

# The Museum of Modern Art

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May 1989

## CHRISTOPHER WILMARTH

May 25 - August 20, 1989

CHRISTOPHER WILMARTH, the first comprehensive museum presentation of works by the American sculptor, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on May 25, 1989. Organized by Laura Rosenstock, assistant curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, the exhibition features glass and steel constructions that manipulate light and shadow and suggest poetic, even romantic content through a constructivist, geometric idiom.

The exhibition and its accompanying publication are made possible by a generous grant from Edward R. Broida. On view until August 20, the exhibition includes twenty-five sculptures drawn from various collections including the artist's estate. It focuses primarily on works of the 1970s, along with a selection of later sculptures. Also featured are fourteen drawings, including a series produced just before the artist's death in 1987 that has never before been exhibited.

In his mature works, Wilmarth composed with planes of delicate color and light, placing plates of blackened steel behind translucent sheets of etched glass imbued with a luminous, greenish cast. Laura Rosenstock writes in the catalogue essay, "He employed a painterly technique that emphasized the tactility and richness of his materials, which like an alchemist he persistently sought to transform. He continually examined the concept of duality: contrasts between light and shadow, transparency and opacity, heaviness and weightlessness, materiality and ethereality, form and spirit are repeatedly presented; the synthesis of geometric with organic forms, the range between abstraction and representation are constantly explored."

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Wilmarth's art reveals his essential concern with the mystical and physical possibilities of light, especially the ways in which light evokes reverie and generates sensations of space and containment. Glass was the vehicle through which the artist could best capture this experience. The first works employing glass date from 1967 and are composed of wooden cylinders sliced by plate glass. The plywood, while seemingly weighty and solid, is actually light and hollow; the fragile-looking glass is thick and heavy. These early pieces establish Wilmarth's preference for the juxtaposition of disparate materials and shapes and the inversion or transformation of these materials.

Throughout 1969 and 1970 Wilmarth experimented with glass in ways previously unexplored in sculpture. In the process of his investigations, he discovered that the medium could be cut, bent, shaped, stacked, suspended, layered, and etched. The etching process in particular became fundamental to the sculptor's work because it enabled him to control the degree of transparency in the glass, endowing each piece with a different and individual character.

By 1970 Wilmarth incorporated Roebling steel suspension cable into his sculpture. The cable serves both structural and compositional functions, supporting the glass panes and binding them to one another and to the wall, as well as acting as a type of scribed line. In 1972 he started using sheet steel, layering plates of it behind etched glass panes. When a section of steel is cut or folded, it traps and diffuses light through the frosted glass, creating shifting spaces and multiple shadows of varying depths.

Wilmarth's sculptures from the early 1980s are influenced by the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. To affirm Mallarmé's emphasis on the spiritual, the artist used a simple ovoid form, evoking a multitude of symbols, including the human head. These ovoids were made of blown glass, which Wilmarth viewed as "frozen

breath." The artist pursued this figurative impulse into the mid-1980s, combining the anthropomorphic ovoid shapes with the larger abstract forms of his earlier sculpture.

Shortly before his death in 1987, Wilmarth made possibly his strongest, most beautiful works on paper, exploring a new level of expression while retaining continuity with past work. These drawings also contain allusions to the human presence. Their haunting, foreboding quality is prefigured in the grave, austere tones of some of the glass-and-steel structures. The duality of light and shadow and contrasts between abstraction and representation continue to be central concerns in these works, as the intensity and integrity of Wilmarth's vision remain always apparent.

Christopher Wilmarth was born in 1943 in Sonoma, California. At seventeen he came to New York, and earned his B.F.A. degree in 1965 from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. Between 1967 and 1969 he worked as a studio assistant to Tony Smith. In 1969 he returned to Cooper Union as professor of sculpture and drawing, a position he held until 1980. Wilmarth was invited to be a visiting artist at Yale University (1971-72), Columbia University (1976-78), and the University of California at Berkeley (1979). In 1986 he was appointed professor of sculpture at Columbia University. Christopher Wilmarth died in November 1987.

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PUBLICATION Christopher Wilmarth by Laura Rosenstock. Foreword by Kirk Varnedoe. 58 pages. 33 color and 15 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Paperbound, \$8.95; available in the Museum Store.

No. 45

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