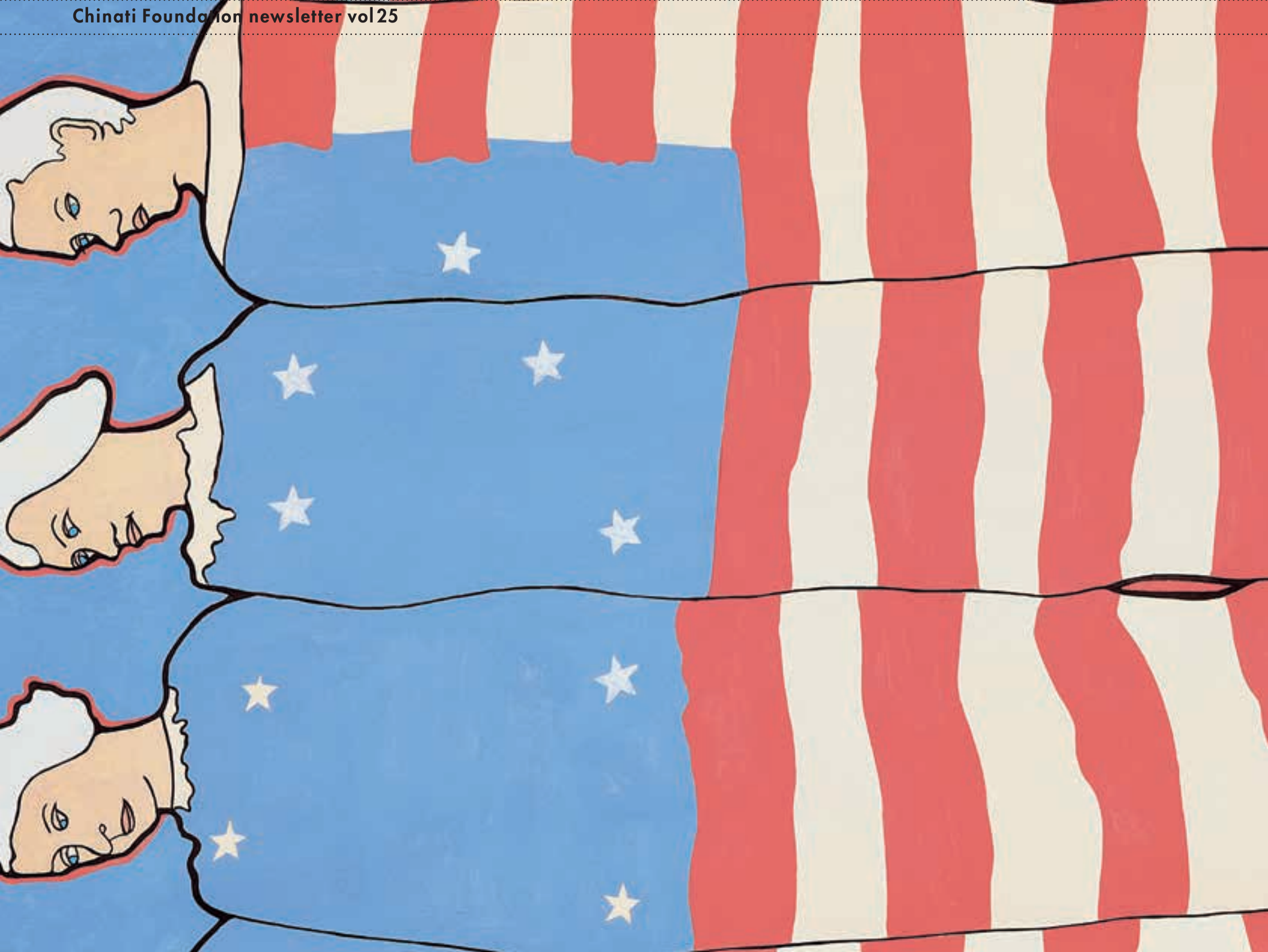

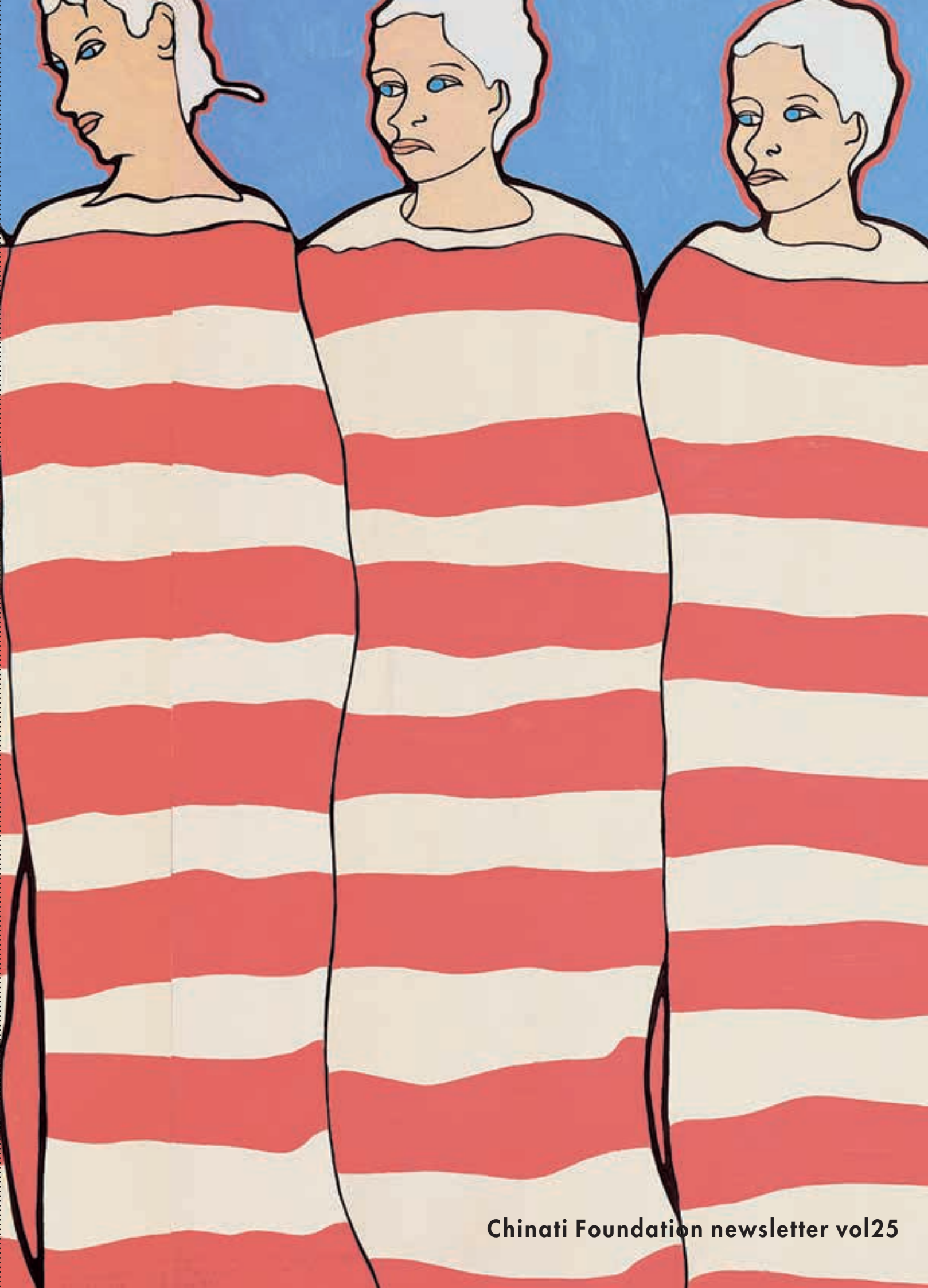

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John Wesley's Umami

The following is an edited and expanded version of a talk given on John Wesley's work by Linda Norden on Saturday, October 12, 2019. The talk was presented at the Marfa High School auditorium as part of the 2019 Chinati Weekend. Norden was introduced by Chinati director Jenny Moore.

Jenny Moore: Hi everyone, thank you for joining us this afternoon. I want to introduce our esteemed speaker, Linda Norden. Linda is a curator, writer, and part-time professor of art history, theory, and criticism currently teaching in Cornell University's Art, Architecture, and Planning program. She has taught in the MFA programs of Hunter College, Yale, Columbia, and the Malmö Art Academy in Sweden. In earlier roles, Norden was hired to help establish the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies—my alma mater—where she taught from 1992 to 1998, and, with Harry Cooper, to establish the department of modern and contemporary art for what was then called Harvard University's Fogg Art Gallery. She curated contemporary art at the Harvard Art Museum between 1998 and 2006, where her program included a John Wesley exhibition organized with the artist entitled *Love's Lust*, and the production of Pierre Huyghe's puppet opera allegory *This is Not a Time for Dreaming*. Between 2008 and 2010 Linda directed the City University of New York Graduate Center James Gallery, and she served as commissioner of the U.S. Pavilion for the 2005 Venice Biennale, where with Donna De Salvo she organized Ed Ruscha's project *Course of Empire*. Please join me in a warm welcome for the amazing Linda Norden.

Linda Norden: Thank you, Jenny, for the invitation to speak on Wesley and at Chinati, and thank you all for seating yourself in a dark auditorium on a beautiful day with so much great art out *there*. I do love that we're in this high school auditorium. If I can convey any of the inexhaustible delight I've taken from John Wesley's art over the years, and the surprise of experiencing Wesley here in Marfa, on Donald Judd's minimalist oasis, I will feel less guilty about stealing an hour-plus of your weekend.

A few more thank you's to start: Aside from the incomparable Jenny Moore, I owe a huge thank you to the unfailingly informed, smart and wonderfully warm Chinati staff for their many helps these past few days. Concerning Wesley, a big thank you to Jessica Fredericks and Andy Freiser, who have arguably done more than anyone other than Judd to support and share Wesley's work in countless, inspired gallery presentations from the nineties forward, and through their extensive contributions to two major Wesley retrospectives and catalogues at MoMA PS1 in 2000, curated by Alana Heiss, and at the Prada Foundation in Venice in 2007, curated by Germano Celant.* I owe my deepest Wesley thanks, though, to my dear friend, the artist Bill Barrette, onetime student and longtime friend, studio partner and chronicler of Wesley. It was through Bill that I first met Wesley, back in 1984, having let on how much the work intrigued and delighted me.

I reviewed the Prada retrospective I mentioned for *Artforum* magazine, and one of the things I noted there was my surprise at seeing Wesley, outside the show, thronged by spectators. I'm reading it here, because an important tack to my talk, today, is the relationship between Wesley and Judd, and the role played by Judd in championing an artist treated as an outsider for most of his career. "John Wesley must measure well over six feet," I began. "Yet at the opening of [Celant's] monumental retrospective...in the vast Venetian halls of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Wesley's imposing silhouette was obscured by hundreds of well-wishers. This was not a typical event for an artist long treated as an outsider, an exception to all the art world's rules. Indeed, ever since 1963, when Donald Judd threw up his hands in happy despair and proclaimed Wesley's art 'interesting' but essentially uncategorizable—'what some bumpkin made of appearances for some unartistic reason'—the critics drawn to his art have labored to fill in the blanks, taking stabs at descriptive language that might account for the discomfiting contents of Wesley's paintings." Myself included. "His art," I wrote, "is hilarious and heartbreaking, looks like nothing else out there, stings like sex, and lingers like a messy, lovable mutt."

A brief aside, here, concerning my title and by way of set-up. I was trying to characterize Wesley's hugely likable demeanor as well as an impossible-to-pin-down obliqueness, in both the koan of a man, and in his art, that is at once unnerving but which never fails to delight. I was inspired here by two observations made by Hannah Green, Wesley's wife and soul mate from 1970, when they met, until her death in 1996, and a novelist with an almost cult following, who devoted a great deal of her writerly attention to this same task: "Jack never does anything obvious," she observed. "His ideas come as the mind turns (like a globe) into darkness. His mysterious and varied iconography must have a certain magic, a certain mystery for himself as well." Green was writing in 1973, when Wesley was first exploring the Dagwood Bumstead cartoon character with whom he later became much identified, and she was trying to describe a quality of life he captured in his art that is also a quality of darkness or death, which she just couldn't put her finger on. Despite his preoccupation with this singularly American cartoon at the time, she thought perhaps that "the elegant obliqueness of the conceptual angles" in his art seemed Asian. Hence my invocation of the indescribable "deliciousness" attached to the Japanese word "umami."

So—here's Mr. Umami himself: Here's Jack! [fig. 1] *Molto bello*, in the words of my late great sister. Tall, strikingly handsome, well mannered, charming, witty, and "a natural raconteur," in the words of Barrette."Wesley," adds Barrette, "was possessed of a highly original intelligence which could be quite disarming when you first met him, not unlike his paintings."

My talk today will toggle between biography, exploration of Wesley's ever-uncanny form-context propositions, and a little foray into some less familiar responses to the work. Toward this end, I've assembled a lot of pictures. The constants

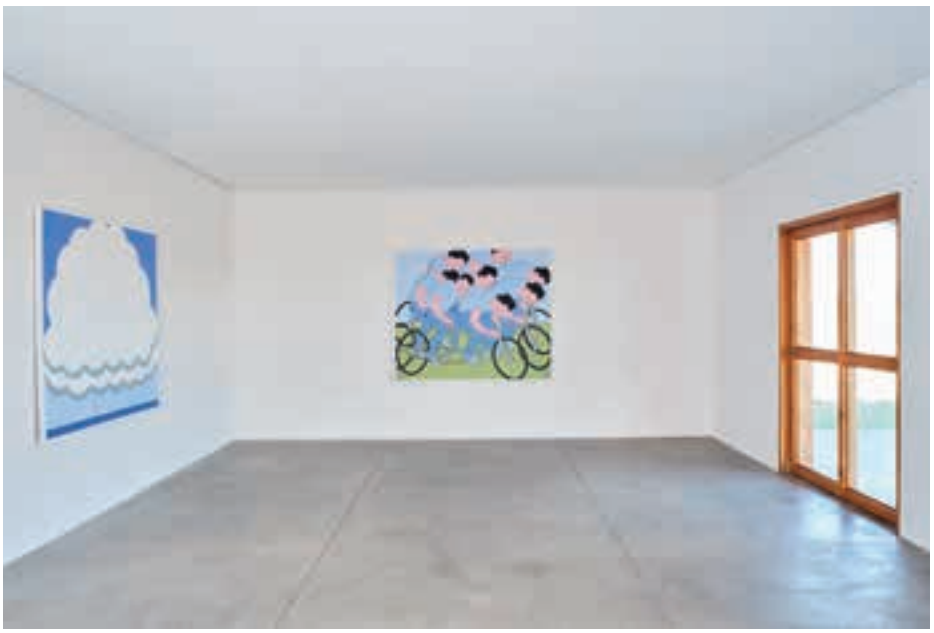
* And major thanks are due, of course, to both Alana Heiss and Germano, themselves—especially to Germano, who has since died of Covid-19, both for his elegant and extensive presentation of Wesley's work in the vast Prada/Fondazione Giorgio Cini space, and even more, for the near-encyclopedic gathering of essays, sources, documents, detailed chronology, and extensive reproductions of imagery he orchestrated by way of catalogue for the exhibition. It has become the go-to source for most things Wesley.—*LN, July 2020*

UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ALL WORKS ILLUSTRATED IN THIS ESSAY ARE BY JOHN WESLEY.

1. JOHN WESLEY.

in Wesley's art, above all, his narrow palette and the mix of flat surfaces and object quality in his early work, and ubiquitous black outlining and cartoon-charged drawing style later on, can make you miss his extremely precise calculations of scale and contour and line-quality; of gesture and pose and gaze; and of color. The range Wesley finds in baby blue and pink will make you jettison any auto-assignment of gender to those hues. But the question I am most occupied with today, thinking about Wesley here in Marfa, at Chinati, is the unavoidable question raised by trying to think about Wesley and Judd in the same breath. What did Judd value in Wesley's art? [figs. 2-6] So I will begin where I think Judd began with Wesley, by looking at the work showed in 1963, at his first one-person New York show, and a few words on the early years of Wesley's friendship with first Dan Flavin and with Judd. I'll follow this with a brief characterization of Wesley's middle chapter, in which he takes on his Bumstead alter ego, and then share some thoughts on the more overtly arousing and provocative later work, which owes a lot to both hard news photography and to print magazine ads, mostly of somewhat stereotypically beautiful, erotically charged images of women. Wesley is forever updating and reconfiguring his reception to very current events through a sensibility that often mistakenly gets read as old-timey. I'm especially interested in that idiosyncratic, cognitive dissonance. More crucially, I think, Wesley is very much an artist dependent on found sources for both content and contour. I personally believe that, especially in his later work, pretty much everything gets figured out for Wesley in the tight relationship he sets up between image selection and his tracing of key contours. But even in the stiffer, more heraldic early work shown in his first show, and in all the work to follow, Wesley's selection of material and his careful transposition of a given source image play a crucial part in the impact of the work. The affect of Wesley's painting owes as much to his drawing, in this sense, as to his incredibly precise, seemingly stringent palette. Look long enough at a given Wesley, or juxtapose two works seemingly identical in their pink, blue, and cream pigments and you'll be astonished to see the range of tone and hue Wesley puts into play. Ditto the facture of his brushwork: The surprise in close viewing of the actual paintings is the complexity and control Wesley wields over every formal decision on the surface.

In that same *Artforum* review, I wrote that Wesley "might well be described as the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of minimalism, a not-quite-Pop, or, in Judd's words, 'retro-Pop,' faux-primitive Californian who appeared on the New York scene fully formed circa 1960. His outrageous rethinking of a hard-edged, abstract, surreal, figurative painting intrigued and baffled even his closest colleagues—Judd, for one—just as the French



3. INSTALLATION VIEW, JOHN WESLEY GALLERY, CHINATI FOUNDATION, MARFA, TEXAS.

2. EXTERIOR VIEW, DONALD JUDD'S 100 WORKS IN MILL ALUMINUM, 1982-86. CHINATI FOUNDATION, MARFA, TEXAS.

4. EXTERIOR VIEW, JOHN WESLEY GALLERY.

postman-turned-artist, le Douanier, piqued the interest of his friends Picasso and Braque." I was cribbing again from Hannah Green."You're both primitives," Green had said, comparing Wesley to Rousseau. "We're both surrealists," corrected Wesley. (Again, not a stylistic mindset one would imagine Judd responding to, and yet he speaks to a surreal effect in his first writing on Wesley.) A more seemingly mundane Wesley quip, years later, comes closer: "I could deliver the mail. I know the names of all the dogs." He was referring to the dogs in the tiny French provincial town Conques, where he and Hannah spent many months each year while Hannah was researching a novel on the martyrdom of the twelve-year-old St. Foy, the town's patron saint, and her history. (When Green died after a long illness, in 1996, without finishing her careful project, Wesley published the novel, *Little Saint,* posthumously.)

Wesley *was* a postman, for about a year in 1961, until the fun job became drudgery. He was also a welder for Lockheed in 1952, and then more importantly, or more influentially, a draftsman for the Northrop Aircraft Corporation in 1953, which is when he began to paint and think of himself as an artist. He was born in 1928, so he's twenty-five at that point, which he thinks is late to start as an artist. He also never thought he could draw. But the Northrop job entailed translating blueprints for the aircraft craftspeople who couldn't read blueprints—and that skill informed the primary means through which Wesley's art got made and still does. "I was never good at drawing," he said. And yet the quality of his line over the years, and his tracing of carefully culled source images, as I've already said, was fundamental. Wesley's hand-traced drawings infused the source images with his editorial read on what he was looking at. Obliquely, I characterized the stylistic quality that resulted as "Passive-Expressive" in a brochure essay I wrote to accompany the exhibition *Love's Lust,* which I curated for the Harvard Art Museums in 2001. And the title I gave the exhibition proper spoke to my preoccupation with Wesley's ability to distinguish love from lust, which seemed a crucial distinction to me. Both figure large in Wesley's art, as does his recognition of the difference between underscoring the expressivity of a source image, Wesley's "raw material," and making any of the grand truth claims of the expressionism that Judd so vehemently jettisoned. Which brings me back to the relationship between Wesley and Judd. It's by no means a given that Donald Judd's Chinati, his creation of a pilgrimage site, to preserve and present to the public permanent, large-scale installations of art, would extend to the sui generis, hilarious, profoundly dissembling pictorial art of John Wesley. Yet I think Judd may have intuitively appreciated Wesley's ability to tap the political, erotic, and emotional affect of his source material directly, through a formal abstraction that did not

5. INSTALLATION VIEW, JOHN WESLEY GALLERY.

6. INSTALLATION VIEW, JOHN WESLEY GALLERY.

7. *POST OFFICE BADGE*, 1963.

supplant the expressivity of his imagery with any didactic or Expressionist-order truth claim. About which, more below.

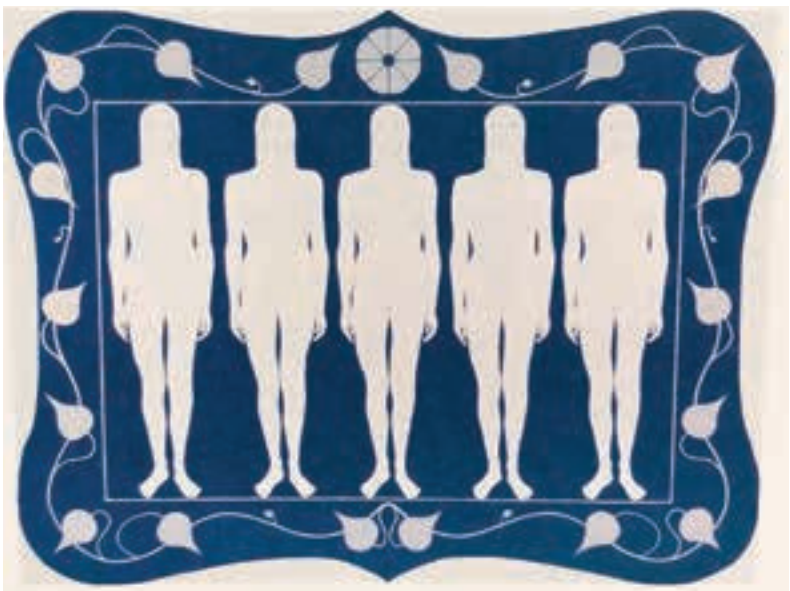
Some bio, again:

Wesley met Dan Flavin first, introduced by a mutual friend, and Judd may well have been pointed to Wesley's show by Flavin. (Wesley's description of his early encounter with Flavin is worth mentioning for its casualness and humor. Flavin, he said, was easy to find, always at exhibitions, and he and his wife Sonia had a car but didn't know how to drive, which gave Wesley a role in their lives.) Flavin, like Judd, was a reader of critical theory and philosophy. Wesley and Judd didn't talk about art much. Wesley said that Judd had *those* kinds of conversations with Flavin. Wesley was a reader of fiction, the funnies, and the news in all its pictured and printed manifestations, and he loved the movies, remembering everything he saw right down to a tellingly framed shot. But the three artists were drinking buddies, and Judd and Wesley became deep, forever friends and shared a great deal of downtime and travel and art together.

And Judd remained committed to Wesley as a friend and artist until his death in 1994. A thirty-five-year friendship.

Judd, as most of you know, was a prolific, much-read New York critic during those early years: His 1963 review of Wesley's first one-person show, at the Robert Elkon Gallery in New York, would have meant something at the time, the more so because the years between 1962 and 1964 were the years during which Judd was formulating the thinking that culminated in his seminal essay "Specific Objects." Nothing about Wesley's early, oddball, emblematic, figurative paintings on wood and canvas would appear to call out to Judd. So it's not a surprise that Judd's review reads as a struggle. Judd had a way of doing his thinking in his writing, and his review of Wesley is no exception. He struggled to put his finger on why he was finding Wesley's art of interest, and of value. What's more of a surprise is that Judd lands on the declaration that Wesley's paintings are "good" after detailing each of his reservations—e.g., about Wesley's penchant, at the time, for what Judd read as a nostalgic, old-fashioned aesthetic. (Aside: But Judd's catholicness, in his surprisingly open reception as a critic, is often overlooked. I firmly believe it's part of what makes his ardent commitment to the dictates of his own thinking about materials, expressivity, making, and presentation so confident, so compelling—and so radical. The years Judd spent looking broadly, but hyper closely, at the range of art he reviewed as a critic, I think, deeply informs his more ideological formulations about art and complicates ideas that can seem reductive if viewed only as manifesto.)

This is what Judd saw in 1963 at the Robert Elkon Gallery, which is where Wesley showed for twenty-some years, until Elkon died, and to whom Wesley was introduced by Leo Castelli. You can appreciate how, seeing these works in 1963—think Warhol and Lichtenstein, think of not the relationship to content but the aesthetic and the old-timeyness of it—they would come as a surprise, and yet didn't play for a lot of people. This is *Post Office Badge,* 1963 [fig. 7]. *Post Office Badge* is 72 by 72 inches—very large!—and doesn't exist anymore. But at the time, he has said, he was very proud of the fact that it was a badge that had his own number, and that it "kind of harked back to the Pony Express"—proud, that is, that "the history was in the image." "My images aren't paintings," he noted, "they're banners, badges, objects like



8. *SIX MAIDENS*, 1962.

9. *TEA TRAY WITH MAIDENS*, 1962.

10. GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE THREE INDIANS, 1963.

11. CHEEP!, 1962.

that," something Judd might have appreciated. "And they're insistently flat. I want them as flat as possible." *Post Office Badge* is also a little bit of an homage to Jasper Johns, whom Wesley, like many other young artists at the time, has said he thought was "the best of the bunch out there."

Next we have *Six Maidens* from 1962—there's a version of this in the installation right now that Wesley does later, when he's in Marfa—and beside it is *Tea Tray with Maidens,* also from 1962 [figs. 8, 9], which is not just an object; it's a domestic object. He finds flat things, things that evoke a sense of domestic space, and like most Pop artists, he's working from things that are meant to be familiar, but that's about as far as the Pop connection goes. What happens between the tea tray and *Six Maidens* really interests me, because the hair starts to look like a caricature of the way Wesley draws what's clearly meant as a reference to stereotypical renderings of Native American hair. I'm not saying this in a projective, racist way, I hope. I'm saying it because there's another image in the show called *George Washington and the Three Indians* [fig. 10] in which Wesley makes one of his many political comments in juxtaposing the equivalent heads—putting G.W.'s coifed wig head to head with his braided pastiches of Indian do's. The Indians don't have names, they're given as types; but so is George Washington. The reason I'm fixing on the hair is that Wesley starts quite early on to home in on things that are types or stereotypes, which he personalizes in narrative ways that have to do with how the figures are juxtaposed in his careful compositions—how they touch, how they relate to the frame. The images repeat, not only within a single painting, but from painting to painting, much as certain emblems—in terms of content, the identical repeats, but they come from something specific. They're hybrids, because he puts them together like a Mr. Potato Head, putting together the hair from the three Indians and the profile of the maiden on the tray. Repetition is huge in his work—and it works in unexpected ways. He says at the very beginning: "Repetition makes things funny. You say something four times and it makes you laugh. You say 'Richard Nixon' forty times and you indict him."

But back to Judd on Wesley, circa 1963.

Here's Judd talking about *Cheep!,* 1962, which is maybe the best image in that first show [fig. 11]. "Things start to happen, where there's an action and the action is surreal—you can't tell if the momma and poppa birds are coming or going, but there are a lot of hungry mouths there and they're very interesting forms." He adds: "If Pop Art is defined as the apparent duplication of a picture or pattern popularly used, Wesley's paintings are Pop Art. But," he continues:

> Wesley's paintings do not resemble Lichtenstein's, or anyone else's. The number of the paintings, the time necessary to paint them, makes it unlikely that the method was taken from Lichtenstein. Wesley's paintings, if they are Pop Art, are retroactive pop. Most of the paintings are like, or copies of, the pictures and patterns of blue and white china. Most of the forms are nineteenth century. The forms selected, the shapes to which they are unobtrusively altered, the order used and the small details are humorous and goofy. This becomes a cool, psychological oddness. A blue escutcheon fills *Cheep!*. This blue, which is always the same, is slighter bluer and darker than cerulean. At the top there are two identical birds statant, nearly white silhouettes, each holding a worm like a banner. Their eyes are just double circles. They are the parents of the fifteen smaller birds in the nest or bowl at the bottom. Their eyes are just empty rings, like Orphan Annie's. Together they make a complicated white silhouette inflamed. There are two rows of them, all identical, all with their bills wide open.

He goes on for two more columns:

> The blank eyes are also an instance"—of something, though he doesn't say what. "Two of the paintings have colored flowers or vines circling the pictures, one of which is the *Radcliffe Tennis Team*....All of Wesley's paintings are well done. The only objection is theoretical, not critical. Wesley's method, and Lichtenstein's, is somewhat the same as that of traditional painting; the form is relatively hidden.

"Form being hidden" is arguable, and I'm going to try to argue it. But here's the line from the review that gets most frequently quoted:

> The guise here is not appearances though, but what some bumpkin made of appearances for some unartistic reason. This is a big difference and is interesting—it is sort of a meta-representation—but (and this unreasonably denies the paintings as they are) the curious quality of Wesley's work would be better unconcealed, unadjusted and unscaled to anything else.

OK, that's sort of stage one. They become friends for the duration, and Wesley writes very fondly of his interest in Judd and Flavin. In 1981, right as Judd is staking out Chinati, he invites Wesley and Hannah to Marfa to stay in the Walker House in town. Wesley arrived with Hannah that year. He came back and worked here again in 1982–83, returning in '84, '87, '89, and in 1990 they did a show. Asked later on, in an interview, about his visit to Marfa with Hannah in 1981, when they stayed in the Walker House, and why he decided to paint a few works there, the artist answered, 'It was to fulfill an agreement with Don to provide him with these pictures he wanted. I was supposed to do this work for him and he said, come here and do it. I don't think that he had finalized or exactly put together what he wanted to do with it, but he did want them. He wasn't sure what they were going to be and neither was I. I wanted to come back as much as possible. I loved the idea of working there and having the work remain there suited me well." And then Hannah goes on to describe the pleasure of being there, and the particular pleasure she took in seeing the Wesley paintings from the vantage of their house which was situated across from the local Methodist church, named for "the other John Wesley." Between two Wesleys, as it were. A very Wesley-esque repetition.

12. SONNABEND GALLERY INSTALLATION VIEW PHOTO, 1964.

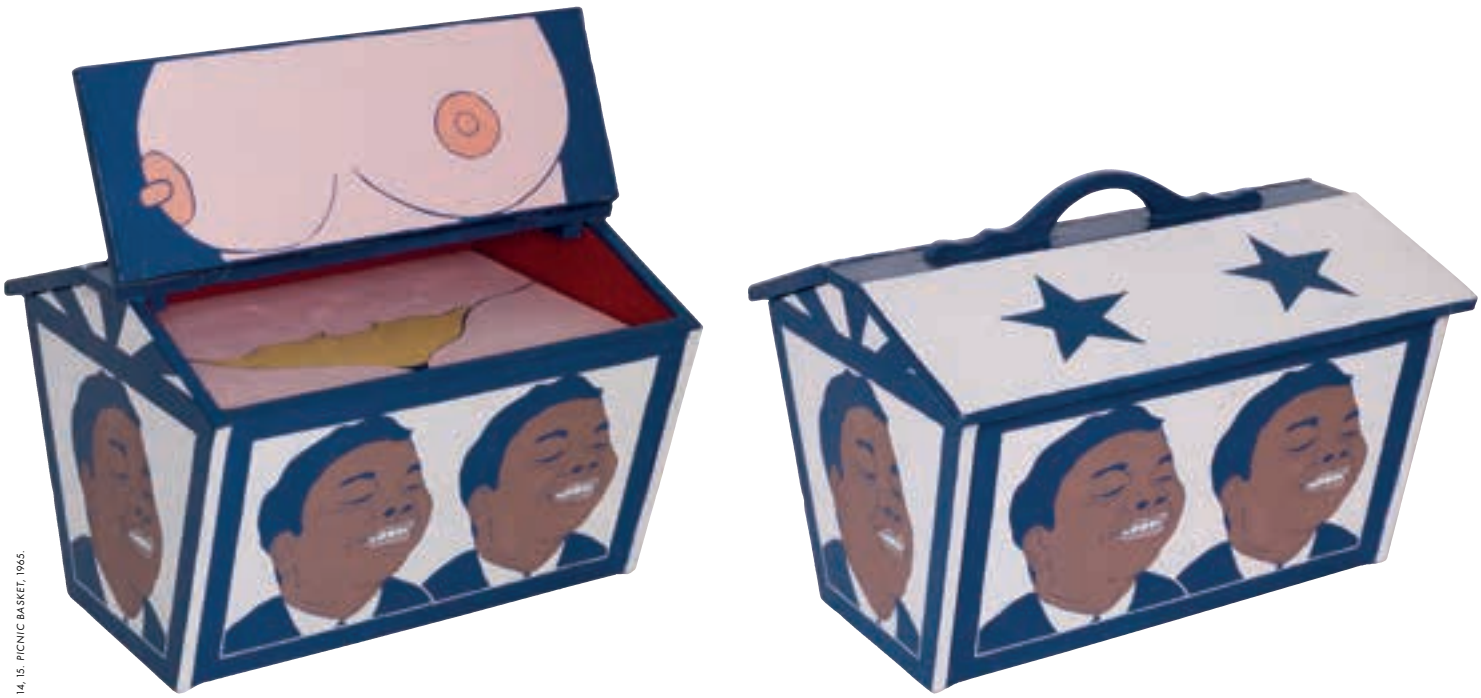
This is an installation in the Sonnabend Gallery in 1964 [fig. 12]. You can see Johns's *Flag on Orange,* a Wesley, one of Warhol's "Disaster" paintings, and a George Segal. The reason I put it up is because the show was called *Pop Art: New Realism,* and I think "New Realism" does a little more justice to the European interest in a new relationship—not in the style of New Realism, but as something that feels as emotionally real and psychologically real as it is formally real, physically real, and kinesthetically real. I also wanted to show this because—just to give an iconic Warhol example [fig. 13]—repetition does not necessarily make things funny. This is a really dark painting that deals with Marilyn just dead, which is the reason Warhol chose the image. And in Wesley's own images, the presence of death is always lurking. (I'm going to come back to this, too.) But he has an incredible sense of humor—"make it funny," he said, reminding of repetition's double edge. So here is something very *un*funny that he makes very funny, *Picnic Basket,* from 1965 [figs. 14, 15]. This is based on a local politician, I think, a figure in the newspaper, a black face that he chooses for caricatural reasons—not to embrace the caricature, but to call it into question. And then, inside the picnic basket is a white naked lady. It's charged on so many levels. It's a piece where you want to say "Yeah" and not ask too many questions—not because if you ask the questions you get answers you don't want, but because Wesley is so good at making you live with those questions.

This is *Turkeys* from the same year [fig. 16]. Repeated turkeys."Turkeys," says Wesley, "are the dumbest animals there are. They are so dumb, domestic turkeys, that if it starts to rain they look up in curiosity and the rain will fill their lungs and drown them. You can't leave turkeys out in the rain." The next year you see the repetition again.

It's often unremarked how much other art influences Wesley. He takes ideas as he can use them, and this work, *Brides* from 1966 [fig. 17], has the repeated female bodies, but he uses the Italian Renaissance tradition of the predella—a structural form that served kind of as the subtext to, or commentary on, the larger painting it sat below—to do all kinds of naughty stuff with this flower that looks like it might inseminate *all* of the brides, not just one of them. He plays with dark and light, unconscious and conscious—so many things he does with these formal conventions, and yes, a lot of them are traditional. He's as catholic in his way as Judd is in the criticism Judd writes. Wesley looks at everything he can use. (I think there's a way he also sees this as an American habit, pre-postmodernist theorizing.)

Here's another Wesley way to think about birds. It's called—and the titles always do a ton of work—*Bird Act,* 1967 [fig. 18]. The turkeys that I showed before introduce a cast of animal characters and the interaction and strange relationships that Wesley stages to flesh out not just the *human* psyche, but to treat animals as another kind of

13. ANDY WARHOL, *MARILYN DIPTYCH,* 1962. TATE, LONDON.

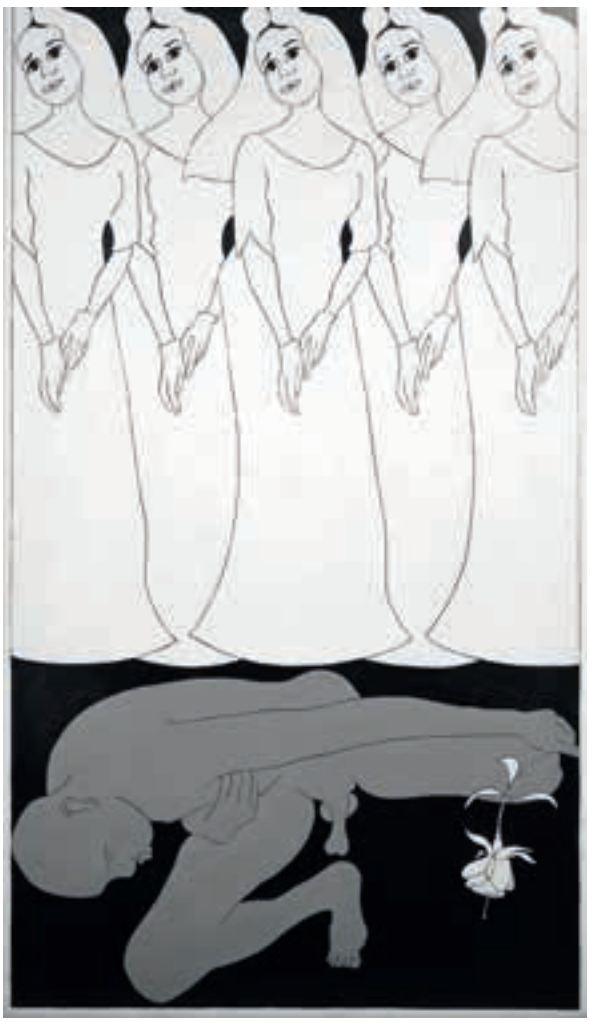


14, 15. *PICNIC BASKET,* 1965.

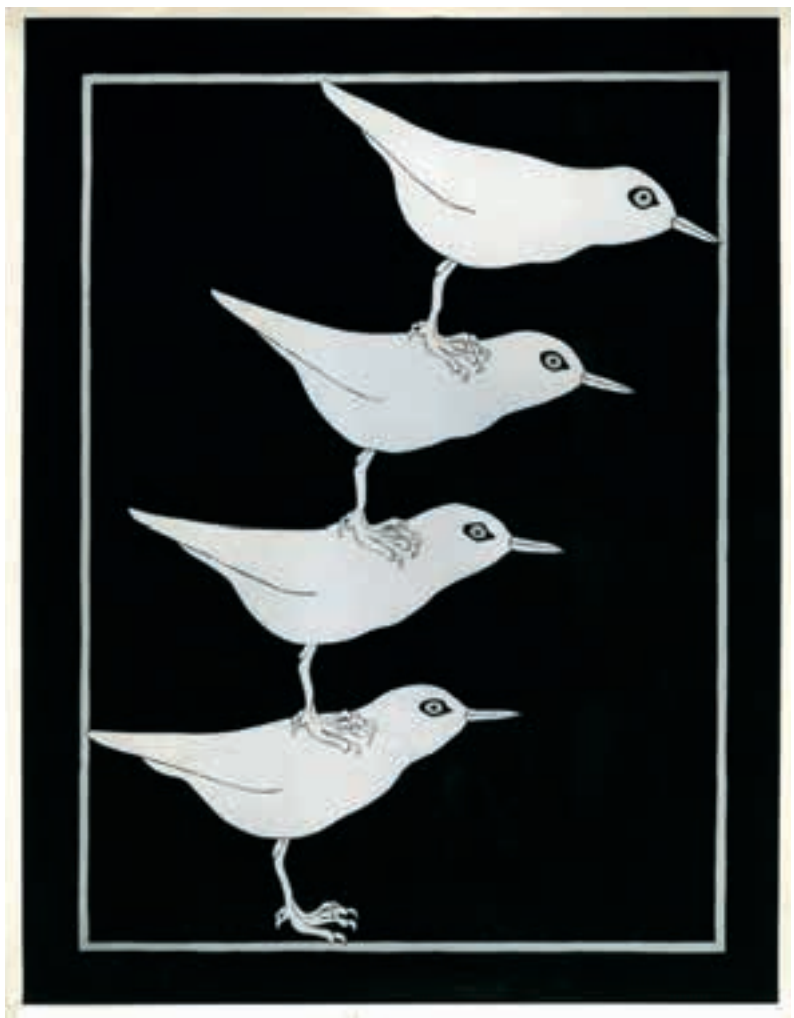
intelligence and both another object of human desire and another order of creaturely desire. Sex, I guess I am trying to suggest, related to love and lust, and also to birth, life, and death, is a big part of what Wesley explores from the beginning. But this juxtaposition of the predella, the image below, and the image above, where you have different characters that may or may not be in the same real plane, that might be projective like a speech bubble in a comic, he uses to terrific effect.

I haven't said anything about framing yet. That tea tray was one idea of the frame. The frame is always an integral part of the image, and for me it's one of the many invented and deployed tricks of his trade, which also heightens the sense of *touch*. This—meaning the sixties in NYC—is a period of incredible attention to visual imagery, and if you're going to think about Pop or Op Art, most people think of them as *visual* culture, but Wesley introduces touch right away. He also introduces a sense of *breathing*, so you can feel temperature in a Wesley painting and life and fear, or anxiety, palpably. You can see it even in this kind of old-timey, limited, seemingly flat, uninflected palette (though it's much less uninflected, as I've said, when you see it live)—the color contrast, the difference between the flesh color of the turkeys (which aren't really supposed to be flesh-colored!) and the pale pink of the woman, and the white of the bear. You have the sense that his breath in her ear might be very hot, and you can feel the way his fingers touch, the pressure of a hand, or a paw, on the skin. Wesley can draw a lot better than he thinks he can, even if these are from a source. (Thinking, now, that this introduction of breathing, as sound, also of the more haptic qualities of touch and temperature, owes something to Wesley's love of cinema. The way a frame in a movie bespeaks so much more than sound and image.)

16. *TURKEYS*, 1965.



17. *BRIDES*, 1966.



18. *BIRD ACT*, 1967.

19. CADDY, 1966.

The next images get even more ratcheted up (although I don't know if you can get more ratcheted up than that picnic basket). This is *Caddy* from 1966 [fig. 19], and—I don't know; the picture is worth a *lot* of my words—you see the contrast in *scale,* the projection of *black, primitive, animal, gorilla, monkey*—whatever awful caricatural thing you want to throw out there—he just *goes* to that place, and then the hilariously serious expression on the golfer's face, the tiny eyes and brows, the intensity with which his feet are positioned carefully, and then all those balls in the air.

And here is *Camel* from the same year, which takes things to yet another level [fig. 20]. *Camel* comes up in a piece of criticism I'm going to refer to later in the talk, by the poet Wayne Koestenbaum, who deals with what he wants to call obscenity in Wesley's work. He means it in a positive way, in praise of Wesley's work, and he opens it up to a lot of different characteristics in Wesley's art.

Kiss My Helmet, from 1968 [fig. 21], introduces the mother-child relationship, not just incest, but all the kinds of fears a little boy might have. As Koestenbaum and others have suggested, there's an identification with a kind of child sensibility

20. CAMEL, 1966.

in Wesley that you can read as the heightened sensibility that a kid has, the kind of truth that you have at that age, the kind of one-shot, blessed ignorance of childhood, which, in *not* knowing so much, makes you *correct* what you respond to or feel. These politically charged paintings, from the very politically charged period of the late sixties, point to the double-edged sword Wesley begins to hone early on, a coupling of personal, sexual vulnerability with a volatile mix of culturally and politically charged subjects. He builds here on his earlier attention to what might be described as the outlines and shape of stereotypes, and the way stereotypes both compete with and compound our deepest, most subjective desires. One of Wesley's great gifts to this existential phenomenon was his readiness to read sex as both aggressive and vulnerable. (Equally important, of course, was his profound sense of humor; his capacity to find form for the deep pathos of his and our dilemmas.) It's difficult to appreciate from the vantage of 2019 [2020] just how exceptional Wesley was in this readiness to picture the male sexuality he knew, firsthand, as at once vulnerable, possessed, and rife with judgments, circa 1968. But this recognition is what sparked the curator and critic Amanda Schmidtto organize an exhibition, in the summer of 2019, of five young female painters inspired by Wesley, working in NYC, for whom precisely this readiness to work from sexual vulnerability becomes fundamental.

Wesley's biography accounts for a lot in his life. This is a photo of his first wife, Alice Richter, and daughter, Kristine [fig. 22]. Wesley married Alice Richter in 1947, at the age of nineteen, right out of high school, and had a child in 1953. His second child, Ner, who was named after Wesley's father, was born in 1956. But Wesley's life is driven, at least in part, by the fact that his father died when he was five, and the trauma of his witnessing that death, firsthand. He came home from school and was the first to find his father dead on the floor, in the bathroom, and, as he said, "with his shoes on." That experience underlies everything. Wesley's mother couldn't deal with him and put him in a foster home for a year, then she remarried and took him back, but he never liked his stepfather, so there's not a lot that's positive after the death of his father in 1933—until much later. He clearly had tremendously positive feelings for his father, many of which may have been projected in his absence.

21. KISS MY HELMET, 1968.

Wesley doesn't stay married very long to Alice (I know least about that first marriage). In 1958 he meets the artist Jo Baer through Fred Fellows, an artist that Wesley was sharing a studio with at the time, and they married a year later [fig. 23]. (Wesley married three times and lived with a fourth partner, Patsy Broderick, until she died.) Jo Baer persuaded him to go to New York in 1960, and although Wesley said that the marriage was a disaster, he thanked her in many ways for bringing him to New York, which he never regretted. They also shared, for those of you who know Baer's work from the period, a palette of pink, blue, cream, and black, and an attention to framing. That marriage ended in 1967, and in 1970 Wesley met Hannah Green, to whom he was married, as I've said, until she died in 1996, and whom he clearly loved [fig. 24]. There are many photos in which you can see them very clearly enjoying each other's company. Wesley married Green in 1971, and made his first-ever trip to Europe with her that same year. They stayed in Stuttgart at—this is really wonderful—the Hotel Zeppelin, and if you've seen *Panoply* on view in the Wesley Gallery, here, you'll appreciate the great coup in being able to stay in a place called Hotel Zeppelin.

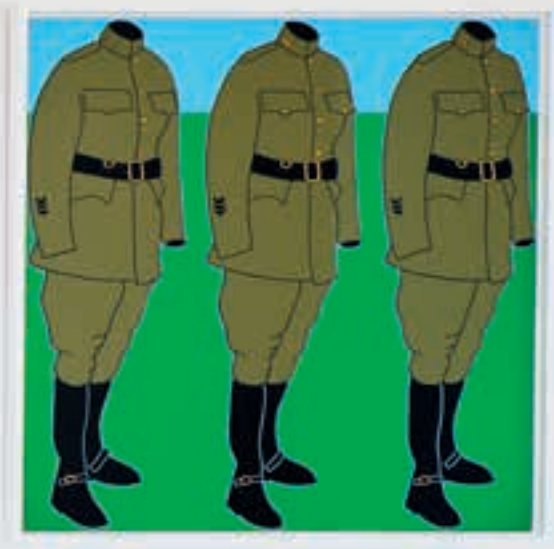
While he went to Europe ostensibly to sign the *Panoply* portfolio, they also traveled. That portfolio is focused on World War I imagery, a time period that Wesley was very preoccupied with, probably because of his missing father [fig. 25]. It's hard to say, but that Americanism was something that Wesley really focused on, but also in terms of a relationship with Europe that was defined for him by the presence of the Olympics in Los Angeles in 1932, which he understood to be the last of the innocent Olympics. What he loved about it was the exoticness, for him, of all these different people from different countries. You'll see at Chinati one of a number of paintings he made of bicyclists in the Tour de France race. In the 1932 Olympics, the cyclists he was drawn to were Italian. He loved the imagery, and he later found a popular book on the Olympics that a lot of families owned. It was

20. JOHN WESLEY, ALICE RICHTER, AND DAUGHTER KRISTINE.

23. JOHN WESLEY AND JO BAER.

24. HANNAH GREEN.

25. INSTALLATION VIEW, JOHN WESLEY GALLERY. ON VIEW: FOUR PRINTS FROM *PANOPLY: EIGHT SILKSCREENS INSPIRED BY THE SPLENDOURS OF THE GREAT WAR*, 1971. L TO R: *THE COMPLEAT FRITZ*, *BALKANS*, *SHOOT HIM, CECIL*, AND *AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES*.



26. HANNAH WITH SHADES, 1998.

produced at the times of the 1932 Olympics, and it contained images that became source material for him, so you'll see a lot of sports people in his art. Another sourcebook that he used, which I'll discuss in a minute, was also focused on American imagery. But again, he was interested in American imagery vis-a-vis Europe, or vis-a-vis Japan, or vis-a-vis China. These were the countries (and the continent) that he was thinking about.

Two years after Green died, in 1998, he made two paintings of her, one of which you'll see in the show here, *Hannah with Shades* [fig. 26]. They're both based on a photograph, and both seem so elegiac to me, made two years after she

27. HANNAH WITHOUT SHADES, 1998.

died. *Hannah without Shades* [fig. 27] was shown at Jessica Fredericks in 1998 which garnered very mixed reviews, one of which, a negative one by artist and critic Peter Plagens, spoke to the fact that Wesley's paintings make you ask not "what's going on?" or "what's it about?" but "why he was motivated to paint it?" The show definitely made you wonder about the artist's biography, but Plagens, I think, was speaking to something larger. Plagens is one of the people who doesn't like Wesley's aesthetic, and he doesn't or can't deal with the content. But there are others, like Ken Johnson, who love the work and couldn't understand its lack of popularity when every painting, to him, was a perfectly conceived and executed event.

This is an image from *The Story of American Pictures* [fig. 28], a very popular, "in every household" kind of book originally published in the '30s, with the kinds of widely circulated, dramatic news images that, in a later iteration—for example, Weegee's photographs—inform Warhol's Disaster paintings. This painting, *Al Capone Flouting the Law* [fig. 29], is based on an image of Capone from the book [fig. 30], and it reminds us of Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men,* with a very different detail—observe the looming hand. The body in the ambulance, on the other hand, is all about the feet, and knowing Wesley's biography,

28. IMAGE FROM THE STORY OF AMERICAN PICTURES.

30. IMAGE OF AL CAPONE FROM THE STORY OF AMERICAN PICTURES.

you can't not think about his father, "dead on the floor with his shoes on."

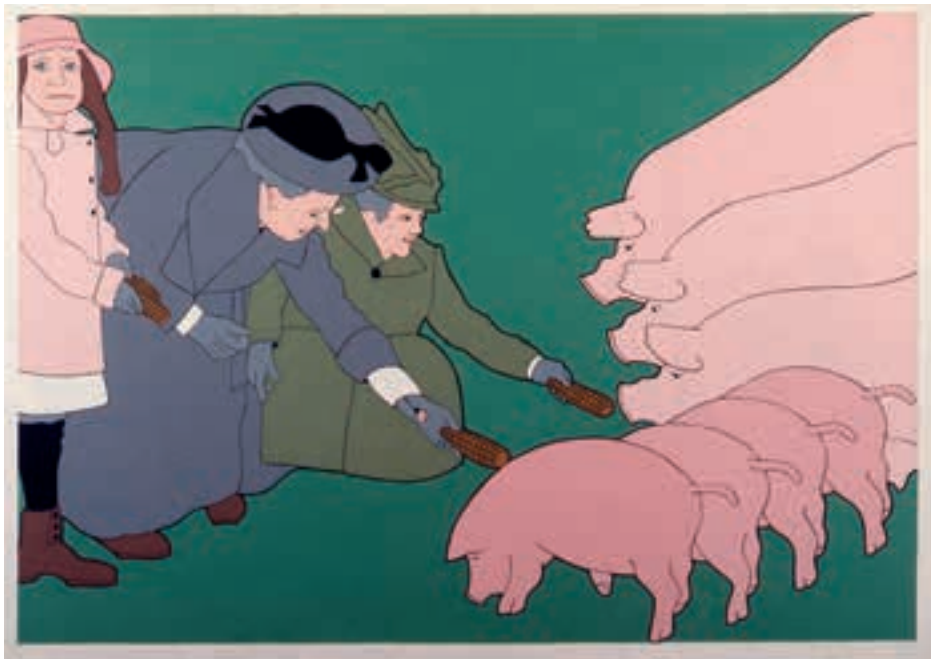
That view of the feet, the painting of a foreshortened image—think of Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ*—looking at a body from the feet, fetishizing feet and hands, became something that Wesley did a lot of. I don't know if I want to use the word "fetishizing," but he obsesses over the holding of hands, the placement of hands and feet—bared more often than shoed on women—but this kind of foreshortened image is also something that recurs, and I confess, I kind of identify with that. [laughter]

This is an image called *Chinese!*—with an exclamation point [fig. 31]. It's a tough image to parse. It's another "repeat image," but the question is, does the repetition make it funny, and if so, what are we laughing at? I think something else is going on here—Wesley's work also portrays his caricaturist's ability to identify the traits that contribute to a stereotype. The image seems as much about Wesley's inability to comprehend what "Chinese" might mean—and his refusal to pretend he does. Having identified a face or faces that might look Chinese to him, it posits his uncertainty as an insistent question. It also introduces or underscores the subjectivity that Wesley puts on the viewer, not just his own, so that he makes *his* picture, his effort, *ours* to parse, and it invariably raises more questions than it answers.

Here's another great image, based on a photo of women at a state fair feeding corncobs to pigs [figs. 32, 33]. The photo is undated, but the painting is called *Cincinnati 1917: Luncheon on the Grass*. I didn't upload Manet's painting, but I figured most of you could picture *Déjeuner sur L'herbe*. He's got the *repoussoir*, and the dressed and undressed figures. I think the source image might be from 1917, which, again, means it's a World War I image—like the *Panoply* images, like so many drawn from *The Story of American Pictures*, which defines an American gestalt through news images beginning with images from the U.S. while Europe was under the campaigns of World War I and round through the Great Depression years here. The date of Wesley's painting is 1972, but what does he emphasize? First, he's picking this incredibly odd image, which is a totally reasonable image for 1917 or an earlier period, when you might go to a state fair with hats and gloves on, or in a suit, and not take your gloves off to feed the pigs. Earlier he makes an image that I want to think came from the same source [fig. 34]. But this one is really strange and it foreshadows his later, more graphically sexual images. The elderly women feeding corncobs to the pigs had a mix of gloved and bare hands, and the oddity of the corncobs as pictured in the source is something not lost on Wesley.

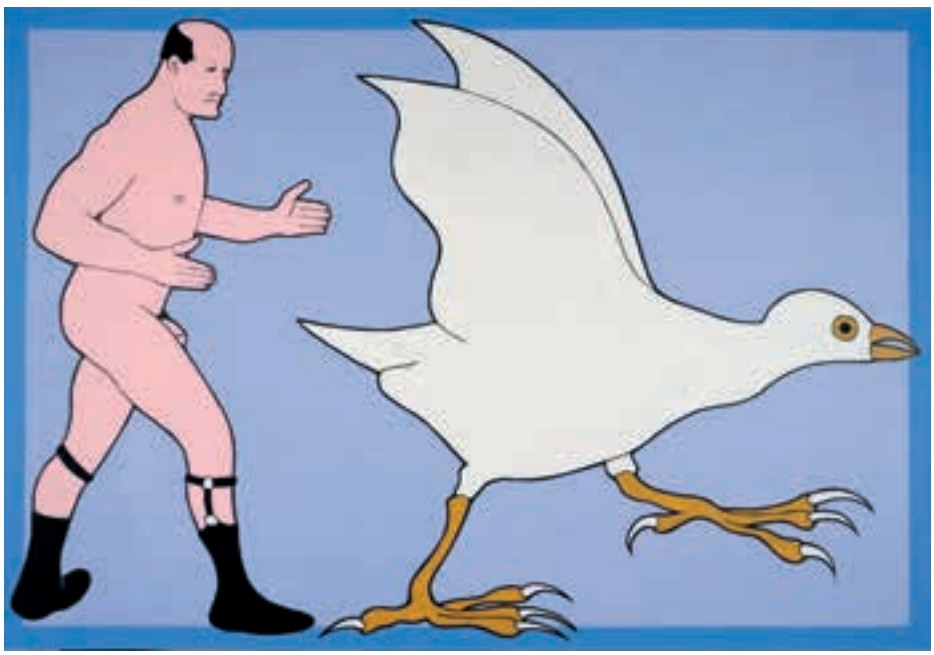
In 1972, Harald Szeemann curated *Documenta* and invited Wesley to participate. Szeemann did not know how to deal with Wesley—no one knew how to deal with him—and gave him a room *way* in the back, by the stairs. Wesley presented eight paintings: *Brides, Caryn and Robin, Seasons of War and Laughter, Chinese!, Suffragettes, Mets, What's Going On in the Hall?,* and *The Queen Mother and the Arp*. I want to read you what Hannah Green and Dan Graham each had to say about his installation. Green is quoting Graham: "At *Documenta*, in Kassel—that lovely city high on the hill looking out over the green valley of the River Fulda where once upon a time the King of Hesse made his Hessians play at war games on the water"—(you can see why Hannah and Jack liked each other)—"Dan Graham said one morning at breakfast that Jack, because he falls into no category, had very nearly baffled the German curator planners of *Documenta* with their German necessity for logic. He had very nearly baffled them, but not quite, for with the most subtle design on their part Jack was given a room of his own, at the back of the Neue Galerie, neatly separating

31. *CHINESE!*, 1969.



33. *CINCINNATI 1917: LUNCHEON ON THE GRASS*, 1972.

32. PHOTO OF WOMEN AT A STATE FAIR FEEDING CORNCOBS TO PIGS.
34. *HANDS*, 1966.



35. *LEDA AND THE MAN*, 1972.

two galleries devoted to 'Neue Realismus,' directly downstairs, from the category of 'Individuelle Mythologien'; and as you came upstairs from the gallery devoted to 'Politische Propaganda' and enter Jack's room you encounter his painting, *Chinese!*"

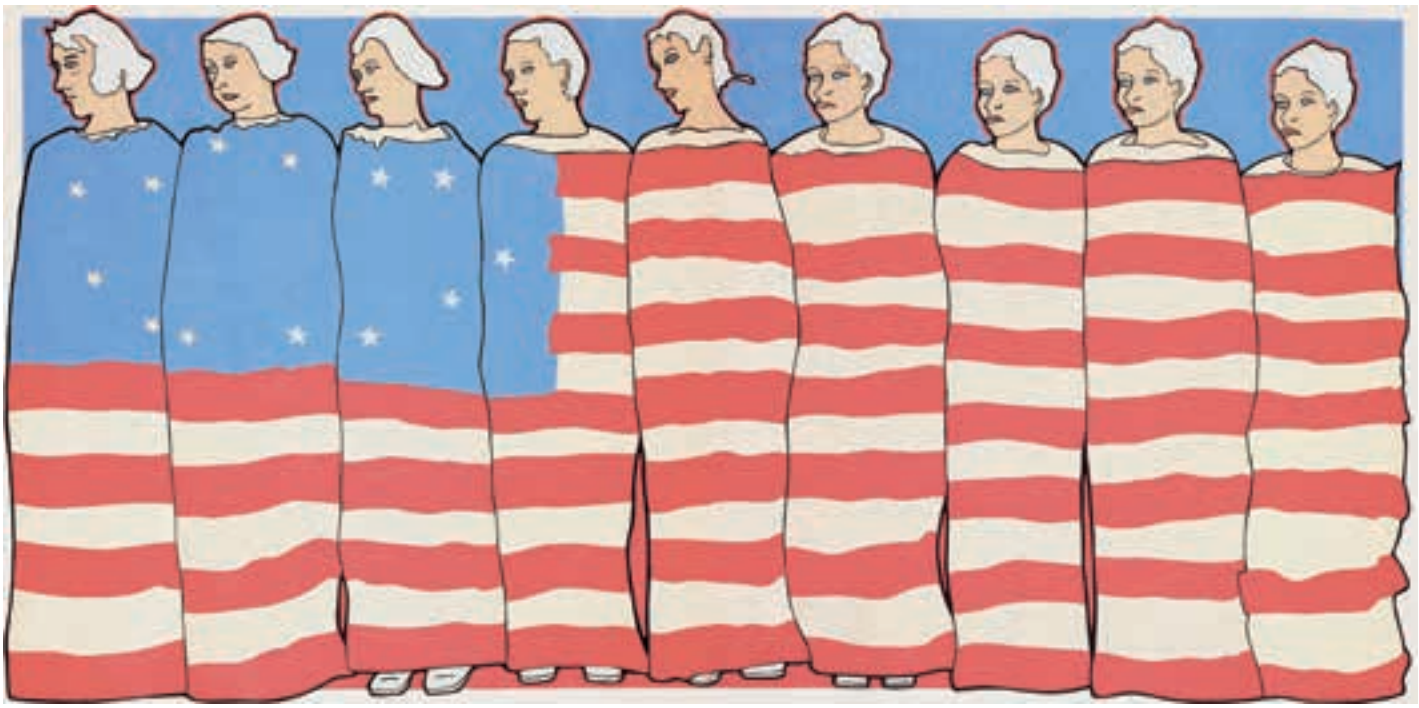
This is another painting from '72 that again presages a direction in which he's going [fig. 35]. It's something I wanted to pick up on in the show I did at Harvard, which is two figures isolated, either confronted heads, or in chase—a composition distinct from what we saw with the woman and the bear, or the turkeys. It's called *Leda and the Man*. The man has always made me think of Jackson Pollock. [laughter]

These are two paintings he did for a whole show on the Bicentennial. The paintings are Wesley weird. He "couldn't do Washington Crossing the Delaware," because "he'd already done that," he said, so he had to do a new body of work. These are called *Nine Female Inmates of the Cincinnati Workhouse Participating in a Patriotic Tableau* and *Nine Female Inmates of the Cincinnati House of Corrections Participating in a Patriotic Tableau,* both 1976 [figs. 36, 37]. I love it. It's Cincinnati again, like the women feeding the pigs at the State Fair. I don't know how many of you have seen the early Betty Boop films in black and white, the Sing Sing films, where the inmates get wrapped in black tape over their white jail suits so that they get stripes, and then when they get out of jail, the guards unwind the tape, freeing them to go incognito into the world. That's what I thought of here. It's a really neat play of black and white and red all over—against the red, white, and blue; the prison black and white—that's so cool. And so acute.

OK, 1973. I'm going to race through these Bumstead images, though they are in many ways

38. CLIPPING FROM A *BLONDIE* COMIC STRIP BY CHIC YOUNG.

a key to the heart and soul of Wesley. This is a clipping from a 1973 *Blondie* [fig. 38]. What Wesley takes from it to create *B's Stoop* is the house in the background [fig. 39]. I wanted you to see how in many of the Bumstead images Wesley empties out the space [fig. 40]. He's revisiting his house, and he reads Bumstead as (pater) Ner Wesley. He makes it very explicit, and Wesley's late arrival at the Bumstead identification reinforces the notion that trauma is something that takes a long time to

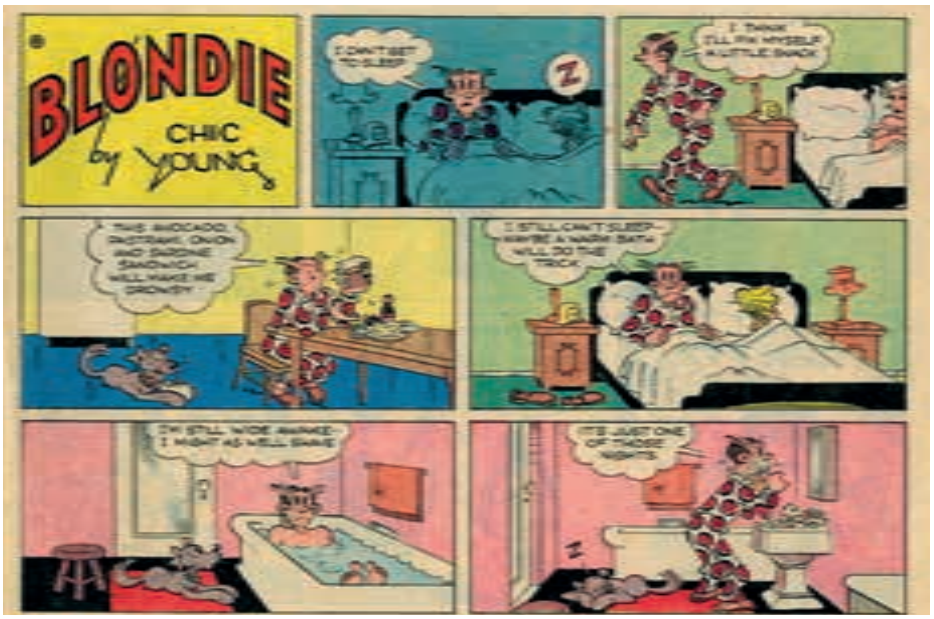


36. *NINE FEMALE INMATES OF THE CINCINNATI WORKHOUSE PARTICIPATING IN A PATRIOTIC TABLEAU*, 1976.

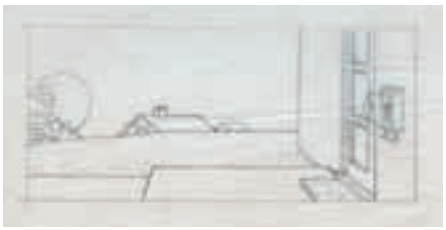
37. *NINE FEMALE INMATES OF THE CINCINNATI HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS PARTICIPATING IN A PATRIOTIC TABLEAU*, 1976.

39. *B'S STOOP*, 1973.

40. *B'S WINDOW*, 1973.



41. *BLONDIE* COMIC STRIP BY CHIC YOUNG.



42. TRACINGS FOR *B'S STOOP*.

address. It wasn't until 1973—two years after his marriage to Hannah and after his first trips to Europe; and a year during which he was a resident artist at the MacDowell Colony, with time to work on a focused project—that Bumstead surfaces as Ner, his father, as well as a kind of everyman. Wesley says: "It's really my house when I was little. Those lamps, those curtains, that chair. They were in my house then. My father was like Bumstead. He was thin like Bumstead and he wore a tie to work, and when he came home from work in the evening he tipped his hat to the neighbors. I am seeking Ner Wesley." Always makes me want to cry.

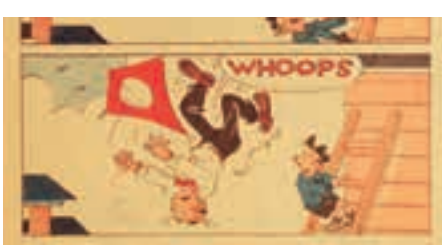
What I want to show is that what gets said in the comic strip is still in the paintings, even minus the words. The boss relationship—dialogue he plays out, and his relationship to Blondie. I'm showing a Bumstead strip about not being able to sleep [fig. 41], and what Wesley takes from this—with a number of other motifs and mise-en-scenes from the comic strip—become motifs of Wesley's own, which he revisits in 1990 and again in 2003—for example, with Bumstead in the bath, but also adding other characters.

I also wanted you to see some of Wesley's method here [fig. 42]. Wesley famously raved about tracing paper, and a lot of his first real experimentation with tracing an original source began with the Bumstead series. As I've said, much happens in the way the line is transformed from the original to his version. Equally instrumental for Wesley was being able to "flip the tracing paper, and reverse the image."

Here's another example where Wesley takes Bumstead the bumbler, which becomes a kind of type or persona, but all that you see is the ladder [figs. 43, 44]. Even if these are traditional means, Wesley is inventing a whole vocabulary of space and of lines versus areas of color. And then he introduces Bumstead's fraught relationship to Blondie. This is *The Bumsteads* from 1974, and he gets into it [fig. 45]. He starts pursuing the deep, existential questions that arise in any intimate relationship.

Now I'm moving forward. This is *The Bath*, from 1990 [fig. 46]. What I'm interested in is the frame, and the way that he intensifies not just the obvious erotic content but the nerve centers, if I can put it that way. He uses other devices or motifs.

44. *B'S LADDER*, 1973.



43. PANEL FROM A *BLONDIE* COMIC STRIP BY CHIC YOUNG.

45. *THE BUMSTEADS*, 1974.

46. *THE BATH*, 1990.

47. *WALLFLOWER DAGWOOD*, 1991.

He takes something between the "splash" or the "splat"—the famous comic-book motif—and the speech bubble, and when there's *no* speech, and something looms, he deals with gravity, a sense of something pending, and the failure of words.

In *Wallflower Dagwood,* 1991, he's playing with Dagwood in drag [fig. 47]. And he plays with lesbianism, albeit a lesbianism observed from the vantage of a straight man's curiosity, in *First Kiss: Blondie Bumstead and Ynez Sanchez,* also 1991 [fig. 48]. Wesley often talked about the exotic as something that he wanted to deal with; it intrigued him as a subject, the idea of something foreign or other. He often spoke of his experience of the 1932

49. *BUMSTEAD IN BEDLAM*, 1991.

48. *FIRST KISS: BLONDIE BUMSTEAD AND YNEZ SANCHEZ*, 1991.

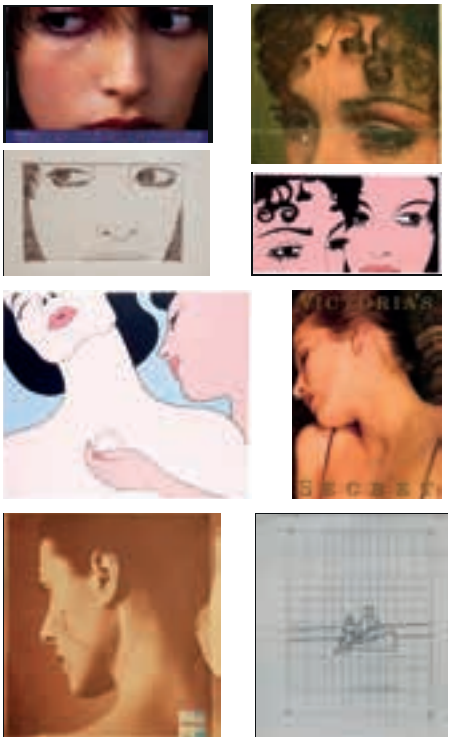
Olympics, as a very young boy in California, as his first introduction to people complete other from those he knew from his family and neighborhood. Clearly, the curiosity this inspired him, along with the suspended judgement, had a huge role in his formation as artist. The intimacy that one feels for something one doesn't know but is attracted to—the intimacy many talk about now as that of a fan, especially with music—informs his subject matter as does the looming darkness, the underbelly of things, as in *Bumstead in Bedlam,* 1991 [fig. 49]. Wesley finds an incredible array of intensely personal, but palpably exposed, new ways to paint these really familiar figures. As always, everything seems posed as a question, or questions. What is new is the way Wesley's reversals and rearrangements of a subject he finds baffling or arousing or both, made possible through his experiments with re-using, flipping and cutting and re-arranging portions of his trace drawings introduced a kind of comprehension through a formal de- and re-construction of an image.

Here are two paintings from 2003 where he introduces the Japanese figure Utamaro [figs. 50, 51], one of which I was able to buy for Harvard—an aside I mention only because I have studied this image a lot. One thing to note here is the strangeness of the scale. What *is* she? What is she to *him*? Are they in the same world? What is he *doing* with the figure?

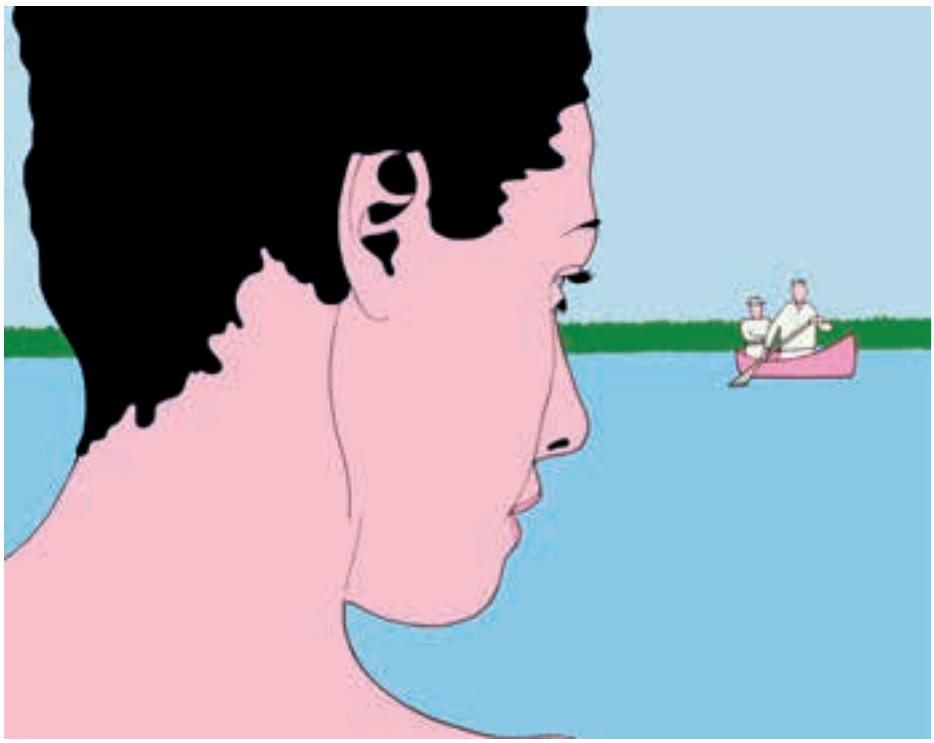
50. *UTAMARO DRINKING, BUMSTEAD MAD*, 2003.

51. *UTAMARO WASHING, BUMSTEAD SLEEPING*, 2003.

52. *BUMSTEAD WITH DEAD GEISHA*, 2006.



53. MAGAZINE SOURCES; SKETCHES; *SHOW GIRLS*, 1998; *BABY OIL*, 1992.



54. *BOYFRIENDS*, 1999.

Bumstead with Dead Geisha is maybe the most deeply sad of Wesley's late Bumsteads [fig. 52]. Perhaps it references Hannah's death; I'm not sure if the last woman in his wife, Patsy Broderick (the mother of Matthew Broderick), whom he also really loved, was sick yet (she has since died). I don't think so; the Prada catalogue only goes to 2007 and this image is from 2006, so it doesn't speak to Patsy being sick. But I know she did become sick, and Wesley's work is ever-responsive to his personal life and the world around him. His subjects and his art sometimes seem to push away hardship in his life and sometimes seem to go there.

These images show him looking at new source material all through the late eighties and the nineties [fig. 53]. He's looking at new images of women; he's updating what you're attracted to and playing with that advertiser's ability to manipulate desire. He's not exactly working from critique, because he's going to the same place emotionally that he had gone earlier, but he's using different conventions, and the work is wonderfully responsive. It feels topical even when it's dated because he's so attuned to a particular moment and the way it's represented. (Aside: So many artists just fix on the newness of a type of representation, which dates super fast. Wesley focuses on the relationship between the representation and the subject. It's a relationship that, if guaged astutely and rendered with comparable inspiration, never dates.)

To wit, *Boyfriends*, 1999, which I find incredibly poignant [fig. 54]. The print curator at Harvard, who is just phenomenal, bought this with me, and she wrote something wonderful: "Here, we wonder, is the foreground figure male or female? Are the two figures in the canoe, manifestly male, equally objects of desire, or is one a guide and the other a passenger? Is the impending rendezvous desired? By whom? And so forth." (I love the "and so forth"!) "It is to be noted that the charged palette of the composition reflects the altered consciousness of the print relative to earlier examples" (meaning other prints that we bought).

Two more images informed by surprising, really unexpected, sources, difficult to discern strictly from the painting. This one is an image of people at the World Trade Center site after 9/11 [fig. 55]. It was taken in fall 2001. This is what Wesley paints from it; it's called *Candy Machine* [fig. 56]. It just stops me cold: where the curves are, and the precise distance between the two figures—the way he conflates such a perfect representation of a couple at an impasse with this image of shared, more abstract, but also more real, horror and shock.

And this is Wesley channeling Vladimir Putin!—in one of Wesley's crazy couples [figs. 57, 58]. And this is from my little show at Harvard, another image that deals specifically with the politics of the time in which it was made. This was done in

55. NEWSPAPER PHOTO OF PEOPLE AT THE WORLD TRADE CENTER SITE AFTER 9/11, FEBRUARY 2002.

56. *CANDY MACHINE*, 2002.

57. NEWSPAPER CLIPPING OF VLADIMIR PUTIN AND SKETCH.

58. *VAN NUYS HONEYMOON*, 2002.

59. NEW WORK, 1999.

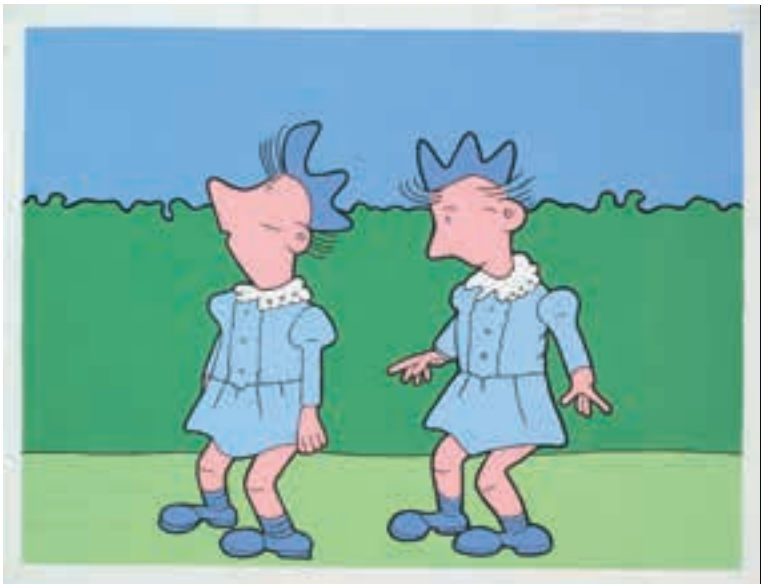
1990 and refers to days of intensive bombing with which the United States' Gulf War on Iraq opened [fig. 59]. It's called *New Work,* a play on "Newark," because, Wesley said, "You know the way you feel that those planes are coming through your windshield when you're rushing to the airport?," and yet the painting also looks exactly like the TV images that we all saw during that

62. NGUYEN NGOC LOAN, NATIONAL POLICE CHIEF OF SOUTH VIETNAM, EXECUTING VIETCONG MEMBER NGUYEN VAN LEM, SAIGON, 1968. PHOTO BY EDDIE ADAMS/A.P.

60. DUSK, 1987.

remote-controlled war, images that looked like computer game screens, except that the bombs being dropped were on Beirut. It's related to *Dusk,* from 1987 [fig. 60], this cartoon, domestic, and depressed—but not explicitly referential—image. Next, the last political image for now—called *Popeye*—another painting that I had in the show [fig. 61]. Think of that image that I called Jackson Pollock, *Leda and the Man*. This is a variation on that, with the relationship between two figures on a radically different scale: a blindfolded, short, and fat Popeye [Wimpy], bulging out of his jacket and shirt, made to kneel by a tall, skinny version of Wesley's son, Ner, also kneeling, but with a gun pointed at the back of Popeye's head. This was done in 1973. To me, I couldn't *not* see the famous photo of the execution of a Viet Cong citizen by the Saigon police from 1968 [fig. 62].

61. POPEYE, 1973.



63. TWO ELVES IN STOLEN DRESSES, 1985.

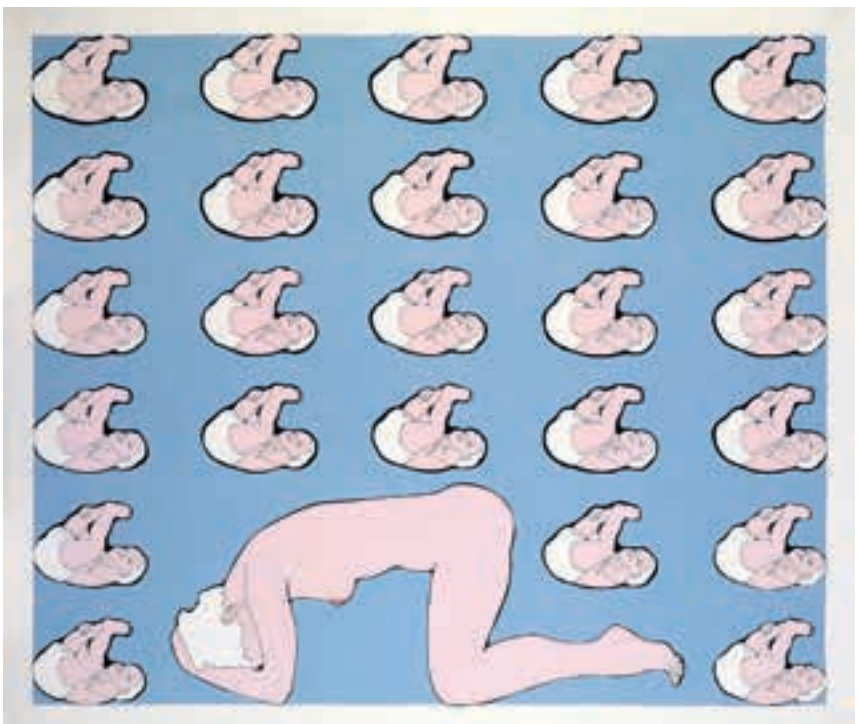
64. YOUNG ARTIST USING HIS WIFE AS A MODEL, 2000.

I want to land on a few things that others have said about Wesley, in more recent writing, beginning with the great writer and poet, Wayne Koestenbaum, because the categories that he offers in his effort to come to terms with Wesley's art so exceed and intensify any others I've read. I invited Koestenbaum to speak on the occasion of the show I did at Harvard, in 2001. He'd never seen Wesley's paintings before and he was blown away by them. Koestenbaum called his lecture "Obscene Allegories: In Praise of the Paintings of John Wesley," and he opened the talk with the gouache, *Two Elves in Stolen Dresses,* one of my all-time favorite Wesley's, from 1985 [fig. 63]. Koestenbaum is gay, but for him, as for Wesley, the sexual, not just his own, is the locus of pretty much all that he treats, which was why I was interested in his thoughts on the art. Another work he showed in the talk was *Young Artist Using His Wife as a Model* [fig. 64], which I later bought for the Fogg, in part because Koestenbaum related it to a famous painting owned by the museum called *Raphael and La Fornarina*—a painting by Ingres of Raphael in a chair with a model on his lap, painting her [fig. 65]. He says that to gather the strength to write the lecture he had to use the word "obscene," because to his mind Wesley's paintings created a kind of "charged blank." "The paintings suggest a relationship to the maximal or minimal, but they don't bear relation to anyone else's dogmatic definitions of scale. Wesley, said Koestenbaum, "has a capacity to ignore boundaries, frames, law, sexual object, choice, position, and other absolutes." And "his way of fleeing American ideation," Koestenbaum thought, "while appearing to retain it, is to hug close to the obscene, his shield of immunity, in a childlike hygienic fashion." I like that.

Toward this end, Koestenbaum posits as a category "gravity," and he points to a number of Wesley paintings by way of example: *Plague,* 1967, one of many Wesley meditations on babies, descending, without labor, onto a nude female, leaning below [fig. 66]. The babies here rain down as curse, not blessing; *Bumstead Out the Window,* 2000 [fig. 67]; and *Dagwood, Wave Dancer,* 1991

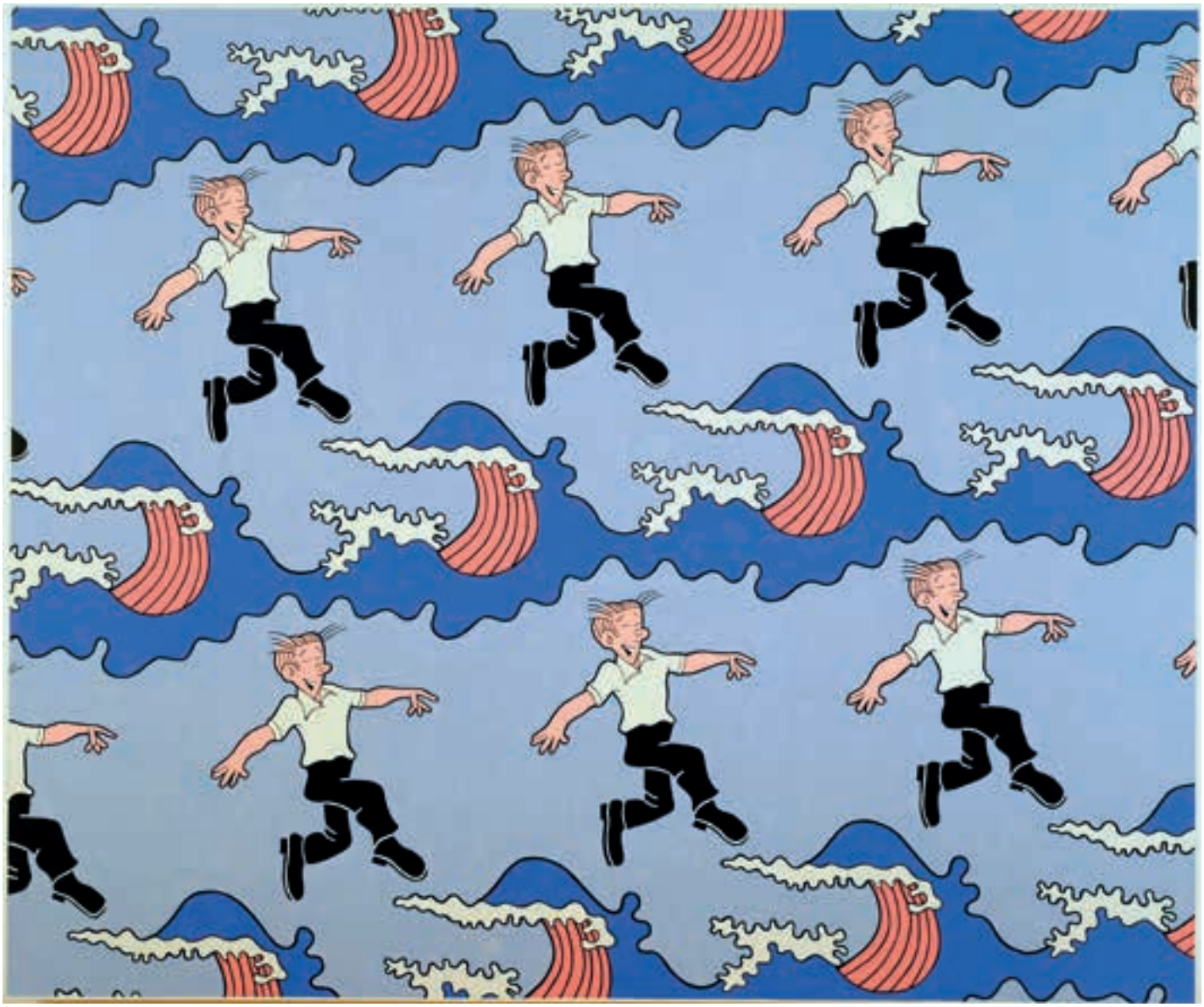
65. INGRES, *RAPHAEL AND LA FORNARINA*, 1814, HARVARD ART MUSEUMS.

[fig. 68]. Wesley also does the Japanese waves Dagwood dances amongst without him, giving the waves that much more anthropomorphic life — as if so many open whale mouths, with or without



66. PLAGUE, 1967.

67. BUMSTEAD OUT THE WINDOW, 2000.



68. WAVE DANCER, 1991.

their Dagwood Jonah. And then Koestenbaum reads *Night Titanic,* 1984, along these lines, fixing on the pink portholes that Wesley features in a tidy line on the ship's prow and the painting's upper right corner [fig. 69]. Later Koestenbaum picks out the square black windows in Wesley's mostly pink 1983 *Chateau* [fig. 70] in terms of those portholes on the *Titanic*. Jenny Moore, standing in front of the actual painting yesterday morning at the newly opened Wesley pavilion where it is currently installed, related them to Judd, which I loved at least as much. *Chateau* was painted in Marfa, and now it hangs next to the pavilion's beautiful pivot door, so that you can see Judd's cement cubes out in the field, with *their* big square open holes in neat art historical juxtaposition.

Koestenbaum's interests extend to two hilariously disturbing, or disturbingly hilarious Wesley paintings, both from 1972: *Daddy* [fig. 71], a painting of a little girl, repeated five times, in black pigtails, white shoes and a little orange dress, with an expression that hovers somewhere between uncertainty and distress; and *Debbie Milstein Swallowed a Thumbtack,* also of the same girl,

69. NIGHT TITANIC, 1984.

70. CHATEAU, 1983.

71. DADDY, 1972.

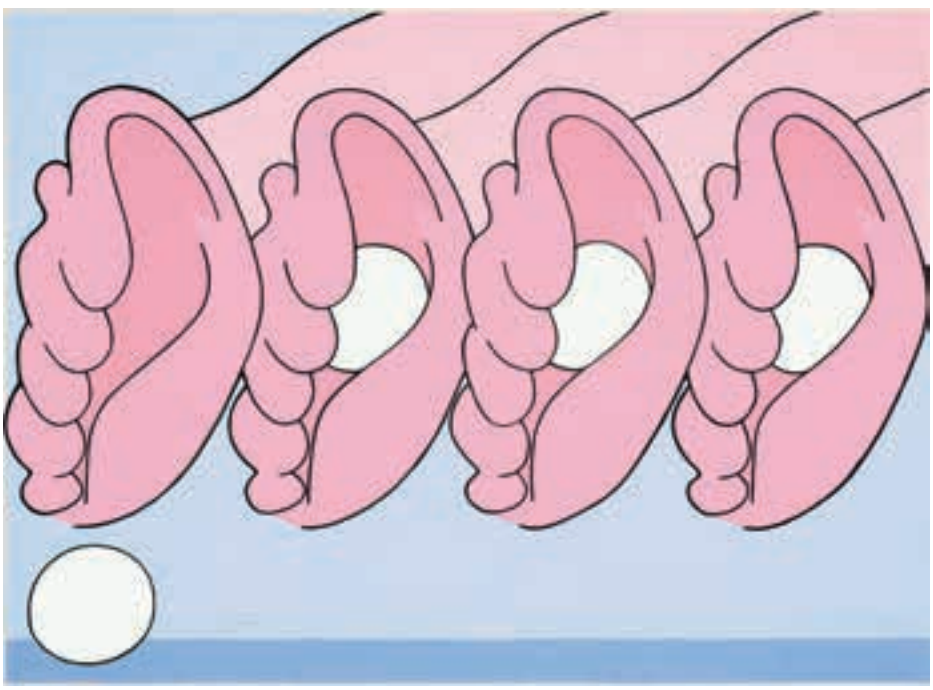
72. DEBBIE MILSTEIN SWALLOWED A THUMBTACK, 1972.

73. GO DOWN, YOU RISING SUN, 1971.

repeated, though in this case, in two different poses [fig. 72]. Bill Barrette, whom, as I've said, was a student of Wesley's at the School of Visual Arts, has said this is one of the few paintings that Wesley painted from a true story, because one of his students did indeed swallow a thumbtack. Wesley doesn't paint Debbie Milstein; he paints the nurse responding to her dilemma, wondering whether the thumbtack might find its way through her body and out again—which is another notion that Koestenbaum mines under the umbrella of the obscene.

He also looks at *Go Down, You Rising Sun* [fig. 73], but doesn't deal with the fact that Wesley has a history of painting the Japanese flag, and naked girls holding the Japanese flag, which he did in the Bicentennial year. He does deal with the idea of spanking, which is another of the ways Wesley reads the red circle on white field of that flag and plays with putative cultural habits and stereotypes.

I've tried to get Koestenbaum to give this talk again; he gave it only that once, at Harvard, and it was brilliant, with many more images than I've mentioned here. He talks about Wesley's *Yellow Couch,* 1986 [fig. 74], noting how Wesley knew



77. FOUL BALL, 1989.

74. YELLOW COUCH, 1986.

75. MAN REGARDING A COUCH, 1967.

76. EDWARD HOPPER, ROOMS BY THE SEA, 1951. YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY.

that you don't have to put a figure on the couch; "the figure is already implied," he said—and yet he doesn't talk about *this* Wesley, *Man Regarding a Couch* from 1987 [fig. 75], which somehow or other seems more existential that specifically sexual. But there is that empty couch. What Koestenbaum compared to Wesley's *Yellow Couch,* which sits before a window, was unexpected, and wonderful—Hopper's *Room by the Sea* [fig. 76], in which he managed to find an obscene reading. And then these last images: he talked about *Foul Ball* and *Untitled (Four Balls),* both of 1989, which are easy fodder for an essay on obscenity [figs. 77, 78]. But I love that he used the categories he'd now fleshed out: gravity, the empty couch, pink and blue—yes, pink and blue were also obscene in Wesley's hands—and the openings.

78. FOUL, 1989.

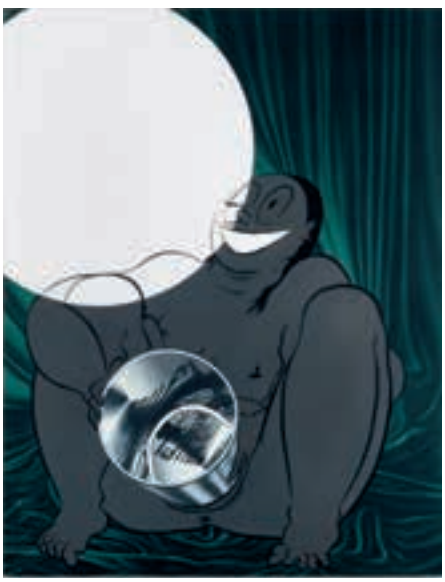
79. INSTALLATION VIEW, *THROWBACK JACK*, FREDERICKS & FREISER, 2019.

In tandem with Koestenbaum's lecture, I want to discuss an equally disarming and brilliant show that was at Fredericks & Freiser in the early summer of 2019, *Throwback Jack*, which was curated by the writer, editor, and curator Amanda Schmidt. These are installation shots that included Wesley and five artists inspired by him, all women: Math Bass, Ivy Haldeman, Becky Kolsrud, Ebecho Muslimova, and Emily Mae Smith [figs. 79, 80]. I'll hone in on what Schmidt says about Wesley at the beginning. She quotes Judd, from that early review I spent so much time on above: "'If the paintings are going to be defined within the realm of Pop Art, they're more accurately defined as retroactive Pop.'" She notes that Judd elaborates on this, describing Wesley's figures and patterns as forms that come from the past, and that "'the forms selected, the shapes to which they are unobtrusively altered, the order used, and the small details, are humorous and goofy. This becomes a cool, psychological oddness....This ambiguity is one of Wesley's main devices.'" So, Schmidt homes in on ambiguity. "His contemporaries, canonic Pop artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and Rosenquist, used 1960s TV, advertising, and comics culture as source material, strategically reproducing images of objects and icons as they related to commodity culture"—which is not overt in Wesley at all, not his subject per se. And then she introduces the artists in her show, all women Schmidt believes to have been directly inspired, in part, by Wesley."What distinguishes Wesley for this group," she says, is that "he took the 'mass' out of Pop Art and made it cooly personal and intimate. Behind the artifice of his schematic style—recognizable by flat fields of nursery-palette colors and crisply, slightly distorted cartoonish forms—his subjects are somehow warm-blooded and real. Because his subjects derive from images of yesteryear, rather than the present, the narrative tableaux become relatable through the intimacy inherent to nostalgia."

She talks about other devices borrowed from Wesley: seriality and repetition; the emphasizing and de-escalating of psychological tension and emotional associations; "the subtle variations in the apparent uniformity [which] in fact negate the subjects' sameness." That seems really important to me: there's repetition, but the repetition is never identical. "No two repeating forms are identical, and even the hard-edged lines waver with humane dimension. If Pop Art confirms the notion that we're alike in our needs and desires, Wesley's retroactive Pop underlines that though our needs and desires may appear universal, they are singular, and unknowable, even and often to ourselves." (Wesley's Pop style, of course, was concurrent with the Pop artists from whom Judd distinguished him, back in 1963; what was "retroactive" was the earlier twentieth century period of pop culture that Wesley looked to for his sources.)

Schmidt next goes through each of the artists to see more specifically what they took from Wesley. Emily Mae Smith, for example—there's this

80. INSTALLATION VIEW, *THROWBACK JACK*, FREDERICKS & FREISER, 2019.



81. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *FATEBE [BUCKET/CURTAIN]*, 2019.

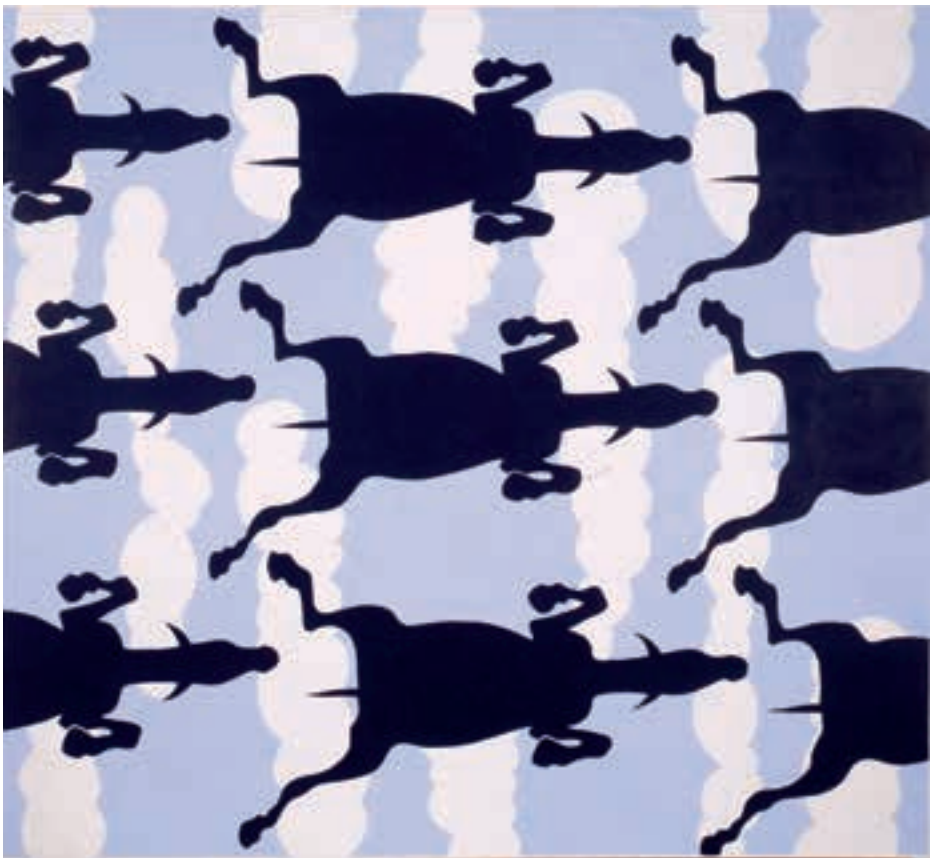
exaggerated eyelash that she takes very directly from Wesley. Think of those nineties drawings that I showed, which he copied from magazines, the curls and the hair and the eyelashes, which had become a kind of signature for him. In the Emily Mae Smith painting, it's nothing *but* eyelash; there's no other body part defined [fig. 79, second from right]. It's a kind of Gumby head—with long eye*lash*.

The artist that I was most drawn to and intrigued by in Schmidt's show was Ebecho Muslimova, whose work is called *Fatebe [Bucket/Curtain],* 2019 [fig. 81]. Schmidt describes the graphic, almost cartoon-like paintings of Muslimova. She sees Fatebe as a kind of Bumstead to Muslimova, an antihero, as Bumstead is: "roly-poly" and "situated in outrageous scenarios that throw her inner emotional states into haywire and all over the canvas. Muslimova uses Fatebe's body less as a commentary on the female body, than as a mould through which to cast some of mankind's most fragile, but masked emotions, states, and qualities: eroticism, shame, desire, humility, fear, debauchery, and anxiety (among so many others)." Where Schmidt draws a contrast with Wesley is in "the full frontal, explicit positioning of Muslimova's portrayal of Fatebe's female body. In Wesley's work, the woman's body is almost never fully visible—it's usually strategically cropped or framed; Muslimova's Fatebe offers a direct portal to and through her body." The essay also speaks to something Schmidt sees as distinctly twenty-first century: "a dramatic shift in meaning, perception, and positioning of body politics and its representation in media in the [century's] first decades. "If we are to review the trajectory of figurative art throughout the twentieth century...a significant divergence coincides with Wesley's development of a personal (or retroactive) Pop: Postwar subjectivity in figurative art arrived with a crucial dissolution of the dominantly traditional 'male gaze.'"

Wesley's "personal" Pop, she says, corroborating Judd's observation, but more generously, happened to be retroactive. But what mattered for the dissolution of the dominant, traditional male gaze was its patently personal formation and the vulnerability that entailed and exposed. As I've said above, Wesley also gives this enormous subjectivity to the viewer. He introduces a kind of intimacy; he heightens all of the sensory receivers and interfaces through his framing devices, exaggerations of scale, the body parts he singles out, what he makes of skin and variations in the shade of pink or whatever color he uses to paint it—all of this heightens an emotional state on our part, so that we're forced to negotiate his complex imagery in this heightened state, and we're not so much *implicated* as *included* in whatever he sets forth. He gets us to this point because he so closely tracks his own kinesthetic perceptions.

I'm going to end with an image, *Blue Cloak,* 1994 [fig. 82], that Bill Barrette wrote about, with incredible depth of feeling, in his essay for the Prada catalogue, "Art, Love and Faith: John Wesley in Conques, 1970–95. A memoir." Barrette accompanied Hannah and Jack (I'm using first names here, because Bill does) on any number of pilgrim walks in the southern French Mediterranean area and the town of Conques, repository of the remains of Saint Foy, the subject of Hannah's book. Saint Foy was a child, possessed of the conviction that she was married to Christ, and martyred in the most gruesome way, and Hannah tries to reconstruct and explore the nature of this child's belief, and the relationship of all the relics and the representations of the child, over many years of research for her novel. Barrette, along with Hannah and Jack, also walked the pilgrim trails in the Southern French mountains around Conques, and he writes beautifully about this in his essay for the Prada catalogue. His meditations on their shared experience of these trail walks offered a neat way to tie back to Judd and his belief in the perfect, or close to perfect, installations he spent so many years constructing and then offering, as a destination. Judd often compared the experience of visiting an artwork that he was after to a pilgrim's visit to a cathedral or relic on a pilgrim trail, so that the idea of walking (which you do at Chinati, even if you first have to get to Marfa) to arrive at a given project, has its own significance and history. Barrette's essay, unlike Judd's willfully de-sacrilized parallel, also looks to more deeply religious associations and undercurrents for the psychic depths Wesley's negotiates in so many of his paintings. He suggests, for example, that Wesley's *Blue Cloak*—a beautiful, large, and confounding painting of a woman holding a blue cloak up to her mouth, with eyes tightly closed, and head tilted just slightly up—is an image of the Virgin in the Annunciation, "just after the archangels have departed," and that it speaks to the apocryphal experience of Saint Foy. "What you're left with, the weight of the knowledge that the Virgin has just been inseminated, ties to Saint Foy, who believed she was the wife of Christ." Barrette gives two pages to his reading of this image, within which he accounts for every detail of the expression, the holding of the hands, and its source. It's a heartbreaking piece of writing. And though it may seem a leap, he compares Wesley's *Blue Cloak* to a radically different painting, *Untitled (Horses and Clouds),* from 1988 [fig. 83], one of my absolute favorite Wesley images, a painting I featured in a group show I did after the Harvard Wesley show, because I loved it so much. And this is where I want to end, with *Untitled (Horses and Clouds),* which strikes me as a great Marfa or Chinati image. You can look up and look down and see the horses and the clouds together. It's Wesley at his pattern-making, meaning-stirring best. It's all there. Thank you all for your patience. Thank you very much.

82. BLUE CLOAK, 1994.



83. *UNTITLED (HORSES AND CLOUDS)*, 1988.