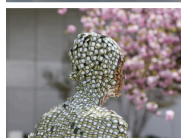
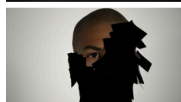


## studio international

# Wilmer Wilson IV: 'Moving between mediums is my way of remaining nimble'

The artist explains some of his performances, his interest in intervening in monuments in public spaces, why he uses detritus from the streets, and how he uses his body to push back against social and cultural control

by A WILL BROWN



Wilmer Wilson IV is a conceptual artist working across mediums including performance, sculpture, collage, installation and video. Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1989, he often combines one or more mediums as he makes site-specific performances and installations that also become photographs and videos. His practice revolves around the appropriation and recontextualisation of everyday objects – “I voted” stickers, brown paper bags, sticking plasters, lottery tickets and Post-it notes – that offer distinct insights into his surrounding environment and lived experience. At play in Wilson’s work are notions of self, identity, economic distribution and systems of meaning and production.

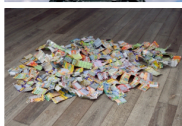
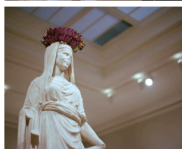
**A Will Brown: Let’s start by thinking about the various forms you work in. Where did you begin as an artist? What were you making then?**

**Wilmer Wilson:** I consider myself to have been an artist from the end of high school on. There was a general malaise of discomfort surrounding my day-to-day existence in the Virginia suburbs that I wasn't equipped to shake or address in any way. I decided to take a black-and-white darkroom photography class, taught by the best teacher I’ve ever had, Aimee Joyaux. With her guidance I began to understand how art can deal with complex, abstract and contradictory realities, as well as articulate new ways to exist in the world. My physical body dominated the composition of most of my negatives, removed from any environmental space, in stark white. Then in the darkroom I could enact all sorts of impossible manipulations and arrangements on my body, corresponding to the way I was registering things day to day. That first series of photographs was utterly concerned with the absurdities of race in America as I had experienced them. Being in front of the camera was a performative experience, though it took me a few years after to realise that.

**AWB: As you work across sculpture, installation, photography, performance and video, how has your relationship to materials changed over the years? Are you doing more of one thing in particular, or is this flexibility central to your work?**

**WW:** I came to art through photography, and that interest has been consistent. But, with time, it was clear that, instead of a medium, signs and meaning were my primary engagement – more specifically, how signs accrue collective meaning, how that corresponds with the reality of the sign, and how to navigate that disparity, or divert from it altogether.

Responding sculpturally to physical objects and materials around me became important after that. Then I learned that there was a whole history of using the body in art, and me performing followed naturally. Even when my works manifest through different media, I consider them to



be closely related – a work in one form often generates ideas in another. My performances are often very concerned with material; I think first of a resulting photograph when I'm composing a performance. They're hard to separate and I feel imbalanced when I restrict myself to one medium for too long. Moving between mediums is my way of remaining nimble: when it gets too heavy over there, I step away and make something fast over here.

**AWB: Your performance work draws a number of nice parallels with Bruce Nauman. Notions of duration, process and transformation come to mind immediately – in particular, in your video *Black Mask* from 2012. Can you tell me about that work? What are its essential ideas and aims?**

**WW:** I love the simplicity of those Nauman pieces, and the way repetition can actually lead to a sudden shift. *Black Mask* is a video in which I cover my face in black squares until they make a dense, jagged, flat silhouette over my face, and then I remove them. The piece is also a response to the post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon's 1952 text *Black Skin, White Masks*. It tries to make tangible the chasm between the social fact of blackness and its persisting complexity even after it is mapped on to a body.

**AWB: What is it about performance that is so important for you? What does it achieve that other forms of art-making don't and cannot?**

**WW:** There are myriad ways every body responds to, reifies and fails the meanings imposed on it by cultural and structural systems. It's easy to say everything is "a social construct", and it's relatively easy to feel disembodied in this networked time, but the body is where the construct becomes real and unstoppable, where the risk comes to bear, and where there is the most at stake. The artists I am interested in have a way of working and thinking that acknowledges that. Performance is arguably the most direct way of addressing the body. It is very hard to remove the specificity of a body from the composition of the performance, even if the language crafted around it tries to feign otherwise. This makes it a crucial tool in my constellation of work methods.

And it is important to me to be serious in thinking with one's body. Logical and rational thought is no longer enough. They are frequently abused and reproduce the ugliest forms of violence we see on a regular basis. Using one's own body to push back against reified social and cultural control is still one of the most potent arenas of individual political efficacy, and perhaps the only one.

**AWB: How important is site-specificity for you?**

**WW:** Site plays a shifting role for me. I spend a lot of time trying to understand what makes a place specific in a globalising era, as well as what, if anything, is still important about specificity. Globalising systems tend to assume nothing can exist outside of them. But as [artist and writer] Hannah Black said recently, technology can only magnify the social relationships from which it issues. So I spend a lot of time trying to see things that are not yet legible in a global context. This comes out most in my materials, particularly of my recent objects. As I live in America, sometimes my materials seem very American.

Performance is where the form responds most directly to a place, because, like the body, the place of a performance piece cannot be extracted either. With bodies I am in awe of their relative ability to go where they please. I often exercise this freedom by leaving the art space as soon as possible and orient myself to where I am, with people who are where I am. I also love the self-deprecation that happens in public space, where art or performance becomes one of a number of

Brown, A. Will. "Wilmer Wilson IV," *Studio International*, 9 September 2015.

obstacles that make the landscape chaotic to a pedestrian, something [American artist] David Hammons talks about.

Yet I recognise the amount of intentful time it takes to gain a deep understanding of a place and a community. My overall interest in site-specificity can only really go as far as how long I spend with the site and the people. This is important.

**AWB: Can you break down and talk about your 2012 installation, set of prints and performance *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart*?**

**WW:** *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart* is a performance in which I inflate and tie brown paper bags around my body. Once I am completely covered, I exist in the transformed state for a moment, and then I explode out of the exoskeleton by popping bags with my fists. This piece is part of the skin works from this time, in its meditation on transformation of the meaning of skin via the creation of artificial, theoretical new ones. My body activates the latent cultural history of the paper bag as an extension/casualty of global systemic racism, specifically colourism. In the United States, the paper bag has a history of being used as a test to denote lighter skin from darker skin. I thought that by embodying the line between good and bad, it might suggest a possibility for contradiction, frustration and escape from that reality.

**AWB: You've done the same performance, *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart*, in multiple venues over the past few years. What changes for you as you re-perform a work like it in a different location and context, especially after a few years have passed?**

**WW:** Performing that piece in various forms and locations was a sort of scientific experiment. The 2012 performance was the control, happening on my own body in an art-gallery context. I wanted to see if the objectifying process could be heightened via performing in a place such as an art fair. There were many more people and the speed of potential viewers is much faster in a space like that, so the time between initial identification of a performance and seeing my external state as a primary concern felt shorter.

I also performed the piece at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art [in Arkansas] in October 2014. This time I used the opportunity to see how it translates on to other bodies. Two other people of colour, one with a male body and one with a female body, underwent the progression with me at the same time. I work hard to balance between taking into account the specificity of my body, yet not have my body overwhelm the work. Using other performers is a way to reassert that. But generally, self-agency is an important component to my work, so I don't frequently compose works with bodies other than mine.

**AWB: The work you did at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) Boston, *Priestess Faust Walk*, looks so subtle, yet direct, and quite playful at the same time, with a few layers of personal history. Can you tell me about the work, what it means for you, how it lives on, and if this is a kind of performance you might do again?**

**WW:** *Priestess Faust Walk* was a performance in which I walked around Boston in *dérive* style, collecting losing lottery scratchcards. I then fastened them into a laurel-style wreath and placed it on an ancient Roman sculpture in the MFA collection. It was cathartic to bring ephemeral materials and my ephemeral self into contact with an ancient sculpture. In the summer of 2014, I spent time in Rome and was bewildered by its age. It made the things I am around on a daily basis feel extremely new and precarious. The piece at the MFA tries to play different types of sublime experiences off of one another. Playing a lottery scratchcard is an ambivalent type of sublime experience – it's urgent and colorful and seductive. It's also a transmutation of labour

Brown, A. Will. "Wilmer Wilson IV," *Studio International*, 9 September 2015.

(blood, sweat, etc) into potentially nothing. And it is loaded with larger societal class dynamics. It holds a Faustian ambivalence. But so does "history".

Intervening in monuments in public spaces is a definitely something that I am interested in mining more. I completed a related work called Liberty Walk, where I had performers place a wreath at the feet of Lady Liberty on the Washington Monument of Eakins Oval, in Philadelphia.

**AWB: I'm also interested in the work *Quilt, also made of used lottery scratchcards*. Tell me about that work and how found or gathered refuse materials, or kind of societal byproducts, in this case what is left of unfulfilled hopes and dreams, play into your work?**

**WW:** Being in public with no other aim than to be a pedestrian is the main way I come to feel connected to a place. The Situationists' ideas around the *dérive* resonate – cities are a lot less rational than their plans let on to be, and being a pedestrian lets one feel that. Discarded lottery scratchcards are a common feature of urban space. Bringing together the individual detritus and making them into something larger, via the fabric form, seemed like a natural manifestation of a monument/memorial to take that deals with a day-to-day aspect of city life.

**AWB: When we last discussed your work you mentioned the idea of "thinness" as a central aspect for you. Can you explain your notions of "thin", conceptually and materially?**

**WW:** Thin things are things that have marginal and fleeting presence. These can be materials and objects, like the above-mentioned lottery scratchcards in urban space; they can also be images and bodies. The way thin things escape this state is by accumulating together with other thin things, which transforms them into a film. A film can then coat larger objects with more presence, and have a direct impact on their meaning. This is my way of trying to take transformative repetition a step farther, and directing that mass of repetition on to the surface of a specific target. It's all throughout my work, from these performances making second skins out of other materials, to the Boston MFA piece.

There is always this diffusion and coagulation in my work, the scattered state of fleeting things and their sudden condensing into presence.

**AWB: What exhibitions or artist's work have you seen recently that has been interesting and noteworthy for you?**

**WW:** I've been very interested in the slippages E Jane enacts around the mediated body in digital space. Samuel Hindolo has been making compelling works on canvas around the shifting historical meanings of the frame and the bodies in them. And chukwumaa's recent work manages to deal with sound in a very material way.

**AWB: Can you break down and explain your Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER work, which has a number of component parts and forms? What are those parts, what is the work about?**

**WW:** Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER is a suite of three performances in which I covered my body in increasing values of US postage stamps and walked through the streets of Washington DC, asking to be mailed. The performance happened in the spring of 2012, in three different neighbourhoods of the district. It is my conceptual processing of the historical figure Henry "Box" Brown. The absurdity and grotesqueness of his methods all for his end goal of freedom seemed to bear some relationship to my skin-related works of the time, and the US postage stamp became loaded with that context. As they were performed in public, each performance became utterly tied to the location and community with which they came into contact.

Brown, A. Will. "Wilmer Wilson IV," *Studio International*, 9 September 2015.

The piece did produce aftermath in other media. The Shed Skins are a sculptural aftermath of the performance, and I also have photographic prints, video, and a photobook including the stamps from each day.

**AWB: Following up on the Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER question, can you tell me about your relationship with the Shed Skin parts, the artefacts from the performance? Do those exist after the exhibition and performance as objects, available for collection and exhibition?**

**WW:** As I alluded to above, I prefer the word aftermath to artefact. It implies an event that was disorienting or destructive, and a result that is physical, substantial and recent. Many people like to use the word "residue", but, for me, this word seems to deal much less with the material it places itself in relation to, and is more like a trace – a greatly diminished deposit. "Artefact", for me, has a heavy anthropological connotation as well as an indexical lean. Indexical records of performances can have value, but not as something that could potentially be separated from the contextualising performance and have legible or articulate meaning.

The Shed Skin works are objects that I would classify as performance aftermath. I had a show comprised completely of performance aftermath titled The FOREVER Aftermath in 2013 (at a now-defunct space called Artisphere in Rosslyn, Arlington, Virginia), and some Shed Skins were shown as part of Theaster Gates's Retreat exhibition last year.

**AWB: Showing an "artefact" in an exhibition, or as an exhibition, is a definite point of interest for me. What about the "artefact" is compelling for you?**

**WW:** The issue of documentation v aftermath is fundamentally one of authenticity, and I have a gigantic problem with authenticity. As Amelia Jones argues, being present for a performance does not equate to a more privileged, authentic experience than viewing documentation. Similarly, this sort of hierarchy is tangled into the question of aftermath. The performance document too often holds the status as a reliable or truthful vessel of a historical event. I prefer to revel in that mediated artifice and destroy the illusion of pure truth in documentation. In the process, the aftermath acquires strengthened medium-specific qualities that are relevant outside the performance context.

**AWB: What are you working on now? Do you have any big exhibitions and projects in the works?**

**WW:** I am exhibiting my text project Keef-Wulf for the first time in a gallery space, as part of Blair Murphy's Marginalias show at New York City's Field Projects. And on 10 October, I will be performing a newly commissioned work, Portrait with Hydrogen Peroxide Strips, at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC.

• *Wilmer Wilson's Keef-Wulf is at Show #27: Marginalias, The Field Projects Gallery, New York, 3 September – 24 October 2015.*