushed in one at a time on large canvases that made his workspace look cavernous. At first he constructed his compositions more or less symmetrically. "I didn't know what the hell I was doing," he says. "Eventually I realized that I could connect compositional elements with shadows. People thought that was strange, because the shadows were doing things that they couldn't do naturally." Even more eccentric was his choice of objects, which might juxtapose an antique Chinese vase, a stuffed parrot and a box of chocolates. He was guided partly by compositional requirements—in one painting, the need for a diagonal line inspired the inclusion of a telephone—but there was a conceptual motivation as well, especially when he included postcards of real Dutch still lifes in his compositions. While he seemed to be stepping back into the 17th century, he was actually leaping forward into a sort of retro-Pop.

"Still Life with Chewing Gum and Oriental Ceramics," 1979, acrylic on canvas.

It was an immediate hit. In 1978, his "Dutch Still Life With Cats and Love Letters" was the most talked-about work in a group show at Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York. And three years later, the still lifes were at the core of a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He reveled in his success: "When I realized what I could get away with, I got wilder and wilder. Sometimes the combinations were almost surreal." And yet he began to miss the psychological groundedness of his earlier work. "I finally got a little sick of still life painting," he says. "I started to look back with nostalgia at what I'd done in the '50s and '60s."

For the past decade, Wonner, who is represented solely by John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, has left his Dutch still lifes behind entirely. Today he sits in his studio at a drafting table, drawing on a large sheet of tracing paper, as Degas once did, developing his mythologically inspired compositions of figures in nature by transferring them from layer to layer of tissue. Unlike Degas, he has color photographs

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"Plant Stand and Garden Gloves," 1997, acrylic on paper. "In a Park (VIII)" (right), 2003, acrylic on paper.

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scattered around. "I go to the park with my throw-away camera," he explains, shuffling through a small stack of casual snapshots. "I take some pictures and make some sketches, then come back and put it all together. I make an awful lot of changes before I start painting. I want to say a lot of things that a photograph doesn't capture, but the photos are a help. I think you get stuck doing the same thing if you don't get out and look."

Wonner shuffles over to some flat files by his cot and pulls out several acrylics and watercolors on paper that revisit classic scenes, such as the "Judgment of Paris," with contemporary characters in grassy urban settings. Then, hands quivering slightly, he unpacks a new body of work, several small acrylics showing an old man painting a young one, an easel standing between them. "I feel that both are me in some way," he says, describing these most personal of allegories in little more than a whisper. "It's the art that connects us."

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