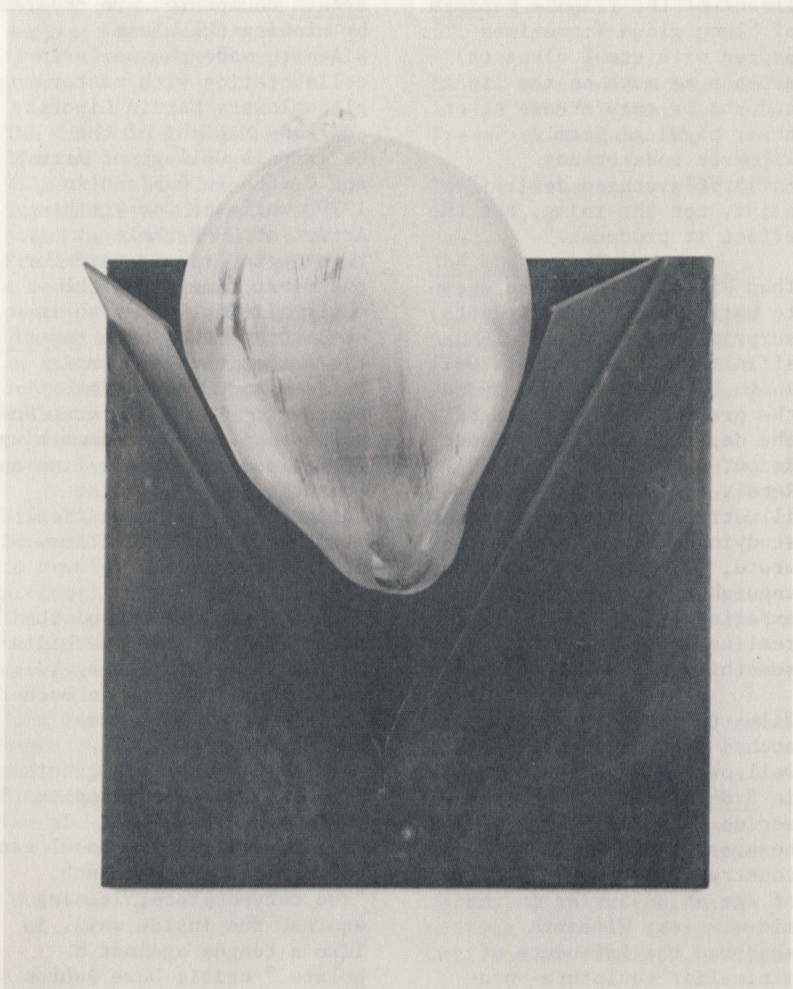


Christopher Wilmarth
MATRIX/BERKELEY 62

University Art Museum
Late May - early August 1983

Saint, 1979-80



"Breath is the first vehicle for a poem; blown glass is breath made physical."

--Christopher Wilmarth

Breath is the name given by Christopher Wilmarth to his suite of seven sets of pastels, charcoal drawings, etchings, and glass and steel sculptures created in response to each of seven poems by the 19th-century French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. The effect of the fragile vessels of blown glass (sometimes paired with steel elements) depends as much on the light and shadow they create as on their physical form. Wilmarth understands Mallarmé's stated desire "to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces."

That Wilmarth should be drawn to Mallarmé's poetry is not surprising. Mallarmé's affinity with artists is well known. His coterie included the great French artists of the day--Manet, Degas, Monet, Redon, and Renoir. Manet, Renoir and, later, Matisse illustrated his poems. After studying Mallarmé, Wilmarth wrote, "His work is about the anguish and longing of experience not fully realized, and I found something of myself in it."

Wilmarth has worked with etched glass and steel for well over a decade, often, as in Breath, producing works in series. Earlier works, however, have a more constructivist look. Coming of age as an artist in the mid-sixties, Wilmarth absorbed the influence of minimalist sculpture--non-objectivity; simple, geometric form; seriality. Nine Clearings for a Standing Man, for example, are large works composed of rectangular

sheets of steel and etched glass. In each work, two panels of equal size stand on the floor and are joined to the wall with a wire cable. Variations between one piece and the next are due to the angles formed by bending each steel plate away from its glass sheet, a process which, in turn, controls the amount of light between each pair of panels.

The curved forms of the Breath sculptures are created by blowing the glass. Wilmarth made the works in collaboration with master glassblowers Marvin Lipofsky and Andy Magdanz of the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland in 1979, while he was Visiting Artist at UC Berkeley. Turning to organic form for the first time since the early sixties, Wilmarth in a sense draws closer to two of his artist heroes, Henri Matisse and Constantin Brancusi. The sculptures and works on paper have something of Matisse's sensuous line and romanticism. They also reflect Brancusi's mystical attitude toward reductive, precise form.

The unifying element of the series is the oval, with its myriad associations--egg, head, mouth, womb. In each set of works (sculpture, pastel, charcoal, and etching), Wilmarth suggests Mallarmé's poetic metaphor through a visual one. In "Soupir" (Sigh), the oval can be seen as an open mouth. "The curved piece, leaning against the inside wall, is like a tongue against a palate," critic Dore Ashton wrote in her analysis of the works. In "Salut" (Toast), Wilmarth subtly echoes Mallarmé's poetic motifs, a champagne glass and a ship's

prow. Wilmarth regarded "M'introire dans ton histoire..." (Insert myself within your story...) as a poem about lovemaking and responded with a pale green orb pierced by one metal plane and enclosed by another, as if between the pages of a book. "Sonnet" (When Winter on forgotten woods moves somber...) was written for a friend whose young wife had died. The circular opening in the frosty ovoid sculpture suggests the open mouth of the deceased speaker in the poem.

The exhibition includes the limited edition book of Wilmarth's etchings and translations of Mallarmé's poems by the American poet Frederick Morgan, as well as a book of Wilmarth's own poetry inspired by Mallarmé. Breath is also the title of an award-winning catalogue containing illustrations of Wilmarth's works, the Morgan translations and a major essay by Dore Ashton.

Wilmarth was born in 1943 in Sonoma, California. He moved to New York, where he presently lives, to study at The Cooper Union, from which he graduated in 1965. He has received many awards, including grants from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 1970 and 1983, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1969, 1977 and 1980.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

7 sculptures, 1979-80:

When Winter on forgotten woods moves somber, glass, 11-1/2" x 6-3/4" x 6".

My old books closed, glass, 17" x 6-1/2" x 5-1/2".

Insert myself within your story, glass and steel, 12" x 11" x 9".

Sigh, glass, 13" x 7-3/4" x 6".

Saint, glass and steel, 14" x 11-1/2" x 7". Lent by Frederick Morgan, NY.

Toast, glass and steel, 10" x 7" x 7".

The whole soul summed up, glass, 17" x 12" x 5-1/4". Lent by Robert and Marlene Baumgarten, Winnetka, IL.

7 pastel drawings, 1979, 26-1/4" x 19-1/4".

7 charcoal drawings, 1979, 26-1/4" x 19-1/4". Lent by Gelco Corporation, Eden Prairie, MN.

9 etchings, softground and aquatint, 1980, 81, 12-3/4" x 8-1/2" (plate size).

Breath, two books of etchings, edition of 30, one bound (16" x 11-3/4" x 1-3/4") and one left as a portfolio (17" x 24-3/8" x 1-3/4")--containing seven poems by Stéphane Mallarmé translated by Frederick Morgan, with images, handwriting and book design by Christopher Wilmarth, 1981.

Breath, a book of poems by Christopher Wilmarth, 148" x 17-1/2" x 8-1/2" (open), 1982.

All works lent by the artist, courtesy Hirschl and Adler Modern, NY, unless otherwise noted.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Graham Gallery, NY, '68;
Paula Cooper Gallery, NY, '71, '72; Galleria dell' Ariete, Milan, Italy, '73 (catalog); Daniel Weinberg Gallery, S.F., '74, '78; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, '74 (catalog), '77 (MATRIX brochure); Grey Art Gallery, NYU, '78 (catalog); Studio for the First Amendment, NY, '80, '82 (catalog); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, '83.

Selected bibliography about Wilmarth (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Masheck, Joseph. "Chris Wilmarth," Artforum, June, '72.

Kramer, Hilton. "Chris Wilmarth: The Delicate Touch of a Constructivist," New York Times, Dec. 8, '74.

Linker, Kate.

"Christopher Wilmarth: 9 clearings for a standing man," Arts Magazine, April, '75.

Ashton, Dore.

"Christopher Wilmarth's Gnomonic Sculpture," Arts Magazine, Dec., '80.

Glueck, Grace.

"Mallarmé's Poems Inspire Glass Sculpture," New York Times, May 12, '82.

Selected group exhibitions:

Annuals and Biennials, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, '66, '68, '70, '73, '79 (catalogs); Seventieth American Exhibition, The Art Institute of Chicago, '72 (catalog); The Condition of Sculpture, Hayward Gallery, London, '75 (catalog); Contemporary Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, NY, '79.

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