

**Brian Wills, 2013, “Untitled”, (Horizontal Spectrum Quadtych),  
Spotlight Paper by Judith Franks, April 17, 2017**



**Artist’s Background**

Brian Wills was born in 1970 in Lexington, Kentucky. The colors, textures, and shapes of the artistic designs in his grandmother’s intricately stitched quilts inspired Wills at an early age and may have played a role in the future direction of his higher education. During the 1990s he earned a Fine Arts Degree from Denison University in Granville, Ohio. However, he thought art might not be the best choice for earning a living so he did an about-face and pursued a study of law at Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Wills’ attraction to creating art never ‘really’ died. After college he moved to Los Angeles and landed a position as a talent manager in Hollywood. When his pocketbook was a bit healthier, he decided to abruptly quit his job, obtain a small art studio, and begin (once again) to create art. He found himself being drawn to the L.A. artists associated with the Light and Space Movement and began experimenting with various materials. The result of his experimentation led to the discovery of his medium of choice; multi-colored, iridescent, single-strand, rayon thread, wood, varnish, and pigment.

**Influences**

Wills cites Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, James Turrell, and Josef Albers as inspiration for his creative direction. Wills gives highest praise to Turrell. He says, “Turrell’s works have had an enormous impact on the way I see the world”. Wills’

adds, “ I’m lucky to have visited a few of his light installations. They are life changing”. (5)

Wills’ tells us that his work is “minimalist in nature” and attributes this to Donald Judd and his geometrically calculated works and Agnes Martins’ fine pencil-line paintings, and Josef Albers’ color theories. (8)

Albers’ book, *Interaction with Color*, completed in 1963, (now in its 50<sup>th</sup> Edition) expanded how color has been used at every level of art, architecture, interior design, and technology. Albers immigrated to the United States when the Bauhaus school closed after 1933 and began teaching students at Black Mountain College and later Yale University. In the following quote, Albers describes the use of color in one of his student’s paintings.

“An arrangement of stripes of very contrasting character. These can be read (from bottom to top); first, as warm and soft against hard and cool; second, with relation to interiors, as a heavy carpet against a light papered wall and third, if considered as sounds, as woodwinds against brass. In addition, there is a harmonious and sonorous assemblage of adjacent colors...all these differences can be read despite the fact that all the colors appear in the shape of stripes, stripes which are all equally hard edged.” (4) (P.170)

Albers’ description opens a window to Wills use of color. This can be seen in the linear arrangement of Wills’ stripes on a enameled surface; in the use of contrasting colored thread pulled bottom to top; and in the soft texture of the threads placed on the hardened wooden surface and if considered as sounds, as harp strings against the wind.

Wills also credits a law school education, and notes, “It really taught me how to think and problem-solve. I use my education in every piece of art I make”. (9)

### **Art Movement**

The Minimalist tradition and the Light and Space Movement are distinguished in Wills’ artwork. Unitary geometric forms force us to consider their arrangement and scale and our perception of the work changes when we interact with the work. Playing with light by creating a surface that shifts in color, translucency, and transpar and using reflective and richly hued threads on enameled wood embraces the Light and Space Movement.

### **Medium**

Wills’ medium of choice is rayon thread, wood, pigment/enamel, and varnish.

### **Technique & Methodology**

Wills 2013 “Untitled” (Horizontal Spectrum Quadtych) reflects his creative direction and signature style. This work is an abstract three-dimensional sculpture. It includes four rectangular horizontal panels 96” long and 12” high.

Each panel is separated into twelve 8” rectangular sections. What Wills uses to separate each section is unclear. However, after enlarging a photo of the artwork on a computer screen (since the work is no longer up in the museum) it appears that the separation between the 8 sections of each panel is actually a space that Wills says he leaves to create a shadow.

Wills’ uses a “precise technique-based approach” (9) that involves wrapping thousands of multi-colored, iridescent, single-strand rayon threads. Each single strand of rayon thread is stretched taut onto a thin wood frame that is then adhered to basswood (a fine wood from the Linden tree used to make musical instruments). “Essentially, we are looking at a series of straightforward linear patterns and symmetrical grids.” (9) Wills describes his work during a summer 2014 gallery exhibition at Quint Gallery in Los Angeles.

“The work measures color, motion, texture, and depth, exploring the science by which our visual cortex sees. The construction is layered, often creating one impression upon first viewing, then revealing itself gradually, after reflection and investigation”. (9)

Wills has a special interest in science, especially optics and how the brain registers color, movement, and spatial relationships.

Wills methods for producing his work combine an advanced level of craftsmanship that he refers to as “almost obsessive”. His actual process involves layers upon layers of varnishes and pigments encasing the threads that form his composition and that are built up through a laborious process of sanding and re-sanding and building back up again.

### **Artist’s Impact on the Art World**

Wills has been producing artworks in his Los Angeles based studio since the year 2000. The impact of his art has not been confined to the West Coast. Following his work being chosen for the San Diego Museum’s exhibition and auction in 2002 the popularity of Wills’ body of work has continued to grow. His art has drawn numerous exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad. More recently, in December of 2016, he had his second solo show that was received well in Paris along with earlier shows and exhibitions in Germany, England, Japan, and Mexico. He has sold regularly at auctions and through numerous gallery sales though out the world. The well-known actor, Neil Patrick Harris purchased a wall sculpture seen in a photograph above Harris’ living room fire place and featured in the March 2015 *Architectural Digest*. Many of his works are included in numerous important collections like The Fredrick R. Weisman Foundation in Los Angeles, The Estee Lauder Collection, The Progressive Corporation, to mention only a few. In addition, his works have received critical praise in Los Angeles, and other cities in the United States and abroad. Christopher Knight a Los Angeles Times critic, has written several reviews of Wills work.

Knight says, “ His work is more mercurial and thus more engaging... More than mere eye candy, Wills’ striped constructions open a new and potentially invigorating avenue....” (3)

Several Museums have shown his work and the public has received it favorably. There are currently three pieces of work by Wills in our museum collection. It is impossible to know what the impact will be in the far future but, for now, we can say that Wills’ work continues to captivate on-lookers and draw interest in the art community.

### **My Impressions and Analysis:**

What I like most about Wills’ piece is that in its geometric simplicity it provokes curiosity and presents an illogical sense in its treatment of color and results in an illusion of depth and movement. This becomes true especially as the light shifts on the surface of the threads and spreads across the rectangular panels. Wills’ threads seem to have a voice. (1) Critic, Yasmine Mohseni in her Huffington Post 2012 review of his solo show at L.A.’s Nye & Brown Gallery gives an excellent description of how Wills incorporates science into his art.

“ Wills’ string theory hypothesizes that everything is made of tiny vibrating strands of energy, or strings, ... the strings in Wills work provide the elemental building blocks for his multi-dimensional abstractions. The strings are never still; the surfaces vibrate with color. The works are self-contained worlds that are constantly in flux.” (10)

Wills delves into an area of physics here known as “The String Theory”. “The theory (yet unproven) suggests that all matter is made of tiny vibrating strands of energy, or strings that provide a unified framework for viewing the universe”. (10)

When interacting with Wills’ “Untitled” piece the surfaces of strings vibrate with color and provide a unified framework for viewing his artwork. For Wills, “science parallels art”, a theme he continually turns to for creative inspiration.

### **Compare and Contrast the Artwork’s Relationship to other works in the Museum’s Collection**

The following pieces of art offer comparisons and contrasting elements in relation to Wills’ artwork.

1. Fredrick J. Eversley’s 1983, “Red Lens” (Cast Polyester resin)
2. Gisela Colon’s 2014, “Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod” (Iridescent Black), (blow-molded acrylic);

These artists, including Wills, have roots in the Minimalist tradition. Each artist has adopted distinctive qualities from the Light and Space Movement and share a viewer experience where “The viewer becomes the participant in their work, and their work is activated by the viewer’s perceptual gaze”. (13)

In contrast, these artists use different materials and a different process for creating their artwork. For example, Wills’ hand wrapping thousands of colored threads, contrasts to Colon’s fabricating blow-molded layers of acrylic and Eversley’s mold-casting layers of polyester resin into a geometric form.

Wills uses colored threads and natural light to play with iridescence, transparency, reflectivity, and translucency. Colors shift from a muted surface to a bright hue as threads interact with natural light and preform an optical illusion for the viewer. Within each change of the viewer’s position there is a new interaction and interpretation of the artwork.

Through a highly fabricated process of blowing acrylic, Gisela Colon’s, 2014 “Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod” (iridescent black), seduces and disarms viewers with bright iridescent light and changing colors. Colon’s emerging light creates a primitive life-like pulsating energy form that transcends and transforms time. Her belief is that her viewers are all seeking a feeling of “the real” of something organic, timeless, magical, mysterious, and quite elusive. (16)

In Eversley’s “Red Lens” he uses the “optical principles of physics that determine the properties of mirrors and lenses” to concentrate and reflect light and energy into a single point. The artwork appears to melt away either at the edges or through the center. Eversley’s fascination with using mirrors and lenses to concentrate and reflect energy into a single point offer viewers an optically distorted reality of themselves and their environment. (18)

### **Museum Purchase:**

Brian Wills 2014 “Untitled” is a museum purchase with funds provided by L.J. Cella, Donna MacMillan, Georgia & Gerald Fogelson, Susan Goodman & Rod Lubeznik, and Marilyn Loesberg. This is one of three works that are not currently on exhibition that are in the museum’s permanent collection. The other two works by Wills, one classified as a painting was gifted by Rita Krauss in 2012 titled, “Untitled” and is an enamel and oil on wood piece, composed of dental floss, vinyl tape, and string. The most recent work by Wills is classified as a sculpture and gifted in 2016 by L.J. Cella, titled, “Untitled” (Black, White, Red Wedge) oil, single strand rayon thread, and basswood on wood. Wills’ 2014 sculpture-relief, we are discussing today, complements the museum’s currently exhibited Light and Space artists working within that tradition and “potential exhibition themes of light and space, optics and perception, innovative materials and California neo-pop” (16). Included in this group is the most recent addition of Gisela Colon’s, 2014 “Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod” (Iridescent Black). Adding to that installation is Jim Iserman’s molded plastic relief; Donald Judd’s, 1988 “Untitled” (DJ 88-45

Menziken); Phillip K. Smith III, 2015 “Lucid Stead Elements Box #4”; Nicole Chesney’s 2007 “Vesper”; Anish Kapoor’s 2003 “Corona”; Frederick John Eversley’s 1983 “Red Lens”; Chul-Hyun Ahn, s 2008 “Tunnel”; and Larry Bell’s 2007 “Cube #44”. Also with the museum’s collection and not exhibited are light and space sculptures and reliefs by Helen Pashigan, Dewain Valentine, Robert Irwin and paintings by Mary Corse and Peter Alexander.

As a final note, there is a thread that connects all these artists and their artworks and that thread is embedded with the following words: light, space, color, depth, shadow, iridescent, translucent, transparent, dimension, illusion, emersion, absorption, deception, reflection, perception, repetition, activation, interpretation, and last of all thanks for your participation.



(Artwork by Brian Wills, Photo of Neil Patrick Harris & David Burtka’s NYC home featured in the March 2015 “Architectural Digest”)

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