

GEORGE WARDLAW

CROSSING BORDERS



GEORGE WARDLAW

CROSSING BORDERS

BY J. RICHARD GRUBER ORI Z. SOLTES SUZETTE McAVOY

MARSHALL WILKES

MAINE NEW YORK

First Edition

© 2012 George Wardlaw: Crossing Borders

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher.

Published in the United States of America by Marshall Wilkes, Inc., 6 Court Street, Ellsworth, Maine 04605. For information, please address the publisher at info@marshallwilkes.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gruber, J. Richard.
George Wardlaw: crossing borders / by J. Richard Gruber,
Ori Z. Soltes, Suzette McAvoy. – 1st ed.
184p. 28.5cm.
ISBN 978-0-9839670-0-2

Edited by Jane Crosen
Designed by Karin Marshall Wilkes
Color separations by Penmor Lithographers, Lewiston, Maine
Printed and bound in China



Passage X: Interior Garden, Johnson Wax Corporation, 1985–86, site-specific sculpture commission

CONTENTS

7	Preface by Grace Glueck
8	Acknowledgments
10	Foreword by Lori Friedman
15	Prelude by J. Richard Gruber
18	Art in Process 1947–1975 Memphis and Oxford to New Haven and Amherst by J. Richard Gruber
88	Art in Process 1975–1996 Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms by Ori Z. Soltes
126	Art in Process 1996–2011 Divining the Numinous: Maine Paintings by Suzette McAvoy
174	Notes
176	Exhibitions
178	Collections
179	Bibliography
182	Chronology
184	Photography Credits

FRONTISPIECE George Wardlaw in his studio with one section of his two-story, architectonic sculpture commission *Passage X: Interior Garden* for the Johnson Wax headquarters at the Howard M. Packard Building, Racine, Wisconsin. Courtesy of Contact, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Spring 1986.



Wardlaw in his Amherst studio, 1982

PRELUDE

In 1983, George Wardlaw was one of only four Mississippi artists—including Ed McGowin, Ray Parish, and Valerie Jaudon—selected, at that time, to receive the Visual Arts Award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters. Nationally recognized as a distinguished artist, professor of art, and long-standing chairman of the art department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Wardlaw was brought back to Jackson and his native state by the Visual Arts Award ceremony. The award also acknowledged the great distance Wardlaw had traveled in his extended artistic journey, one that began on a farm in Prentiss County, Mississippi, in 1927. It is a journey that still continues in 2011, the year Wardlaw marked his eighty-fourth birthday, while working on a series of new paintings and this book.

More than sixty years ago, in 1947, Wardlaw made an earlier return to Mississippi, after serving in the U.S. Navy, and then arranged to use his GI Bill benefits to enroll at the nearby Memphis Academy of Arts, leading to his entry into the American art world. Wardlaw had not seen an original work of art when he arrived in Memphis, yet, even before he graduated from the Academy, his abstract paintings and modernist silver jewelry were shown in national galleries and juried exhibitions. As the first essay will indicate, George Wardlaw's professional career evolved in rapid succession during the twenty-five-year period from 1950 to 1975: when he graduated from the art academy; built a painting and jewelry studio in Baldwin; taught and studied art at the University of Mississippi (with David Smith, Jack Tworkov, and Reginald Neal); exhibited his work at major New York art galleries; moved to New York and taught at SUNY at New Paltz; was recruited by Jack Tworkov to teach at Yale University; then left Yale, to teach, and later to serve as the chair of the art department, at the University of Massachusetts, where he remained for the rest of his influential academic career.

— J. Richard Gruber



Memphis and Oxford to New Haven and Amherst

GEORGE WARDLAW ART IN PROCESS 1947–1975

Memphis and Oxford to New Haven and Amherst
by J. Richard Gruber



George with his parents Lillie and Wiley Wardlaw about 1938, and (opposite) in his University of Massachusetts studio, 1969

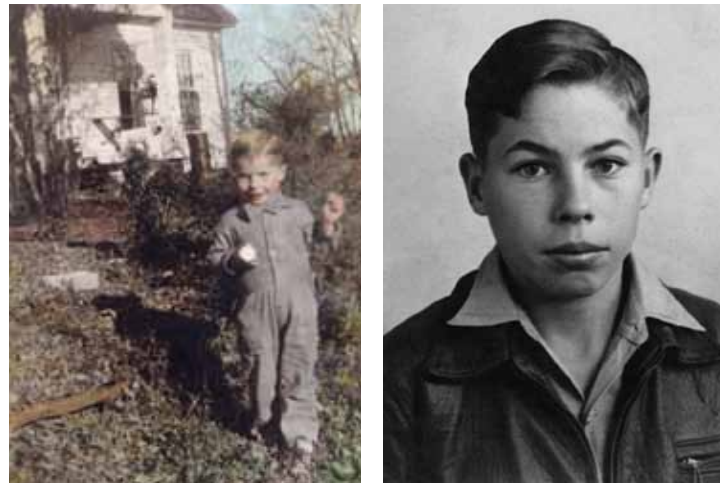
George Melvin Wardlaw was born to George Wiley Wardlaw and Lillie Lee Tapp Wardlaw, in the hill country of northeastern Mississippi, on April 9, 1927, the month the nation's attention was focused on the Mississippi Delta and the Mississippi River Valley. If the young Wardlaw had been looking for a sign about the world he entered, it might have been found, less than one week later, when *The New York Times* described an unprecedented event: "Great Flood Peril Along Mississippi; Huge Mass of Water Is Rushing Southward Threatening to Inundate a Vast Territory." During the spring of Wardlaw's birth a flood of biblical proportions, the nation's worst natural disaster to date, inundated almost one million homes and forced hundreds of thousands of Southerners, many of them African-Americans (and many of them from Mississippi), to migrate to the North.¹ Two years later, in the fall of 1929, the stock market crashed, and the nation entered the years of the Great Depression.

George Wardlaw was raised on a farm four miles west of Baldwyn, Mississippi, during the hard years of the Great Depression. An only child (a sister died in childbirth), he enjoyed drawing from an early age, yet his life and that of his family, like so many others in Mississippi in the 1930s, was centered on farming. Work was the focus of life, and there was little time or opportunity for art. He grew up on an active family farm in Prentiss County where they raised cotton, corn, and soybeans, as well as hay to feed the farm's cows and horses. The family also maintained a small dairy operation. As soon as he was old enough, the young Wardlaw worked in a full range of farm activities



including planting, plowing, hoeing, milking, baling hay, and picking cotton. He knew, firsthand, the life of a farmer, from planting to harvesting.

As with many other artists raised in Mississippi in the 1930s, Wardlaw's aesthetic foundations were largely vernacular, rooted in family and local traditions. Baldwin was a small town located in Mississippi's northeastern corner, a significant distance, both geographically and culturally, from New York City, the center of the international art world in the 1950s, and the city where



George at his grandfather's house, 1930, and about 1940

Wardlaw would achieve recognition as an emerging artist. Baldwin can be found on highway maps between Oxford, Mississippi, and Florence, Alabama, close to the Alabama and Tennessee borders. Founded in 1861, not far from the Natchez Trace, Baldwin was shaped by the Battle of Shiloh and the Siege of Corinth, epic and tragic battles that took place nearby, rooting the city in the history of the Confederacy and the Civil War. Nearby Mississippi cities include New Albany (where William Faulkner was born), Oxford (where Faulkner lived for

decades and home of the University of Mississippi), and Tupelo (birthplace of Elvis Presley).

Willie Morris, the noted Mississippi writer, once described his native state succinctly. "This is a land of ghosts: the vanished Indians." Morris referred to the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Natchez, and other tribes including the Yazoo, Choula, Algonquin, Tunica, Biloxi, Sacchuma, Alimamu, and Pascagoula, noting that they "worshipped the sun and the sacred fire and, like a few contemporary Mississippians, believed in spirits."² This aspect of the state's history was brought into Wardlaw's classroom, as he recently remembered. "When I was in either the fifth or sixth grade my teacher did a study section on American Indians and planned a pageant as part of the study. There were four teachers in the school and four classrooms. Each teacher taught two grades in the classroom. When the teacher, Ms. Rogers, announced the pageant, she said everyone would participate." Then, in a striking way, Wardlaw learned that his personal history was tied to Morris's "land of ghosts":

And she informed the group that one student in the classroom had an Indian heritage and would serve as the Chief of the pageant. To my great surprise, I was that student. This was something totally unknown to me, I had never been told. After asking questions about this revelation, my mother said she was one-fourth Indian, that her grandfather had married a full blood Indian and the subject was dropped. From what I could gather at that time the woman was probably Chickasaw or Choctaw. I felt honored with my elevation in



Itawamba, 80 x 21.5 x 16.5 inches; *luka*, 80 x 17 x 16 inches; *Chickasaw*, 80 x 21 x 13 inches; *Yalobusha*, 80 x 24 x 12.5 inches; all 1980, acrylic on aluminum

*status to Chief and took great pride in the idea that, in at least one way, I was different from everyone else in the classroom and that pride has continued until this day.*³

After World War II, when he attended art school in Memphis, Wardlaw created paintings about his Indian heritage and, later, beginning around 1980, totemic sculptures that he titled after Indian tribes and places in Mississippi, reflecting his ongoing pride in his heritage.

Although he exhibited an interest in drawing and creativity in his early years, Wardlaw had never visited

an art museum or gallery, nor seen an original work of art. Other than a single trip to Memphis, when he accompanied his parents on a visit to his Aunt Laura Prather, he did not spend time in major cities during his formative years. For the young Wardlaw, "art" was associated with the Baptist Church, the social and spiritual center of his family's activities—specifically with the religious scenes printed on the fans dispensed at Southern Baptist churches and revival meetings. Even now, he retains vivid memories of art within this context. Two other forms of creativity made lasting impressions on him. The first were the drawings made by his father to register the hunting dogs he trained. These flattened diagrams, representing



Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms

GEORGE WARDLAW ART IN PROCESS 1975–1996

Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms

by Ori Z. Soltes

The thing about George Wardlaw's work is that, multifaceted as it is in both form and content, it invites multiple approaches to exploring and explaining what it is really *about*. His work may be seen as a series of stylistic and subject convergences. It constantly dances on the borders and edges of modes and categories of expression. It twists within the winds of an extraordinary range of influences while transcending their combination to yield something that is his own, and it turns in an array of directions without ever losing the clear-visioned path along which he has undertaken a lifelong journey.

Back when, after a post-high school stint in the Navy, he was studying art at the Memphis Academy of Arts on the GI Bill, Wardlaw painted a painting and his professor—Ben Bishop, who would exert an important early influence on the artist—came and looked over his shoulder at the work. He liked it. “And then he said, ‘I’ve also got a name for it: *Spiritual Journey*.’” Wardlaw never forgot that moment, and in looking back at it sixty years later, and at the sweep of art that he has made between then and now, it is easy to see how his work has been a series of spiritual journeys on any number of levels all along the way.³¹

His path has been forged of the intertwining and dynamic contention of two fundamental realities: change and constant growth and transformation on the one hand, and a core of consistency on the other that may be perceived throughout his work, as it has been present throughout his life. His Southern Baptist father was a very religious man,

and Wardlaw, throughout shifts through particularized modes of religion—to an identity that might be labeled, if one requires labels, culturally Jewish—has remained consistently spiritual. His sense of the wonderful and the miraculous in the world around us, in its colors and its shapes, in its natural forms and man-made lines, has never wavered. His art has moved across media and styles—as, in some respects, he has embraced diverse aspects of his own being—yet it has continued to translate a recognizable vocabulary of visual ideas into those endlessly shifting articulations.

PRELUDES: CONVERGENCES AND BORDER-CROSSINGS

Wardlaw and his art have spent more than six decades crossing borders and occupying spaces between diverse conceptual places. Even a brief perusal of his career shows not merely diversity of style as of subject and material, but an aggressive assault on the boundaries so often defined within the history of art. He has been equally comfortable and equally accomplished in “craft” and “art.” As his scale of focus grew—literally—from minute to monumental, his brushwork adjusted itself from rough-hewn, expressionist interwoven explosions of paradoxically delicate hues to controlled, sharp-edged agglomerations of pigment shaped by bold outlines. When he “shifted” from painting and other flat media to sculpture, he refused to leave his paintbrush and his coloristic sensibilities behind. Sculptural contours reshaped themselves from more curvilinear to more rectilinear but never letting go entirely of curves.



George in his Amherst studio, 1985

And when confronted with a sense of intimidation regarding how to implant sculpture within an apparently unconducive architectural space, he simply transformed his sculpture into architecture, creating a dynamic dialogue within that space, between the two media, between ups and downs, ins and outs, verticals and horizontals that transverse each other, between coloristic points of view and positive and negative concepts of space that ultimately encourage even the most casual passer-by and passer-through to engage—in the same sort of question the artist had initially asked himself in addressing the commission: How does it all work? How does it all—the lines, the colors, the shapes; the sculpture which is a painting and which is architecture and the architecture which embraces it—fit together, *miraculously*?

There is something about much of Wardlaw's work that seems to pull in a paradoxically secular manner from the realm of the miraculous. One might say that his work—particularly this last-mentioned gargantuan installation, *Passage X: Interior Garden*, 1985–86 (for the Howard M. Packard Building at Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin)—creates the basis for what, in Raphael's day, was called a *disputa*. That is: a discussion regarding the miraculous in which all the participants agree that it happened. For Raphael's audience it was the Eucharistic transformation of wine and bread into blood and flesh; for Wardlaw's audience it is the artistic transformation of painting into sculpture and sculpture into architecture.

If the artist's painted sculpture nods obliquely to Raphael's *Disputa* fresco (ca. 1508) in the Vatican *stanze* spaces, as architectural sculpture it nods directly to Bernini's extraordinary *baldacchino* (1624–1633) for St. Peter's

church in Rome. That Baroque work is a soaring bronze contrivance that needed to draw the human eye toward it in the cavernous, football field–like nave of the church: not to be lost within it, yet not compete with it, so that it has frequently been written of as opening up a border territory between sculpture and architecture. Wardlaw's work stands firmly in that open, border territory.

At the same time one might see his work as precisely antithetical to that of Bernini: the St. Peter's baldachin is part of a multiple-material program of engendering a sense of awe on the part of the viewer. In the context of the Counter-Reformation, its goal is to cause us to feel our tininess within the vast, distancing space and its diversely overwhelming visual elements, and by extension to recognize our minuteness within the context of the yet vaster, yet more transcendent, divinely shaped universe at large. Wardlaw's intention was to bring the architectural space down into the graspable purview of and for the human viewer by shaping a bridge of form and color to that architecture that the viewer cannot avoid noticing and thinking about.

As an "interior garden," this work hovers between spaces on several other levels. It carries an idea forward all the way from ancient Babylon and its renowned hanging gardens. But rather than cascading from a series of stepped walls and terraces, it surges up from the ground, criss-crossing the open atrium space with verticals and horizontals that reach from level to level. It offers multiple dialogues: between floral pigments and forms, and between the softness of vegetation and the hardness of aluminum columns and beams. Wardlaw has shaped an interstitial interior environment from an exterior concept.





Diving the Numinous: Maine Paintings

GEORGE WARDLAW ART IN PROCESS 1996–2011

Divining the Numinous: Maine Paintings

by Suzette McAvoy

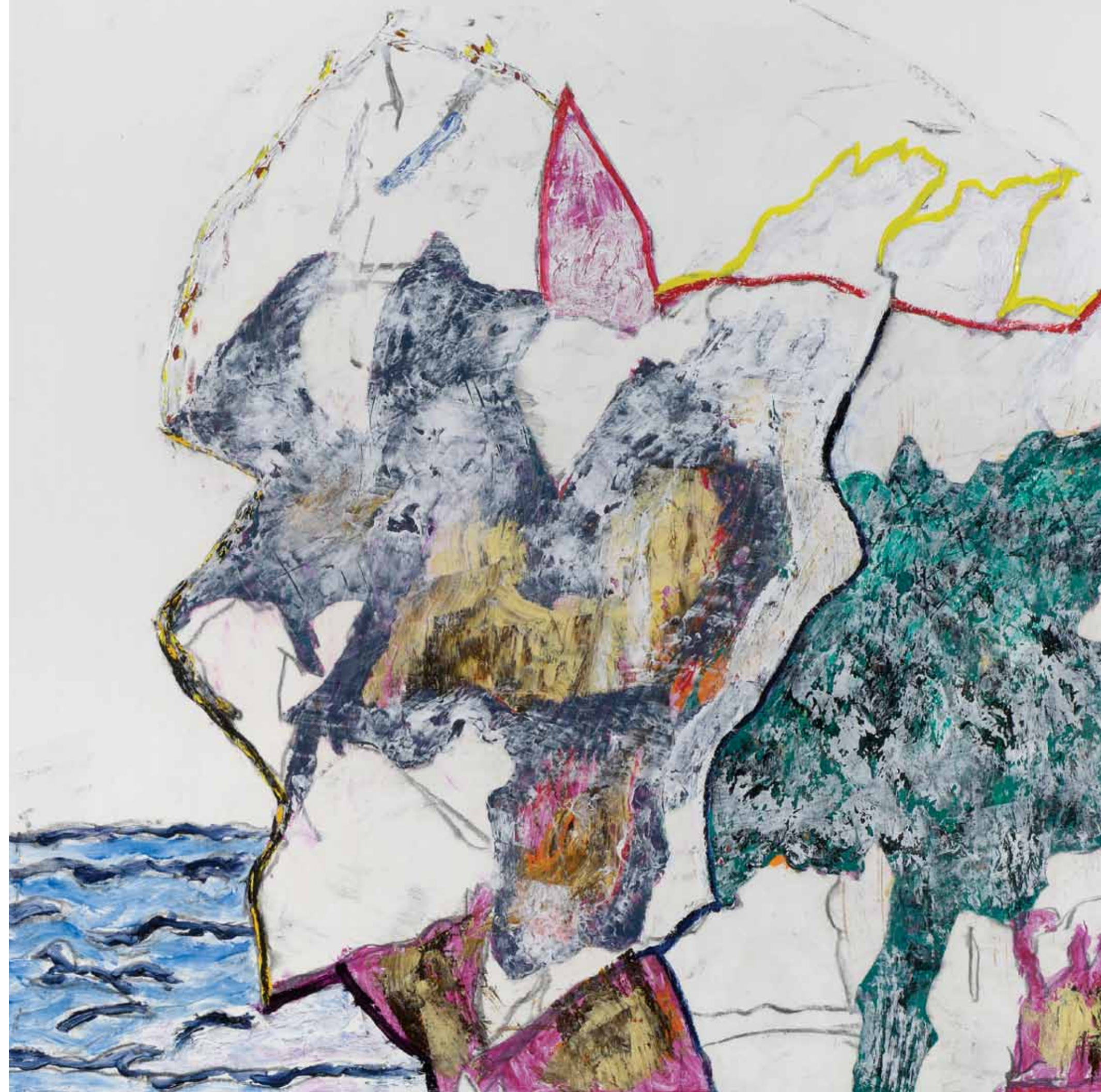
The greatest stories are those that resonate our beginnings and intuit our endings, our mysterious origins and our numinous destinies, and dissolve them both into one.

—Ben Okri

In 1997, artist George Wardlaw began a powerful series of large-scale abstract paintings inspired by the Maine coast. Collectively titled Shore Themes, these richly textured, shaped canvases evoke the essence of the Maine coastal environment. Through perceptive juxtapositions of color and form, the artist intimates the physical and sensory properties of light and atmosphere—a wind-whipped green sea confronting gray rocks; golden sunlight caressing sapphire-blue water; a mysterious dark island anchoring a field of blue.

At the time of their creation Wardlaw had been a summer resident of Maine for forty-six years, yet this was his first completed body of work to directly address his seasonal home. “Back in the 1960s,” he says, “I did about eight large paintings of the Maine coast that I later destroyed because I thought I had failed in what I really wanted to do.”³⁷ In taking on the subject of the Maine coast, Wardlaw was joining a long line of artists that extends back to the mid-nineteenth century, when America’s first great landscapist Thomas Cole ushered in a wave of landscape painting that continues to this day.

Cognizant of this well-populated artistic legacy and ever an individualist, Wardlaw was reticent to approach the Maine motif until he felt ready—spiritually and artistically—to contribute a genuinely fresh aesthetic vision. After completing the major group of paintings and sculptures known as the Exodus series in the mid-1990s, the artist felt prepared for the challenge. “I had always wanted to do something with Maine,” he says. “And



finally, after I had finished the Exodus sculptures and Biblical paintings, I thought, now it's time to deal with Maine—and I've been dealing with it ever since."

Wardlaw was twenty-four years old when he first came to Maine in 1951 to teach metalworking at Tripp Lake Camp located in the small town of Poland in the state's western lakes region. It was the young Mississippi native's first visit to New England, and he was immediately struck by the verdant beauty of the landscape. He spent the next fourteen summers as a counselor at the camp, teaching



George and Judy in Amherst, around 1980

silverwork and jewelry making, skills that had earned him a national reputation while still a student at the Memphis Academy of Arts in 1949.

Tripp Lake Camp, which celebrated its centennial in August 2010 (an event Wardlaw attended),³⁸ was established as a traditional, all-girls Jewish camp. It was at Tripp Lake that Wardlaw, who was raised a Southern Baptist, first became interested in studying Judaism. His nascent interest in

the faith was further nurtured by his close friendship with the artist Jack Tworkov, a relationship that began in 1954 when Tworkov served as a visiting instructor at the University of Mississippi during Wardlaw's second year as a graduate student.

In 1956, Wardlaw accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York (SUNY) in New Paltz. It was there that he met his future wife Judy Spivack, whose family was Jewish. This confluence of events cemented Wardlaw's decision to convert to Judaism at the time of the couple's marriage in the fall of 1957. Over the next seven summers, until the first of their three children was born,³⁹ the couple returned to Tripp Lake Camp, and Judy, like her husband, fell in love with Maine. The state came to represent for the Wardlaws their lifelong "spiritual home."

In the years after Tripp Lake, the artist and his family spent summers in rental cottages or hotels at the shore in Ogunquit. Without a studio to work in, Wardlaw turned to photography to record his impressions, amassing "an incredible collection of photographs and slides as reference materials." Because his work is primarily based on memory and invention, the lack of a Maine studio did not hinder the development of his work. Rather, the time in Maine was spent in direct observation, storing visual memories of the physical and spiritual qualities of nature and place.

The sea (with its potent metaphorical references) became a strong source of inspiration, even if it did not appear as a visual motif until the Shore Themes paintings of the late 1990s. In an essay on his Maine work, published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 2005, the artist writes:

*The sea communicates its message of spiritual awareness in a language whose comprehension seems to transcend the differences of culture and belief that ordinarily divide the diverse peoples of the earth. It is the phenomenon of this common response that I find very compelling.*⁴⁰

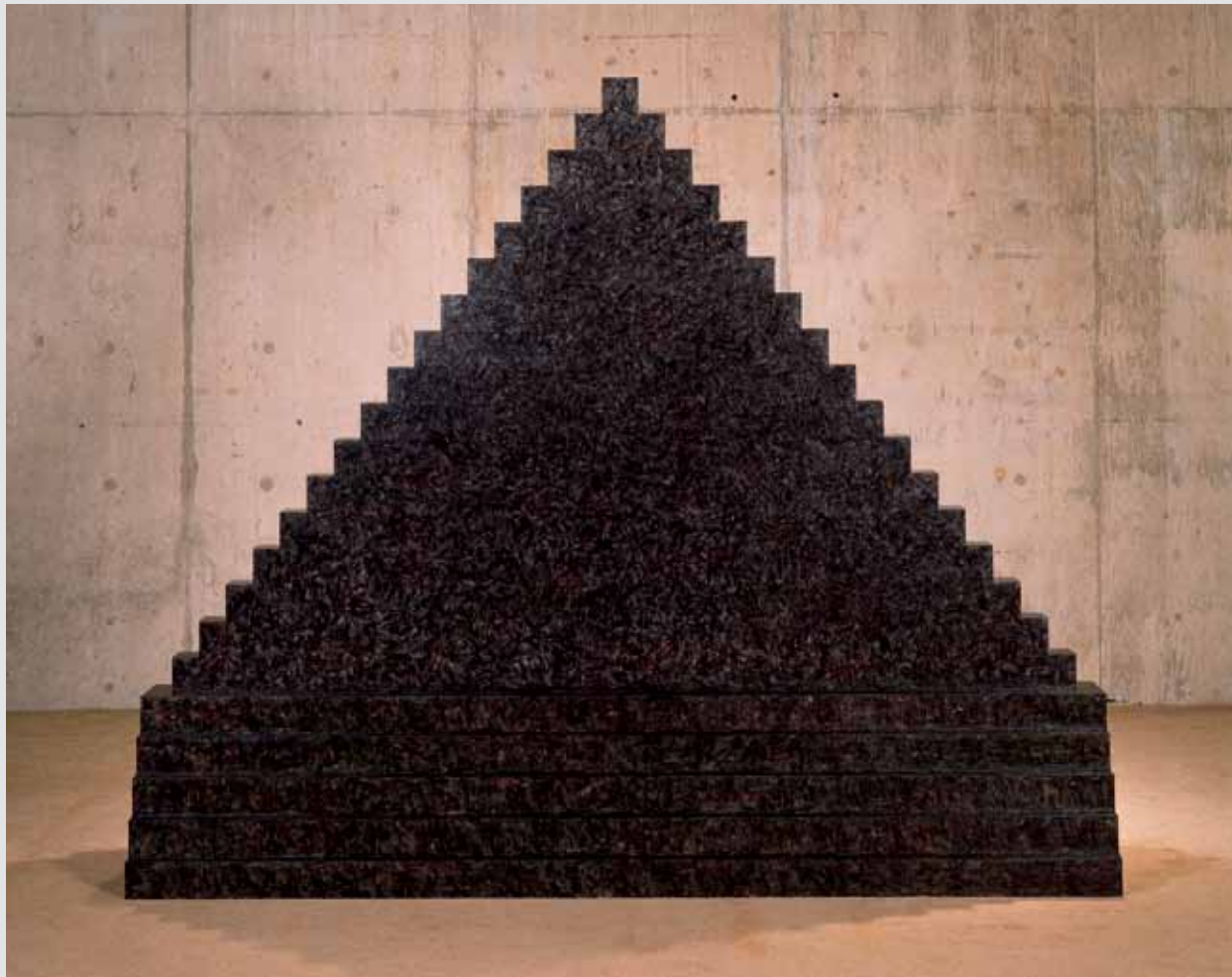
Creating an artistic language that bridges differences has been a leitmotif of Wardlaw's aesthetic approach. Throughout his long career, he has always sought to go beyond perceived boundaries, whether between abstraction and representation, painting and sculpture, fine art and craft, or the physical and spiritual realms. Grappling with the dualities of reason and intuition, the known and the unknowable, the constructed and the organic, are central themes of his art.

The Shore Themes paintings, and the subsequent series of Maine works—*Cycles: Time-Light-Life*, *Shore Visits*, *Windows I and II*, and the most recent group, *Installations at the Shore*—continue the artist's sensitive and intelligent investigations into the nature of art and its ability to communicate across time and culture. Deriving from concrete perceptions first observed in nature, then stored and filtered through the artist's memory, the abstracted imagery of Wardlaw's Maine paintings reflects a profound awareness of the spiritual and metaphysical properties of the sentient world.

When he began the Shore Themes paintings in the late 1990s, Wardlaw acknowledged that he was entering a crowded artistic arena. "Shore and marine paintings have a long tradition, especially in Maine," he writes. "I would like to think, and actually do believe, that my



Morning Dazzle, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 50.75 inches



Warning Signs, 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum, 88 x 106 x 24 inches

“No one can say that George Wardlaw is a one-theme artist. Unlike less venturesome colleagues, content to exploit a signature idea or two, Wardlaw’s aesthetic appetite seems unbounded. His passionate exploration of modes and expressions has taken him in practice from jewelry-making to painting to monumental sculpture; in subject matter from lofty religion to humble apples to the rugged coast of Maine. He has aptly described his art as ‘a kind of collage...of different places, times, experience, materials.’”

— Grace Glueck

