

# Art in America



Rob Wynne: *There Is No Artificial Paradise*, 1999, ink-jet on canvas with embroidered text, 30 by 24 inches. Photos this article courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

## Wynne's Dream Logic

BY ELISABETH KLEY

**S**nakes slithering in bed, swollen flies crawling up the wall—how does New York artist Rob Wynne manage to make these repulsive creatures so seductive? Bringing together appropriated images and fragments of texts from drama, opera and literature, Wynne has developed an installation language that is romantic and bitter at the same time. Using enlarged photographs, wallpaper, cast ceramics and blown glass, he combines elements taken from nature with deeply nostalgic cultural references. His lush environments constitute a salon of person-

al allusions and conversations between artists, writers and composers. Wynne often utilizes such techniques as ink-jet printing and machine embroidery, yet the impersonal surfaces he produces still manage to evoke an overpowering sensuality.

Since he began showing installations in the early '80s, Wynne has brought together disparate elements to form associations that are not specific or obvious. A perfect example can be found in the serendipitous genesis of a carpet Wynne showed in Paris last year. The artist James

Brown, who makes rugs with a group of weavers in Mexico,<sup>1</sup> had telephoned to ask Wynne for a design. As Wynne listened, he opened a book containing "The Figure in the Carpet" by Henry James, and the first thing he read was "I can see him there still, on my rug. . . ." There it was, just the kind of coincidental meeting of random events that Wynne is seeking to express in his work. He immediately agreed to the project, and designed a carpet with a text including that phrase.

Suffused with the kind of interactions between literature, theater and visual arts that were com-



*Untitled (Fly), 1999, luster glazed ceramic,  
16 by 12 by 1½ inches.*

*Combining references to literature, theater and the visual arts, Rob Wynne has over the last 20 years created works—ranging from collages to room-sized installations—marked by wry humor and Proustian nostalgia.*

mon in the Surrealist period, Wynne's work is always closely intertwined with text. Although he studied art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, writers and scholars were his earliest influences. As a student in the '70s, he helped catalogue the library of his friend Adeline Tintner, author of a number of books on Henry James. After graduation Wynne became friendly with the artist Ray Johnson, founder of the New York Correspondence School, and for several years they exchanged art through the mail.

Wynne's earliest works were surreal, nostalgic

collages made from old postcards. Then, using images and found objects, he began to make books and boxes that functioned as portraits of his friends. In one example, a small chipboard box is covered with a blurred blueprint of a set of books on a shelf. Inside are several pamphlets consisting of photocopies of photographs: snapshots of friends, netsuke, Arabian scenes and swimming pools, along with close-ups of bodies. Juxtaposed with these images are words and phrases stamped or typed in various lettering: "pyramid," "mask," "no face."

When Wynne met his life partner, author and scholar Charles Ruas, in the mid-'70s, his ties to the world of literature and theater intensified. Among Ruas's projects was *Conversations with American Writers*,<sup>2</sup> which was published in 1985 after years of interviews with authors including William S. Burroughs, Susan Sontag, Allen Ginsberg, Truman Capote, Toni Morrison, Tennessee Williams and Norman Mailer. As director of arts programming for radio station WBAI in Manhattan, Ruas produced a series of dramatizations of Marguerite Young's novel *Miss*



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*Mackintosh, My Darling*, introduced by Anaïs Nin and read by actors including Marion Seldes and Ruth Ford. Wynne was the musical director for these programs, a job which entailed not only selecting music by such composers as Mozart, Villa-Lobos, Wagner, Verdi and Massenet, but also creating sound effects that included glass breaking, doors closing and footsteps.

Wynne incorporated these techniques in *Sphere Redux*, an installation at The Kitchen in 1981. He wallpapered the hallway leading to the gallery with blueprints bearing the repeated image of a moon rock. In the gallery, one wall was covered with a large image of two marbles on a grid. Three video monitors showed a close-up of a rotating marble lit from within (an idea taken from a poem by Gabriele D'Annunzio), creating a celestial effect. A peephole was cut into the wall, through which could be seen an 8mm-film projection of another

er spinning marble. Playing with scale and perception, Wynne created a metamorphosis, turning a tiny toy into a planet. The accompanying soundtrack combined the violent sound of breaking glass with a piercing operatic note sung by Maria Callas.

Wynne spent the '80s painting abstractions. Although they were well received at several solo shows at Patricia Hamilton Gallery in New York, he missed the narrative

elements—language, drama and poetry—that had motivated his earlier work. In the early '90s, he made several photo-emulsion and silkscreens-on-canvas diptychs showing fragmented facial features and body parts. Then, with *Window Shopping*, a 1994 installation in the Grey Art Gallery's street-level windows, Wynne consolidated the combinations of appropriated poetic texts, images and mechanical fabrication he has been using ever since. Stage directions from plays by Jean Genet—"timidly,



*Above*, *Untitled (The Figure in the Carpet)*, 1998, handwoven wool rug (in foreground); at JGM Galerie, Paris. *Below*, *People Were Talking About Him and Tell Me Whom You Love* (on left wall), both 1996, taffeta, silkscreen, felt and embroidery, 95 by 59 inches, with *His Hair Was Dressed in Such a Romantically Wistful Fashion* (on right wall), 1996, cotton, felt, embroidery, 93 by 61 1/2 inches, displayed on *Sleepwalking Paper*, 1996, silkscreened wallpaper; at Holly Solomon Gallery.







Above, view of Wynne's 1996 series of black-and-white photographs with embroidered text on felt, installed over Butterfly Paper, 1996, silkscreened wallpaper; at Holly Solomon Gallery. Below, *Sphere Redux*, 1981, multimedia installation; at The Kitchen, New York.



naively, tempestuously, clumsily"—were machine-embroidered on cheap clerical suits of unusual sizes. Hung awkwardly on a bare white wall, the garments were framed on either side by curtains silkscreened with photographs of screaming and grimacing heads by the 18th-century sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. The curtains created a stage for the empty

suits, and the faces on the curtains expressed the exaggerated emotions of Genet's characters.

For a 1994 solo exhibition at Elga Wimmer Gallery, Wynne covered the gallery with wallpaper silkscreened with black images of snakes, "turning the gallery into a snake pit," in the artist's words. The image of a deadly coral

snake came from a photograph Wynne found in the Museum of Natural History archives. Printing by hand, the artist randomly repeated the image on paper spread out on his studio floor. Once glued to the wall, the curving forms seemed to multiply like a Baroque design gone berserk, suggesting the anxiety that can come with abandoning oneself to the random and unexpected. In a related body of work, not included in that show, Wynne silkscreened the same image on sheets and pajamas.<sup>3</sup>

With "Sleepwalking," a 1996 show at Holly Solomon, Wynne's installation language reached maturity. Conceived in response to *La Sonnambula*, the early-19th-century opera by Vincenzo Bellini, the installation included photographs with texts taken from literature, television and conversations engaged in or overheard by the artist. The first room, entirely black and white, was covered in wallpaper hand-silkscreened with black butterflies, "setting up a correspondence," Wynne says, "between the fluttering wings of the insect, the movements of a sleepwalker's eyelids, and the closing of a camera's lens as it captures an image." Like Warhol's blackened flowers, which were produced (according to Reva Wolf, author of *Andy Warhol, Poetry and Gossip in the 1960s*) in



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response to Genet's linking of criminality with blossoms,<sup>4</sup> Wynne's blackened butterflies add an aura of menace to an insect that more often symbolizes gaiety.

Hung on the butterfly wallpaper was a

rounded by a line from an aria in the opera that was also Bellini's epitaph: "I never thought I would die so soon."

The second room of "Sleepwalking" jumped from black and white to pink, orange, yellow and lime green. Wynne's use of color is never naturalistic. Rather, as in dreams, his colors are almost perfumed and seem mediated through memory. The room was covered with pink wallpaper silkscreened with a repeated image taken from an early-19th-century engraving—a portrait of one of the first singers to perform the role of Amina. The flame of the candle she holds in each image is "lit" with touches of orange watercolor. Hung on the wallpaper, several large, felt-framed fabric pieces were finished with silkscreen and machine embroidery.

A selection from Georges Bataille's *The Impossible*—"The night is my nudity, the stars are my teeth. I throw myself among the dead dressed in white sunlight"—is embroidered in orange script on deep green taffeta printed with white butterflies. A reversal of the black butterflies in the other room, they seemed to peer out like eerie bats flying in the night.

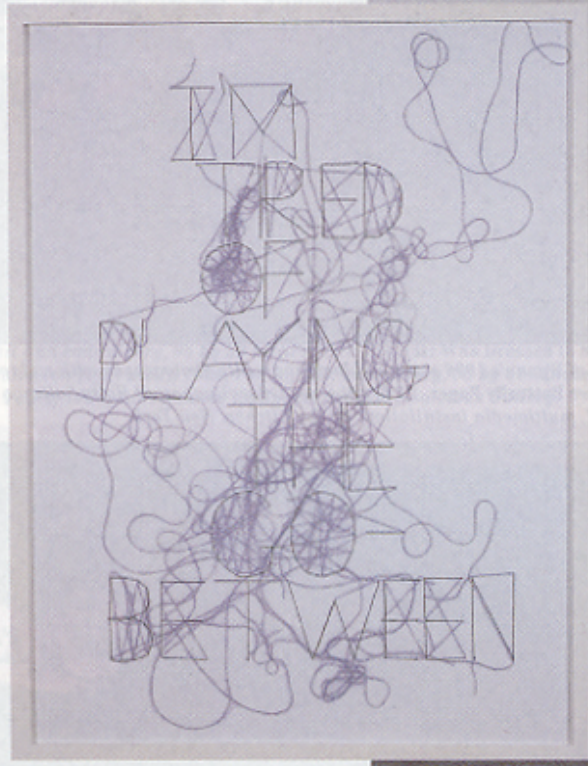
Appropriation and textual art usually bring to mind a cool, ironic institutional critique that is resolutely unromantic and almost seems to rule out the expression of feelings. But Wynne's work is far from ironic. Even as he embraces mechanical reproduction, Wynne's appropriations achieve a complex Proustian atmosphere of longing and regret. And through juxtaposition, the secondhand fragments of thought and blackened or artificially colored nature that made up "Sleepwalking" paradoxically acquire a presence more powerful than that of their originals.

**"Y**ou're Dreaming," Wynne's most recent show at Holly Solomon, revealed the dry humor lurking beneath the artist's dark sentimentality. It included

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series of black-and-white photographs in felt frames embellished with embroidered texts. The names of four of Maria Callas's most famous roles—Lucia, Norma, Medea, Violetta—are embroidered on a frame around a small black-and-white image of a smoking volcano, suggesting an equivalence between lava and emotion. In *Private Collection, Location Unknown, Original Lost, Dimensions Unknown*, an image of buildings destroyed by an earthquake is surrounded by quotations taken from captions under various reproductions of Duchamp's *Fountain*. And a photograph of Callas as Amina, *La Sonnambula*'s heroine, is sur-



*This page, Wynne's Invisible (in foreground), 1999, handblown glass letters on sand, with his 1999 series of text-based "drawings," handsewn thread on vellum, each 25 by 19 inches, and two ceramic flies (on walls); at Holly Solomon Gallery. Inset, I'm Tired, 1999, thread on vellum, 25 by 19 inches. Above left, untitled silkscreened cotton pajamas, 1994.*



