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## Robert Wilson

Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College

By [Joan Casademont](#)

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Robert Wilson once told a well-known critic that he gave up painting for theater because the images in his head were so much richer than what he could get on canvas. What Wilson has created on stage since the late '60s is so distinguished and rich in images and actualization that it is thought of in the tradition of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In his catalogue essay, John Rockwell of the *New York Times* explains Wagner's idea as being the result of believing that each of the arts " . . . individually lacks self-sufficiency." He uses the words "visionary," "mystical" and finally "religious" to describe the experience of Wilson's opera-plays—all words that conjure up a moment in time that is distinctly different from its before and after, a moment that is realized because of its extraordinary sensory power. Despite the force of such an experience of the abstract, however, the actual fragments are often what remain in one's memory. Details make the experience rich, strange, original, dreamlike. Hence the extreme length and counter-dramatic pacing of Wilson's works; one is given the time to absorb or at least observe every fragment of the work. To examine Wilson's theater in detail means to consider Wilson as painter, sculptor, architect—an artist as concerned with the single image as he is with the total "vision."

Robert Stearns, Director of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, where the show opened, had this approach in mind when he chose to assemble drawings for stage sets, chairs from the various stage works, the Dam Drop from *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, and a videotape of spots done for European television. There is only one actual stage set shown, from *I Was Sitting On My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating* (the most manageable within the limitations of a gallery space), and so few documentary photographs of the performances that they seem almost misplaced. In his catalogue essay, Stearns reacts quite strongly against the notion of Wilson's chairs as "esthetic relics" saying that " . . . if we miss the details, we miss the point." The point is argued convincingly here; the formal beauty and sculptural severity of the chairs are as rare in a gallery space as in a sequence of stage scenes.



Lit dramatically by Wilson, the *Overture Chair*, the *Queen Victoria Chairs* and the *Patio* set are tranquil but foreboding. Contrary to Stearns' installation at the Contemporary Arts Center (where the drawings appeared first), the Neuberger used the larger pieces to mark the entry to the exhibition, so that one's progress through the show is a walk from darkness to light. Despite the difference, Stearns' curatorial objective is apparent; the graphic qualities and formal materials of these objects are buttressed by the black-and-white graphite drawings. The flat geometrics of the lead and brass *Queen Victoria Chairs* extends to the simple geometrics of the pipe structure that is the later *Einstein Chair*, and to the even later cold aluminum diagonals of the *Beach Chairs* from *Death, Destruction, Detroit*. Minimalist materials and a recurring interest in the emotive potential of angular metals inform Wilson's esthetic. According to Stearns, some of the objects are reconsidered versions of Wilson's original conceptions. The lead *Stalin Chairs*, for example, were originally draped with muslin, not covered with lead. Covered with lead, they are two of the most evocative pieces in the show, their jagged edges echoing those in a drawing for a stage design in *Death, Destruction, Detroit*. Wilson's esthetic as a painter and sculptor elicits an uncommon formal tension, one created between luxury and austerity: extravagance moderated by precision.

*Video 50* shows another less-known side of Wilson's esthetic: humor. In a series of over 100 30-second spots for European television, Wilson delightfully uses displacement and repetition, with, for instance, close-ups of a nail-polished gorilla's hand reaching slowly for a ringing telephone, spliced together with the recurring hanging chair from *Deafman Gance*. The pacing, the detail, the tension, are, like Wilson's stage work, quite glamorously alien to anything ordinarily suited to the medium.

Considering the awesome detail and complexity of Wilson's body of work from the '60s on, the details at the Neuberger comprise only a small part. But there is no pretense that they are anything more or less, and as such, their "simplicity" is central to Wilson's art.

—Joan Casademont