

G L A S S



Number 67
Summer 1997
\$7.00 US / \$7.95 Canada

Christopher Wilmarth

Sculpture and Painting from the 1960s and 1980s

Sidney Janis Gallery
New York
March 18 – April 19, 1997

Sigh, 1979-80, etched glass, 13 x 7½ x 6".

I associate the significant moments of my life with the character of the light at the time....

My sculptures are places to generate these experiences compressed into light and shadow and return them to the world as a physical poem.

— Christopher Wilmarth

Sculptor Christopher Wilmarth, who was honored by a posthumous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in

1989, used a wide variety of materials, including wood, metal, graphite, plastic, paint, and cloth. Glass, however, is the most important and poetic material in his repertoire.

The slumped- and wire-glass sculptures, produced between 1968 and 1969, explore the subtle reactions between light and glass. *Panoply*, a hanging wall piece in which a gravity-defying clear glass circle is imbedded into a birch plywood arc, is a geometric camera obscura. The triangular shadow cast by the arc directly behind the glass gives the work a paradoxical and ephemeral fourth dimension. *Gye's Arcade*, a floor piece, is resonantly handmade. The slumping and etching of the glass components convey the importance of Wilmarth's body and physical presence in the creation of the work. This physicality works against the interpretation that the art (glass) was premanufactured or machine-made.

Another floor piece, *Even*, uses a wood base to balance two wire-glass panes at a ninety-degree angle. The play of the light through the wire-glass creates an intriguing pattern on the floor, a virtual cage from which the piece attempts to thrust out of.

Wilmarth's 1980s Breath Series, *Sigh*, *My Old Books Closed...* and *When Winter on Forgotten Woods Moves Somber...* are hot glass interpretations of Stephane Mallarmé's poems. Wilmarth, not content to rely on glass' transparent image of beauty to articulate these French modernist classics, chooses instead to highlight glass' breathy quality, the swelling and contracting of the lungs necessary for glassblowing. This enables the glass to suggest complex thoughts and emotions. The blown-glass sculptures in the series resemble face masks, frighteningly devoid of physical features. By cutting away openings (mouths, doors) into the glass he exposes the hollowness that is inherent in all vessels.

In *Sigh*, Wilmarth's organic oval shape acts as a container for a detached face that carefully rests inside the form. The surface of the glass is scarred by Wilmarth's primitive etchings, and the punty is deliberately left on to signify where the work was separated from the blowpipe. It is a powerful image that not only evokes the melancholic poem of the same name, but also acts as a voice for the emotions of the artist.

Brett Littman

