

ART & DESIGN

John Wesley: 'Important Works From 1961 to 1966'

By KEN JOHNSON MAY 28, 2015

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The cartoon-based paintings and sculptures that [John Wesley](#) produced at the start of his career in the 1960s were widely seen as examples of Pop Art. But the works had a poetic psychology unlike those of most other Pop stylists. An apposite piece in this wonderful [show](#) is a table from 1965 with the profiles of Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant painted on its round top and pictures of a standing, sexy woman on each side of its square base. The two parts appear unrelated, but considering that Mr. Wesley was then in the middle years of a marriage to the painter Jo Baer that he once called “a disaster,” a play between civil war and union of the sexes comes to mind.

While the feeling that Mr. Wesley’s images have personal meanings is part of their beguiling effect, biographical information isn’t necessary. “The Aviator’s Daughters” (1963) has a pair of young women in white dresses framed by a border pattern of silhouetted old biplanes. You don’t know who the young women or their father are, but the counterpoint of masculine and feminine is dreamily evocative. Later paintings are especially strange. In “Camel” (1966), a horse-headed man and a double-humped camel seem to be involved in a kinky sexual activity.

An untitled black-ink drawing from 1963 juxtaposing a white rabbit and the small figure of a girl falling within a white circle may be a key to Mr. Wesley’s art. He descended psychic rabbit holes and came back up with metaphorical marvels.

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“The Aviator’s Daughters” (1963), by John Wesley.
Courtesy of the artist and Collection of John Wesley Foundation

