

Ralph L. Wickiser

Beyond the Boundaries of What Is

Ralph Wickiser, father of New York gallerist Walter Wickiser, died in 1998, at the age of 88. Wickiser pere had no small reputation in New York art circles, especially those that swirled around later-century figurationists like George McNeil and Stephen Pace. From 1959 to '78, Wickiser was head of Pratt Institute's undergraduate and graduate schools of art and design and its art education department.

Wickiser spent nearly 20 years of his long artistic career as a more-or-less pure abstractionist. That had all changed by the 1970s, when the artist gave up Brooklyn and Pratt to free settle into his home and own private Hermitage in rustic Woodstock, New York, built in 1949. The peace and solitude gave the artist the freedom to paint to his heart's- and eye's - content, and develop, brilliantly and unflinchingly, some of his new pet theories, not the least of which was that the nature around him - and, indeed, all nature - was abstract, in essence and in being.



Ralph L. Wickiser,
Four Season - Summer
1974-76, 60 x 72 inches

Such a stringent anthropomorphism informed especially Wickiser's feelings about rocks and streams. Indeed, Wickiser maintained that only the camera eye could see - if not entirely picture - the intricate motions of light patterns on water, and deployed his trusty lens repeatedly to that end. The results were near-phantasmagorical renderings of perfectly plain bodies of water; the stream paintings fully crystallize - or crystallize as fully as Wickiser felt appropriate to divulge - the eternal modernist struggle between the "push" of illusionism and the "pull" of abstractionism (and vice-versa). The outlook is calm and ordered; the "inscape," to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, is almost bacchic.

A little analysis might do here: in a typical Wickiser stream painting, we are presented with a brief snatch of water with leaves both on the surface of the stream and sunk to the bottom, Wickiser's romantic realism was also a non-objective one, as sticks, rocks, earth, and reflections - both of trees and further passages of water - accumulate into "abstract" motifs and designs. However illusory, Wickiser seems to be saying, we are still dealing with a two-dimensional canvas space, eternally flat, eternally crying out for figurative definition-

human eye and brain just seem to covet same. Still, the painting is harmonious in its disjunctions, proving its author not only a master of figurative abstraction, but a kind of latter-day 20th-century titan of ecstatic painterly practice.

If it seems premature to throw around words like "master" and "titan" in Wickiser's case, we must remember that he was a man steeped - through his own teachings and the teaching of others - not in the egotistic vanities that surrounded him in his Action Painting (and beyond) peers, but in centuries of Western art and thought, whose book *An Introduction to Art Activities* remains a standard.

A beautifully broken equipoise, then, is the story here: yes, all nature is abstract, just as you can never fully look at the sun. As he drew fertile into himself in Woodstock in the years of rock and stream, an effulgence of vision set in, rather than any eccentricity of sensibility. Thankfully, the years since Wickiser's death are bringing to light, especially, the mature nature paintings. They are better than discoveries; they are aesthetic depth charges in the sea of today's troubled aesthetic waters. Ralph Wickiser, gone some yeas now, is increasingly here to stay.

-- *Gerrit Henry*
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