

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Pam Rosenblatt

A conversation about his Don Quixotes and other artworks with Waltham Artist Michael B. Wilson

*On one spring-like autumn afternoon, artist Michael B. Wilson opened his Waltham studio up for an interview with Pam Rosenblatt, the arts editor for **Wilderness House Literary Review**. For 30 minutes almost exactly, the two people sat at an arts table and discussed Wilson's artwork. The interview follows:*



WHLR: Today is Wednesday, October 8, 2014. *Wilderness House Literary Review* is about to interview Michael B. Wilson from Waltham Artists...

MBW: Waltham Artists West Association.

WHLR: Where do you currently live? In the Waltham area?

MBW: Right here [in Waltham].

WHLR: I read on your website that you are originally from Colorado? From what part?

MBW: The Northern foothills half way between Denver and Cheyenne, Wyoming.

WHLR: That's a big contrast between Waltham versus Colorado.

MBW: Yes. About 5,000 feet more to start!

WHLR: You mentioned [on your website] that you came here from Colorado to attend college. Where did you attend?

MBW: The Museum School. The School of Museum of Fine Arts. I transferred in '85 so I came here [to Boston] and started as Junior. I did my Junior – Senior years and then I did my fifth year diploma. So I have a studio diploma. The equivalent of a Bachelor's without as much academics, more studio than academics. And then I achieved the equivalent of a year of graduate school.

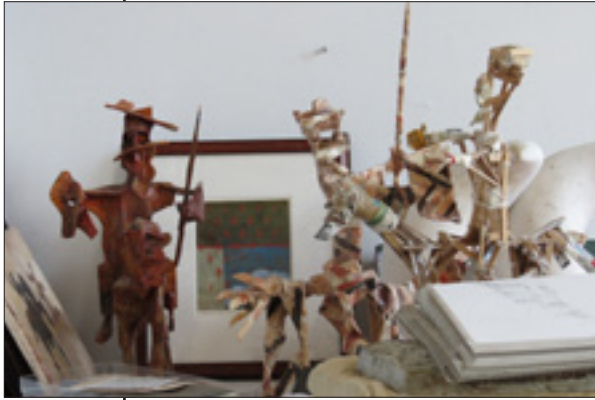
WHLR: What genres of visual art do you work in? And which is your favorite and why?

MBW: I work in a lot of genres. And I change them because my favorites change. For instance, I may do a lot of realistic paintings: trains and automobiles



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or figures. And I get bored with that and switch to something more abstract, like the Cubistic Don Quixotes, which are more the creative process. Reproducing the whole process of making something up is much more creative than duplicating.



WHLR: Which phase are you in right now?

MBW: I'm in the Don Quixote phase. Making it all up!

WHLR: How many years has [this phase] been going on for you?

MBW: Almost three.

WHLR: That's very impressive. I saw [your paintings and sculptures] online, too. They look more impressive in person!

MBW: Thank you.

WHLR: On your website, you have displayed photographs of Don Quixote and other artworks. There are paintings of automobiles and trains, like you have said. There are landscape paintings. Why paint these subjects, especially the Don Quixote series? Do you have a common mission or goal with each one of these subjects?

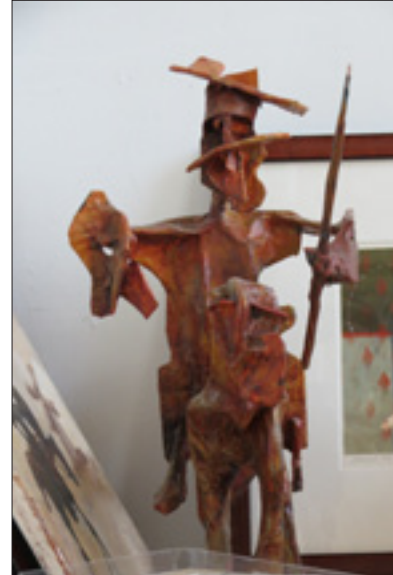
MBW: I think so. Hopefully, there is a thread that links them all. But the trains and the automobiles – those merged an idea I had of travel in the U.S. in the 1920s through the twentieth century. My grandfather and my father and I all took off hitchhiking when we were young. The locomotives symbolized my grandfather's era. The automobiles are mostly vintage from the 1950s, which is more my father. I'm not sure where I fit in. But it's part of a travelling around America series idea.

WHLR: I noticed with your car paintings, you created a Lincoln and I think you had a Buick. Are those your favorite cars?

MBW: No, I just liked the way they look. The trains and cars both -- I really don't know anything about them. I'm not a car buff or a train buff. But I really like the way they look, and that's the basis.

WHLR: Please name three artworks that you've created and explain why you like them so much. Please give the titles.

MBW: There's a painting called "Twelve Square Train" which I painted originally in 2010 and I've recently gone back to paint trains in conjunction with the Don Quixote. So I've updated the "Twelve Square Train" painting which is a process of taking a black and white photograph of a locomotive



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and dividing it up into 12 squares and each square is painted differently. This was one of my favorite paintings – the original one from 2010. Right now I like the [train painting] on the left more. [Wilson holds two paintings upright on the floor, near a studio wall.]

This next painting I appreciate and really like. At one time it was just called “63”. I don’t know why. But this is called “Portrait of a Woman”.



WHLR: And in what year was this done?

MBW: 2014.

WHLR: So these are all the recent ones that you have shown me?

MBW: Yes, these are very recent.

WHLR: Why do you like this one so much?

MBW: It’s a continuation of the cubist paintings of Don Quixote. But of course I moved away from him as the subject just for more a portrait of a person. I think it works.

Why do I like it? It was fun to paint. I think it’s structurally sound. I think it moves in space but stays close to what I want in a portrait.

WHLR: Is there another painting that you would like to discuss? Maybe a landscape painting?

MBW: My favorite landscape painting is “Sunrise over Lake Como”. That was painted from a trip to Italy. Lake Como in Italy. It’s a gorgeous square painting that I don’t usually do. I usually paint like more rectangular.

WHLR: So you use a lot of grid work, in a sense?

MBW: Yes, I suppose I do occasionally. I wouldn’t say I use a lot but occasionally I use it, yes.

I also work dividing the canvas. With this “Sunrise over Lake Como” painting, I feel I’ve got the light about right. The way sometimes things are seen especially in a strong light from one side, like at the “Sunrise at Lake Como”.

WHLR: It looks nice. The blue looks very realistic. Is this a more realistic painting to you?

MBW: Yes, this is very realistic.

WHLR: You mentioned that you create paintings that are reflective of Cubism. Why create them? And why concentrate on distorted faces?

MBW: I wanted to take on Don Quixote as a subject. And I needed a way to paint him without getting bogged down in the method. I feel like I’ve always had a good understanding of Cubism. It gave me enough of a

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structure that could pin an idea on it, keep the idea there while I experimented with technique and how it was painted and what method – the conceptual part of the painting – I could play games with it and still keep it as a picture of Don Quixote. If I had tried to do something realistic, it would have had to conform to a certain set of standards that Realism brings with it since there is no [actual] picture of Don Quixote other than by other artists. I didn't want to do that.

WHLR: What is it about Don Quixote that's intriguing to you? What's your interpretation of the story behind Don Quixote?

MBW: Yes, a fellow who believes so strongly in his mission that he will continue doing it no matter how much sense it doesn't make, how much other people tell him not to do it. He is just so focused on this journey that he is on. It makes me think of artists that I know who focus on achieving their vision against all odds, against good sense, against the prospects of making a living. There is virtually no reason for Don Quixote to do what he does, except to satisfy himself. And that's what I always thought the artist's journey is as well. It does not make sense to make art. It is just what people need to do.

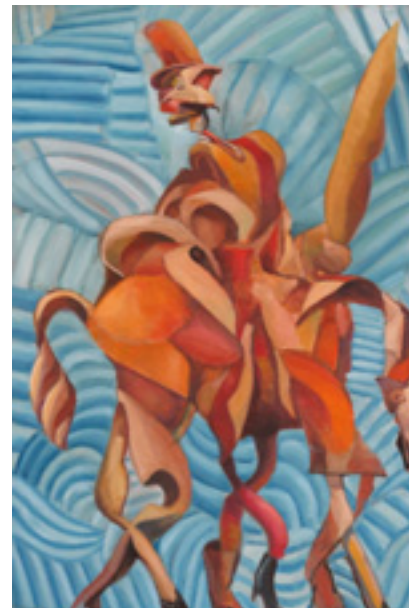
WHLR: But art is communication. You're communicating the message of Don Quixote.

MBW: Yes. I mean there is no practical reason for art. There are other reasons that make art so worthwhile. But they are not because you can wear it or use it in the kitchen or build something with it. It is all ideas and concepts. That is why I like art. That is why a lot of us like art.

WHLR: Why do you like Cubism?

MBW: The freedom. It encompasses both the structure and the method and the discipline while at the same time it allows you to distort reality and to change how reality looks and develop your own standards to go by. Because once you diverge from Realism and start to like Cubism – as soon as you are away from the Realism – you have told the audience that you are doing something different. And once you cross that line, you can do anything with it different within a certain set of guidelines that Cubism was and is. So I like both the freedom and the structure and I like that Cubism was a Spanish movement. With Don Quixote being Spanish, it seemed like a nice thread. And that Cubism was an unfinished language.

I think of art as a language and Cubism was its own kind of dialect on how to build things, build images. And it was so short lived in such a pure thing while it lasted that it never really developed into a more subtle language. Or it did but in small ways. I just wanted to contribute to that dialogue of whether Cubism being 100 years old (which is like being forever in the contemporary art world) still had anything valid to say, if it was still a valid use of art language.



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WHLR: Are you a big fan of Cubist artists?

MBW: Yes, I like them. I understand it – Cubism. I know why Cubism it was. I mean originally it was meant as a way of defining an object as you moved around it. So it was a way of encompassing time and space into a single static image, one of the original ideas, and I get that.

Picasso (1881 – 1973), Braque (1882 – 1963), Juan Gris (1887 – 1927), and Fernand Léger (1881 – 1955). They are actually all at the Metropolitan soon. There is a big exhibit opening.

WHLR: What would you call your style? Is it simply Cubism or is it a progression from Cubism.

MBW: I don't know what I call it. I'm waiting for a journalist to give it a name! And because right now I'm doing the Cubism and I'm doing the trains which are two different things, I don't know what to say, what kind of painter I am other than contemporary, which is pretty vague.

WHLR: Contemporary Cubist?

MBW: Contemporary Cubist.

WHLR: Out of all the paintings you have seen, who is the visual artist whom you most respect? What is your favorite painting and why? It may be an early American painting. A French painter.

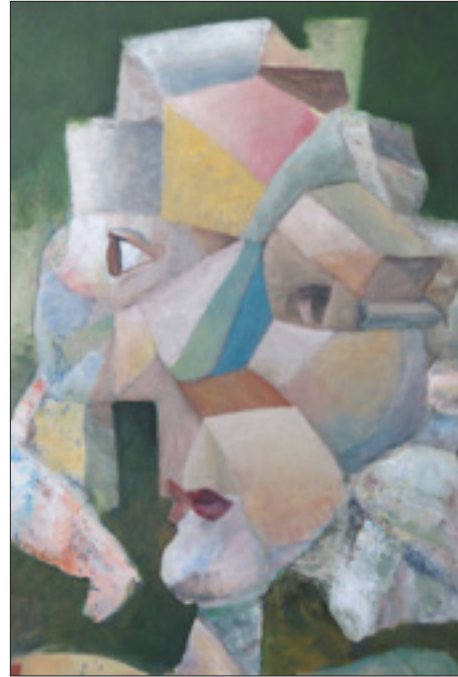
MBW: It would either be the French Impressionists, Robert Rauschenberg (1925 – 2008), or perhaps Richard Diebenkorn (1922 – 1993). Degas (1834 – 1917). Yes, the Impressionists and Degas specifically. All of those guys paint with deliberation, I mean they've thought about it. They're bold in their methods. And yet they can be at the same time absolutely delicate. I love that contrast!

WHLR: You are a teacher of art as well as an artist. You teach classes. How does teaching help the creation of your own artwork and how does painting and sculpting assist in the teaching process?

MBW: How does one feed the other?

WHLR: Yes.

MBW: I think that – to use the metaphor of “feeding” – teaching tends to “eat up” your creativity. It contributes because, for one thing, painting is such a solitary endeavor. It's nice to be around other people doing the same thing. It's like a group of private enterprises in the same room. But that part is helpful, I find, on a limited basis – the sharing of ideas. So to teach I have to slow myself way down because most of the people who I teach are early-in-their-career painters. Because I've been painting for decades, I have to reach back to what it was like to be a beginner. So I have to



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break down everything that I do into basic things which is always a help. I feel like my basis in painting is very strong. The closer I stay to the simple things – the dependable parts of painting – the more successful I am.

WHLR: What words of advice do you have to give to people interested in developing a style in Cubism, etc.

MBW: Probably the best advice is to paint, paint, paint, paint as much as you can. The more you do it, the more muscle memory you have. So the more you paint, the better you get at it.

WHLR: Where do you think your artwork is headed? Do you think there will be more Cubism? More Don Quixote? Are you going to develop something else?

MBW: I think I will continue doing Cubism. Don Quixote? I'm not sure. I thought I would be through with him by now but he's still around. I thought I was through with the trains a few years ago but now they're back again. My work is very cyclic. It goes from abstraction to realism to landscape to abstraction again. So I just ride that cycle. My work will go more abstract again, I think. It will be more abstract and probably end up in 10 years being very realistic again.

WHLR: Is Cubism the most abstract that you can get?

MBW: No. Yes, I can get completely removed from an image that relates to visual reality. It becomes much more non-objective, to use my terms. So yes, I like to get very, very abstract.

WHLR: Do you have any mentors that you would like to mention or people who have helped you in the field?

MBW: Most of them have moved. David Kelly at the Museum School was a great help when I was a student there.

WHLR: What was his field of expertise?

MBW: Drawing.

WHLR: How did you learn sculpture? Who taught you? Was it at the Museum School, too?

MBW: No, I just did it.

WHLR: What type of materials do you use in painting and in sculpture?

MBW: In paintings I use probably an equal amount of acrylic or oil. The sculpture is a combination of plaster and wine and string and wood.

WHLR: What size are your typical sculptures?



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MBW: A 1' 1/2" x 1'1/2" x 1' ish. About the size of a bread box.

WHLR: And what about the paintings? Do they vary in size? Do you always work on canvas?

MBW: Almost always on canvas. I prefer it. I do work on paper occasionally, and it is really from 6"x8" to 4'x5'. I'm most comfortable with the 30"x40" right now. Not too heavy. Easy to move.

WHLR: Have you ever been commissioned to do work?

MBW: Yes, yes.

WHLR: By local people or across the country?

MBW: Across the country. I had a gallery in Los Angeles that commissioned a lot of work. A gallery in Denver. I used to have my own gallery in Provincetown. I was there with a partner, Rosemary Broton Boyle. My main gallery site is out of this studio [in Waltham].

WHLR: How many square feet is your Waltham studio?

MBW: It's about 800 square feet. 500 – 600 square feet. 500 – 600 square feet for working.

WHLR: I read on your website that you did 91 paintings in 91 days!

MBW: That was the title of my Kickstarter project. It was 91 paintings in 91 days. I made 104 in 91 days! Paintings and drawings of Don Quixote. I did them while I listened to the book on CD.

WHLR: Wow.

