

Chae, Julie. "Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)," *Arts in a Changing America*, 2 July 2012.



Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)

Julie Chae

'What does it cost to deliver oneself to freedom?' I asked myself during interdisciplinary artist Wilmer Wilson IV's performance art piece: *Henry "Box" Brown: Forever*, in which the artist methodically covers his mostly nude body with stamps, walks silently leading a procession through the streets of Washington, DC to a designated post office, and asks to be mailed to freedom.



Artist Wilmer Wilson IV shedding his skin of stamps during performance of *Henry Box Brown: Forever* on April 13, 2012 as part of DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Series. Photo: Julie Chae

Commissioned by the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Project, curated by Laura Roulet and performed on three days in April of 2012, the suite of three 6-hour performances is a beautiful and mesmerizing meditation on the possibility of change and transformation. Full of symbolism, historic associations and

Chae, Julie. "Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)," *Arts in a Changing America*, 2 July 2012.

complex contradictions, the work addresses America's history of slavery and racism as well as the country's promise of "liberty and justice for all." More than that, the performance project explores the possibility for enduring faith and hope in the face of persistent suffering, hardship and adversity.



Artist Wilmer Wilson IV walking toward National Postal Museum's post office during performance of Henry Box Brown: Forever on April 13, 2012 as part of DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Series. Photo: Julie Chae

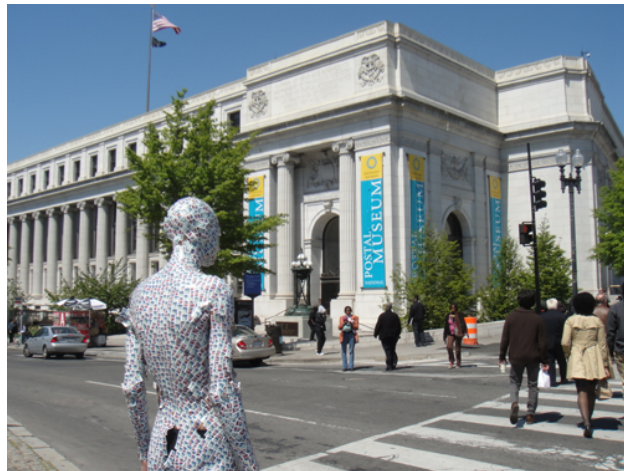
Inspired by the true story of Henry "Box" Brown, who escaped slavery in 1849 by paying to ship himself in a wooden box from Richmond, Virginia to Philadelphia, each performance of *Forever* evokes individual and collective efforts to escape a "boxed-in" existence limited historically by systematic racism and currently by lingering stereotypes. The motif of repetition – from affixing each stamp, one by one, onto the artist's entire body, to repeating the performance on different days – conveys the idea that seeking freedom is an effort that needs to be repeated over and over.

The project gets its name *Forever* from the first-class "forever" stamps (alternating between the Statue of Liberty and the American flag images) that the artist uses for the third of this three-performance suite, having used five-cent stamps for the first performance at the University of District of Columbia in the historic Shaw neighborhood and twenty-cent stamps for the second performance at and around the Lincoln Theater. Setting up a construct that will fail no matter what postage costs

Chae, Julie. "Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)," *Arts in a Changing America*, 2 July 2012.

are paid leads to questioning whether we can rely on the political system (as represented by the postal system) to provide access to "freedom."

Forever is a project in which endurance is an intrinsic element, and the artist (who hasn't eaten or drunk anything since the previous night) performs standing or walking from 9am until around 3pm without breaks for food, water or the bathroom. According to Henry "Box" Brown's memoir, Brown had spent twenty-six hours in a small wooden box "three feet 1 inch long, two feet wide and two feet six inches high," and survived the rough handling at each transfer point during the water and rail conveyance. The crate was even placed upside down for several hours, during which Brown thought his eye sockets would burst from the pressure and he would surely die. He endured the ordeal in silence, however, for he had decided that he would either be free or he would die. Wearing stamps to perform *Forever* is painful and uncomfortable due to their strong adhesive, their stiffness and perforated edges that make tiny cuts in the artist's real skin, but Wilson likewise does not let hunger, pain or other discomforts deter him from finishing each performance.



Artist Wilmer Wilson IV arrives at National Postal Museum during performance of Henry Box Brown: *Forever* on April 13, 2012 as part of DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Series.
Photo: Julie Chae

The "skin" of stamps reminds us of skin's various associations with race and color. In the project, it hides and disguises the artist's real skin in an ironic reference to the history of "passing," for instead of blending in with everyone the stamps actually create a spectacle. Wilson has performed similar endurance pieces exploring the theme of skin in the past, including during *Volta NY* in March of 2012 and as part of a current solo project, "Domestic Exchange," at Conner Contemporary (March 17 – May 5, 2012; concurrently showing with acclaimed video artist Janet Biggs' new work, "Kaweh Ijen.") The "shedding" of the skin of stamps after the postal clerk

Chae, Julie. "Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)," *Arts in a Changing America*, 2 July 2012.

refuses to mail the artist represents a symbolic re-birth, a cathartic sequence underscoring the themes of hope and faith present throughout the performance. Wilson's performance of *Forever* does indeed take us on a journey.

For many the most exhilarating part of the performance occurs during the 30-minute procession when Wilson finishes covering himself with stamps and takes off into the streets and sidewalks of DC, with all of us viewers and documenters of the project in tow. On April 13 of 2012, Wilson exited the historic Old Post Office Pavilion on to Pennsylvania Avenue into a crowd of unsuspecting tourists standing by their tour bus. En masse, they gasped and started taking pictures of Wilson with their cell phone cameras. We walked with Wilson along Constitution Avenue as he passed staring office workers, security guards and more tourists, along with notable landmarks such as the National Gallery of Art, the FBI Building, a Federal Courthouse, a monument to a Civil War Union Army General, the Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism During World War II, the U.S. Capitol and Union Station. In addition to such historically or politically significant landmarks, Wilson walked by park benches with homeless people and their belongings. When Wilson reached the National Postal Museum, he entered the post office inside to ask to be mailed and then stood at an exhibition of historic postal carrier vehicles and air planes to shed his postage skin.



Tourists on Pennsylvania Avenue Taking Pictures of Artist Wilmer Wilson IV during performance of Henry Box Brown: *Forever* on April 13, 2012 as part of DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Series. Photo: Julie Chae

Just as the successful escape by Henry "Box" Brown inspired the making of this project, Wilson has artistic sources of inspiration for his work. These include Marina Abramovic and William Pope.L, performance artists known for using their bodies to explore social issues, as well as David Hammons whose use of common, every-day

Chae, Julie. "Sealed and Delivered? Wilmer Wilson IV's 5x5 Public Art Project in DC (J. Chae)," *Arts in a Changing America*, 2 July 2012.

materials in his sculpture influenced an entire generation of artists. It is also hard not to experience *Forever* without thinking of Adrian Piper's *Cornered* (1988), another conceptual project involving social constructs and pointing out how they limit not only lives but the way people think. In a way, the slave Henry Brown found a loophole in the system – by putting himself literally in a box to be mailed to the North, he was thinking “outside of the box.” In Piper's *Cornered*, the possibility for hope and change comes from also thinking “outside of the box” by not classifying people in the narrow, traditional American terms of “black” and “white.” Likewise in *Forever*, you can't determine the price or cost for freedom using money or the postage system. Each individual can only give what he or she can, and often individuals find “freedom” within the restraints (or loopholes) of each system and situation.



Artist Wilmer Wilson IV standing in line at the post office to ask to be mailed to freedom during performance of *Henry Box Brown: Forever* on April 13, 2012 as part of DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' 5x5 Public Art Series. Photo: Julie Chae