

***White Girl, 1995. By Millie Wilson***  
***Spotlight by T Santora, April 17, 2017***

**Artist's Background:**



**Millie Wilson**  
**American, born 1948**

As an artist, Millie Wilson is best known for conceptual sculpture. Her work has primarily sought a relationship between modernist art practices and modernity's production of deviance, particularly regarding lesbian stereotypes. Wilson has used humor, parody, and beauty as disruptive strategies to insist on a dyke presence in postmodern revisionism, mixing queer girl culture with modernism to critically intervene. Like many queer artists, she embraces marginality as a position from which to create self-empowered narratives that resist dominant understandings of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

She is a Los Angeles-based artist, who was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas. She received her B.F.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1971 and her M.F.A. from the University of Houston in 1983. Wilson is now retired but was a long-time faculty member in the School of Art at the California Institute of the Arts and was an important mentor to a succeeding generation of young artists. She is also a writer who has published a number of articles.

Wilson has received numerous grants, including an NEA Visual Artists Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship, City of Los Angeles Artist Grant, California Arts Council Fellowship, Art Matters, Inc. Grant, and a Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) Artists Projects Grant. She has been published in a variety of contexts and has taught and lectured throughout the U.S. and Europe. She has been a member of the Regular Faculty in the Program in Art at the California Institute of the Arts since 1985.

In 1989, Millie Wilson had a one-person exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) entitled *Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)*. This exhibit creatively imagined the history of a modernist lesbian artist who lived in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. It attempted to recreate this imagined artist's life through a fictitious display of her letters, photographs, and personal items. The piece inserted into the history of modern art, the story of an artist who, if she had existed, probably would have been excluded. The work thus commemorates the nameless modern lesbian artist, while also critiquing the very structure of the single-person museum show as an arrangement that produces the artist as idealized hero.

In 1993, Wilson participated in the Fourth Newport Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, which included eighteen artists from Southern California. The exhibition attempted to show how different artists treat the legacy of Minimalism in a postmodern context and included three works by Wilson, *Ponies (Light)*, *Ponies (Dark)*, and *Cut*. For these works, Wilson took elements and materials familiar to predominately male artistic movements and recontextualized them with the addition of materials and discourses coded as feminine. This discourse continued to influence her work through the development of *White Girl* and informs much of her work ever since.

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Wilson has been, and remains on the forefront of Queer art. Until very recently it was not socially acceptable to be out as an LGBT or Q person. The Q sometimes refers to “questioning” but generally stands for “Queer”. In the 1980s, militant gay activists reclaimed the term “queer” to confront the homophobia unleashed by the HIV/AIDS crisis that disproportionately affected gay men. “Queer” became the preferred label for many people on the LGBT spectrum because of its lack of a fixed meaning and the spirit of social deviance it connotes.

As such, queer art over the twentieth century has been shaped by, on the one hand—the need to conceal references to queer identity and experiences and, on the other, the cultural imperative to create representations of queer identity because none exist. Concepts of censorship vs. visibility or assimilation vs. intervention are what structure queer art.

For example, the sexually charged photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe fall into the censorship vs. visibility category with visibility being the dominant theme. Wilson’s sculptures fall squarely in the assimilation vs. intervention category with intervention being the goal.

**About the Artwork:**

Gift of the artist to the Palm Springs Art Museum, 1995 mixed media construction; synthetic hair, satin, feathers, fox tail, pottery, etc. on wood stand. Overall: 84x30x30 in. (213.4x76.2x76.2 cm)



Figure 1 - White Girl, 1995

**My Impressions/Analysis:**

When approaching this artwork, one immediately recognizes it as a huge amount of hair carefully arranged atop a wooden pedestal. It is at once lovely and grotesque, traditional and otherworldly, delicate and colossal, familiar and strange. What in the world is it? What is the artist trying to say? These questions, and much more, are part of the dialogue intended by the artist. As she put it, she’s “inviting the viewer to move into a space of speculation.”<sup>1</sup>

Wilson creates visual and language-based artworks that interrupt standard cultural history by questioning normative assumptions about class, race, gender, and power relations. Her work disrupts the formal purity of Minimalism by invoking issues of sexual and gender identity. Her multi-media work explores provocative, disturbing, and humorous connections between art styles and cultural stereotypes about the body, desire, identity, and pathology.

<sup>1</sup> SlideProjector.com website: <http://www.theslideprojector.com/girlshowexhibition/artists/milliewilson.html>

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*White Girl* is one of three monumentally scaled fetish wigs (figures 5 & 6) Wilson created to explore the relationship between femininity and danger. It was commissioned in 1995 for the inaugural exhibition of SITE/Santa Fe, the first biennial of contemporary art in the United States. Under the rubric “Longing and Belonging,” the biennial asked artists to address “culturally-based ideas of permanency, displacement, exile, and heritage.”

Wilson’s contribution considered these themes through a project she called *Something Borrowed*, which placed photographic images from the New Mexico state historical archive in dialogue with objects of her own creation, such as this large synthetic wig. Wilson noted that historical photographs presented Native American culture as exotic spectacle. In addition, they privileged the dominance of white cultures, masculine power, and heterosexuality. The state’s tourist industry, based on its romantic rhetoric of the “land of enchantment, further reinforced this heritage of displacement and exile initiated by Spanish colonialism and imposed on the indigenous people of the region.

*White Girl* is “synthetic” in every sense of the word from the material makeup of the hair fibers to the items decorating the hat that Wilson found in Santa Fe’s tourist and craft shops. All the objects are bright white, faux articles, reflecting their status as artifice rather than nature. Wilson selected and obtained all the materials for the wig. She planned and executed a detailed preparatory drawing and met often with the fabricator as the work progressed. She often uses fabricators but maintains strict artistic control over her pieces.

The elaborate coiffure of *White Girl* clearly references the artifice of European aristocratic fashion. Less obviously, it also incorporates a traditional Native American hairstyle of the two-spirit person, a tribal designation for individuals who feel that they embody both masculine and feminine characteristics. The hair is parted down the middle and severely pulled into one or more tightly wrapped buns. The two-spirit tradition centers primarily on gender, not sexual orientation, and this distinction is important.<sup>2</sup> While sexual orientation describes the sexual relationship that a person of one gender has with another person, gender describes an individual’s expected role within a community. For this reason, two-spirit people were once widely regarded as gifted and honored as great visionaries, dreamers, and shamans.

Wilson found inspiration for her hair series in two illustrations<sup>3</sup> found in archival texts. One of these was an eighteenth-century advertisement by William Hogarth showing a variety of men’s wigs of the Age of Enlightenment. The other was a drawing contained in what she described as a study of human homosexuality depicting the genitalia of so-called deviant women. The startling resemblance of the wigs and genitalia (right) reminded Wilson of the

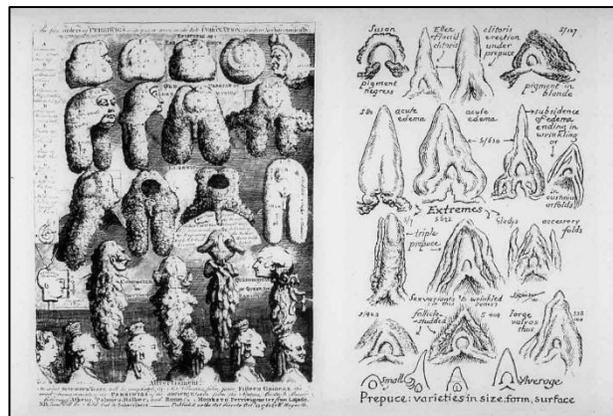


Figure 2 – Hogarth men’s wigs (left) and “deviant genitalia” (right)

<sup>2</sup> Zachary Pullin (Chippewa Cree), Native People’s Magazine: <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/news/two-spirit-the-story-of-a-movement-unfolds/>

<sup>3</sup> From video on Orange County Museum of Art web page: [https://www.ocma.net/artist\\_work/26246/current?page=1](https://www.ocma.net/artist_work/26246/current?page=1)

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transitory nature of scientific theory on homosexuality as well as popular fashion, power relations, and cultural norms assigned to men and women. Implicit in her commentary on the role of the fetishized object (in this case, the wig) is the construct of all cultural norms.

Wilson's oeuvre, including *White Girl*, incorporates elements of beauty, humor, and parody to argue against the invisible or pathological status often ascribed to women, and especially lesbians, in modern Western culture.

According to the artist: *"I think of my installations as unfinished inventories of fragments: objects, drawings, paintings, photographs, and other inventions. They are improvisational sites in which the constructed and the readymade are used to question our making of the world through language and knowledge. My arrangements are schematic, inviting the viewer to move into a space of speculation. I rely on our desires for beauty, poetics and seduction."*

Wilson continues, *"The work thus far has used the frame of the museum to propose a secret history of modernity, and in the process, point to stereotypes of difference, which are hidden in plain sight. I have found the histories of surrealism and minimalism to be useful in the rearranging of received ideas. The objects I make are placed in the canon of modernist art, in hopes of making visible what is overlooked in the historicizing of the artist. This project has always been grounded in pleasure and aesthetics."*<sup>4</sup>

*White Girl* and its counterparts from the *Something Borrowed* project were preceded by other explorations using hair as the primary medium (figure 7). These works share the underlying challenges Wilson provokes by forcing the viewer to question assumptions and stereotypes about gender, class and identity.

**The Artwork's Place in The Collection:**

*White Girl* fits comfortably with other works in the museum's collection. The curators have recently placed *White Girl* in the same gallery as Anselm Kiefer's *Nossis* (figure 3). The proximity underscores the more obvious similarities of the two sculptures: referencing feminine artifice, using white as the dominant color with its attendant allusions to purity/virginity; eliminating the human body from the structure without eliminating its connection to the materials presented, and relying on fashion to create a connection to the past. Karen LaMonte's *Pianist's Dress Impression* (figure 4), uses similar feminine imagery in glass. Although it is more literal in its presentation of beauty and form, it too manages to inspire great mystery. Standing next to the wall text for *White Girl*, one can see all three works simultaneously.

*White Girl* continues the museum's effort to not only highlight important and influential California artists, it provides a transformative experience by provoking viewers to question gender roles and the privilege of white, heterosexual males. Engaging with these questions expands our understanding of ourselves and how the construct of cultural norms in our communities impacts our own perspectives and behaviors with one another and with art.

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<sup>4</sup> Artist's CV: <http://www.theslideprojector.com/girlshowexhibition/artists/milliewilson.html>

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Figure 4 - Anselm Kiefer Nossis, 1999  
(Palm Springs Art Museum)



Figure 3 – Karen LaMonte - Planist's Dress Impression, 2005  
(Palm Springs Art Museum)

Photos of other sculptures by Millie Wilson:



Figure 5 – Daytona Death Angel, 1994  
(Hammer Museum)



Figure 6 - Mistress, 1993  
(Orange County Museum of Art)



Figure 7 – PeersInfluences, 1993  
(whereabouts unknown)

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