

Merrill Wagner

September 15–October 22, 2022
34 East 69th Street, New York



Merrill Wagner, *Outerbridge Crossing*, 1986. © 2022 Merrill Wagner
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition by American artist Merrill Wagner at the gallery's 34 East 69th Street location in New York. Bringing together works from throughout her career on a variety of conventional and unconventional supports—ranging from canvas and paper to slate, stone, steel, and Plexiglas—the presentation will provide an overview of Wagner's expansive approach to abstraction and painting. This will be the artist's first exhibition at the gallery since the announcement of her representation in 2021.

In its emphasis on the materiality and mutability of paint, Wagner's inventive work elides the categories of painting, relief, sculpture, and installation. Emerging in the 1960s, at a time when minimalism and post-minimalism had superseded abstract expressionism as the dominant aesthetic idioms, Wagner both eschewed and embraced their primary concerns, creating rigorous, hard-edged abstract compositions that subtly referenced landscape. By the mid-1970s, Wagner largely moved away from canvas and looked to nontraditional supports as surfaces for color. These alternative media interested Wagner because of not only their textural appearance but also their allusions to the natural world—resonating with her upbringing in the Pacific Northwest—as well as their inherent connection to process and chance. By integrating

the support within the compositional logic of her works, ordering and joining fragments by adding exquisitely considered painted elements—first in geometric formations and later in colorful, all-over compositions—Wagner poetically mediates between the natural and the constructed. As curator Robert Storr has described, “Wagner, materialist, formalist, empiricist, and poet of the given and the accidental as well as of the systematically altered, is, in this every respect, an all-American artist to the core.”¹

The earliest work in the exhibition was created shortly after Wagner graduated from the Art Students League, New York, where she trained under figurative painters Edwin Dickinson, George Grosz, and Julian Levi, from 1959 until 1963. A study of color and form, this monochromatic hard-edge painting features a large red circle delineated with a thin, curving line of white set against a vermillion ground. A few years later, in the mid-1970s, the artist began to look to other materials such as tape, which she had previously employed in some works, to guide her compositions. Rendered on Plexiglas or paper, and enhanced with pencil, oil paint, or pastel, the tape works on view retain Wagner’s earlier emphasis on form but represent an important evolution in her practice wherein process and form become intrinsically linked and the transient nature of her material is revealed.

Wagner’s investigation into the creative possibilities of using found and non-traditional materials was further spurred when she received a large quantity of slate chalkboards and fragments that had been removed during the renovation of P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York. While the artist had previously used slate as a support for her paintings, with this donation, slate became the artist’s primary focus during this period. Standing six feet tall and almost as wide, *Outerbridge Crossing* (1986) is an impressive example from this body of work; the monumental slate sculpture reads at once as a mountain range, a seascape, a quarry, and a horizon line. Composed of rectangular planks of varying size as well as a small curved fragment, the geometry of the work is further accentuated by vertical bands of blue paint. The undulating form of this work, which takes its name from the bridge that spans between New York’s Staten Island and New Jersey, is ultimately reminiscent of both the structure itself and the body of water across which it stretches. Examples of Wagner’s stone paintings will also be on view: *Crooked Strait* (1995), a meandering floor-based work composed of eight pieces which Wagner fit together and connected by a line of oil pastel that runs straight through each stone fragment, and a small wall work comprising a piece of marble placed next to an irregularly shaped dark gray stone. With these works, Wagner responds intuitively to the color, form, and size of her chosen stones, adding graphic lines in oil pastel or broad swaths of paint.

Extending her interest in process, chance, and the transformational effects of time, Wagner has also created a number of outdoor site-specific interventions in unassuming locations, such as on fences and rock outcroppings, which she leaves unprotected from the elements to fade over a long period of time, documenting this change in photographs. In the suite of images entitled

¹ Robert Storr, “Matters of Fact and of Vision,” in *Merrill Wagner*. Exh. cat. (New York: New York Studio School, 2016), p. 20.

Blue, Summer Studio 1985–2003 (2017), Wagner details the transformation of a wooden fence on her property in Tacoma, Washington, which she and her family returned to every summer, onto which she has painted squares in varying shades of blue in an eight-by-eight grid, with an additional row and column of rectangles. Over the course of the photographs—and eighteen years—the foliage around the fence grows, small red apples appear dangling from branches, the grass yellows and turns green again, the fence itself deteriorates, and the blue squares fade at differing rates. As much about the evolution of the surrounding landscape as it is about the artist's painted intervention, in this photographic suite Wagner makes visible the passage of time.

Also included in the presentation is a selection of Wagner's paintings on steel. A product of the artist's urban environment of New York—where she has lived and worked since the late 1950s—and the landscape of her youth in the Pacific Northwest, the steel paintings seamlessly juxtapose the organic and the industrial. Using primarily rust preventative paint on cold-rolled steel, Wagner applies swashes of color to the steel's glossy surface plane. These reflective works, with their industrial materiality and their bands of grays, blues, and whites, are reminiscent of both color field painting and minimalist sculpture.

Whether working with tape, paint, stone, slate, or steel, Wagner is attracted to and compelled by the natural evolution of materials. She embraces the cracking, staining, veining, fading, and natural slubs of the media and found materials that she employs, creating works whose final compositions are dictated by process and time, but which are nevertheless ever guided by her focused attention to color and her keen painterly sensibility.

Merrill Wagner was born in 1935 in Tacoma, Washington. She completed her BA at Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York, in 1957 and studied painting at the Art Students League, New York, from 1959 until 1963.

Early solo exhibitions of Wagner's work were held at the artist-run cooperative 55 Mercer, New York (1970, 1971, 1974, 1976, 1977), followed by presentations at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York (1978), and The Clocktower, New York (1979).

More recent solo exhibitions include Art Resources Transfer, New York (2002), which featured a catalogue with an interview with the artist by Ann Messner and William S. Bartman and an essay by Lilly Wei; *Looking at the Land*, which originated at William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey (2006), and traveled to the University of Rhode Island, Kingston (2007), accompanied by a catalogue featuring texts by Nancy Einreinhofer and Judith Tolnick Champa; Northern Columbia Community and Cultural Center, Benton, Pennsylvania (2011); New York Studio School (2016), which was accompanied by a catalogue featuring essays by Tiffany Bell, Naomi Spector, Robert Storr, Lilly Wei, and John Yau; and *Landscapes of Colour/Landschaften der Farbe*, Große Kunstschau, Worpswede, Germany (2019).

Wagner's work has also been included in significant group exhibitions, including *Blurring Boundaries: The Women of American Abstract Artists, 1936–present*, University of Tennessee, Knoxville (2018); *Minimal Difference: Selected Work by Women Artists 1960s–1970s*, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, New York (2018); *Postwar Women*, The Art Students League of New York (2019); *Painting Deconstructed: Selections from the Northwest Collection*, Tacoma Art Museum, Washington (2021); and *52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2022).

Wagner has published a number of artist books documenting her long-term and site-specific projects, including *Notes on Paint* (1990), which was awarded the Certificate of Excellence by the ALGA Book Show 1990 (1991) and the Northwest Design Award (1992); *Time and Materials* (1994); *Oil and Water* (2002); and *Public/Private* (2004).

The artist has been represented by David Zwirner since 2021, and this will be her first exhibition with the gallery.

She is the recipient of numerous awards, such as the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship Grant (1989); Hassam Purchase Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters (2002); Andrew Carnegie Prize, National Academy of Design (2006); and the Academy Award in Art, American Academy of Arts and Letters (2006). Her work can be found in prominent museum collections, including Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague, the Netherlands; Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; Tacoma Art Museum, Washington; Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Wagner lives and works in New York.

For all press inquiries, contact

Julia Lukacher +1 212 727 2070 jlukacher@davidzwirner.com

Erin Pinover +1 212 727 2070 epinover@davidzwirner.com