

Merrill Wagner

Nature

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5-6/F, H Queen's,
80 Queen's Road Central,
Hong Kong



Merrill Wagner, *Outerbridge Crossing*, 1986
© 2024 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 Hong Kong location. Showcasing compositions from throughout Wagner's career—executed on a variety of conventional and unconventional supports, ranging from canvas, paper, slate, and stone to plexiglass and steel—*Nature* will bring together a group of works that explore Wagner's ongoing interest in process, chance, and the transformational effects of time. This will be Wagner's second solo presentation with the gallery since the announcement of her representation in 2021, and her first in Greater China in nearly fifteen years.

In its emphasis on the materiality and mutability of paint, Wagner's inventive work elides traditional 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 Emerging in the 1960s, at a time when minimalism and post-minimalism had superseded abstract expressionism as the dominant aesthetic idioms, Wagner both eschewed and embraced their primary concerns, creating rigorous, hard-edged abstract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 Tiffany Bell describes, "Wagner's art sets up an opposition between the arbitrary and the ordered. On the one hand, she presents unconventional art materials that have withstood the effects of time, either from human use or exposure to natural

processes. On the other, she applies carefully considered, often geometric configurations to impose a simple yet elegant order.”¹

Working in both abstract and figurative registers, the artist moves seamlessly between these different modes of expression that for her are linked in both form and content to the natural world, each in turn informing the other. Among the earliest works in the exhibition, a monochromatic hard-edge painting from 1966 features a large circle delineated with a thin, curving line set against a uniform ground. This composition can be read simultaneously as a study in color and form and also a waning moon, introducing from the outset the coexisting dualities that would come to characterize Wagner’s oeuvre. 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 plexiglass or paper, and enhanced with pencil, oil paint, or pastel that lends her compositions an atmospheric feel, 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. In works such as *Untitled* (1979), the tape is complemented by an abstract field of lightly applied oil paint that conjures Turner-esque atmospheric conditions.

The exhibition will also explore Wagner’s investigation into the creative possibilities of using found and nontraditional materials—a practice that 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 it became Wagner’s primary focus during this period. In *Steilacoom* (1979), an abstract composition of lightly applied strokes of oil, pastel, and crayon alludes to the shores of the Puget Sound in the Washington town for which the work is named.

Wagner’s works in slate find their apotheosis in works such as *Outerbridge Crossing* (1986), which underscores the artist’s simultaneous embrace of both the formal and material qualities of these surfaces. Composed of rectangular planks of varying size as well as a small curved fragment, the geometry of the composition is further accentuated by vertical bands of blue paint. The undulating form, 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. As curator Lilly Wei has noted, such works evoke a wide range of references “with impressive economy and visual tension, a mountain range, a deconstructed and downsized Stonehenge, a blown-up Song dynasty landscape, an urban canyon—or just broken pieces of slate.”²

The artist’s small, impressionistic landscapes are yet another way in which she seeks to paint time. These intimately scaled oil paintings, which were created *en plein air* at the Wagner’s farm in Pennsylvania, feature the deep reds of fall leaves, the snow-whites of winter, and the vibrant yellows, pinks, and lavenders of spring and summer blooms. Often titled after the month in which they were painted, these compositions chronicle the effects of the changing seasons year after year.

The exhibition will also include examples of Wagner’s steel paintings, which the artist began in the late 1980s—works that 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. These reflective works, with their industrial materiality and their bands of pigment, are reminiscent of both color field painting and minimalist sculpture. *Williams Street* (1988) is composed of two sheets of steel that cross one another and are further unified by a painted teal square that overlaps the

¹ Tiffany Bell, “Merrill Wagner Amidst Chance and Order,” in *Merrill Wagner*. Exh. cat. (New York: New York Studio School, 2016), pp. 6, 9.

² Lilly Wei, “Ephemera and Endurance: The Art of Paint, Stone, and Steel,” in *Merrill Wagner*. Exh. cat. (New York: New York Studio School, 2016), p. 22.

boundary of each individual piece. Likewise, *Assertion* (2006) features horizontal stripes of varying widths in shades of canary yellow, gray, black, and blue. Wagner embraces the irregularities of her found material and invites natural color variation and evidence of corrosion into her composition.

In other works such as *Untitled* (1991), two irregularly shaped pieces of slate have been structurally joined together and are further unified by the thin white lines of oil pastel that Wagner applied to their surfaces. The slate has a rough, uneven quality that contrasts with the delicately rendered and almost thread-like line. 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, training under figurative painters Edwin Dickinson, Julien Levi, and George Grosz. The artist has been represented by David Zwirner since 2021, and her first exhibition with the gallery was on view in 2022 at David Zwirner's East 69th Street location in New York.

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

More recent solo exhibitions include those held at 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), and was 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, State University of 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 (2022–2023).

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 AIGA Book Show in 1991 and the Northwest Design Award in 1992; *Time and Materials* (1994); *Oil and Water* (2002); and *Public/Private* (2004).

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).

In 2022, a solo exhibition of Wagner's work was presented at David Zwirner's East 69th Street location in New York. In May 2024, the artist's work will be on view at David Zwirner, Hong Kong, marking the first time her work has been shown in Greater China in nearly fifteen years.

The artist's 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.

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