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CECILY BROWN

Dick Wray

A TEXAS NATIVE, WRAY BECAME KNOWN FOR HIS ART AND HIS INFLUENCE ON ARTISTIC TRENDS—ESPECIALLY IN HOUSTON, HIS HOMETOWN. BY EARL WEED



Untitled, 1996, oil, mixed media
on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

WHEN THE painter Dick Wray was born in Houston in 1933, the city was still early in its boomtown rise. People came to Houston to work, not make art. Over the next 77 years of his life, Wray became one of the key agents of change—not only bringing in artistic influences from the outside, but also expressing with his own bold and vigorous art the transformation of Houston as it grew to become the fourth-largest city in the United States. As such, he became one of the key painters and leading figures in what came to be called “The Houston School.”

Wray grew up in the working-class

Houston Heights neighborhood and learned to draw at an early age: cars, airplanes, comic figures. He took summer art classes at the freshly opened Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, until he had to go to work to help support his family. After high school, Wray was drafted. Upon his return from the service, he used GI Bill funds to enroll in the University of Houston. He initially studied architecture and applied himself with particular industry to drafting and watercoloring, while also studying studio art and art history.

By the mid-1950s, Houston had become the tenth-largest city in the country. Right

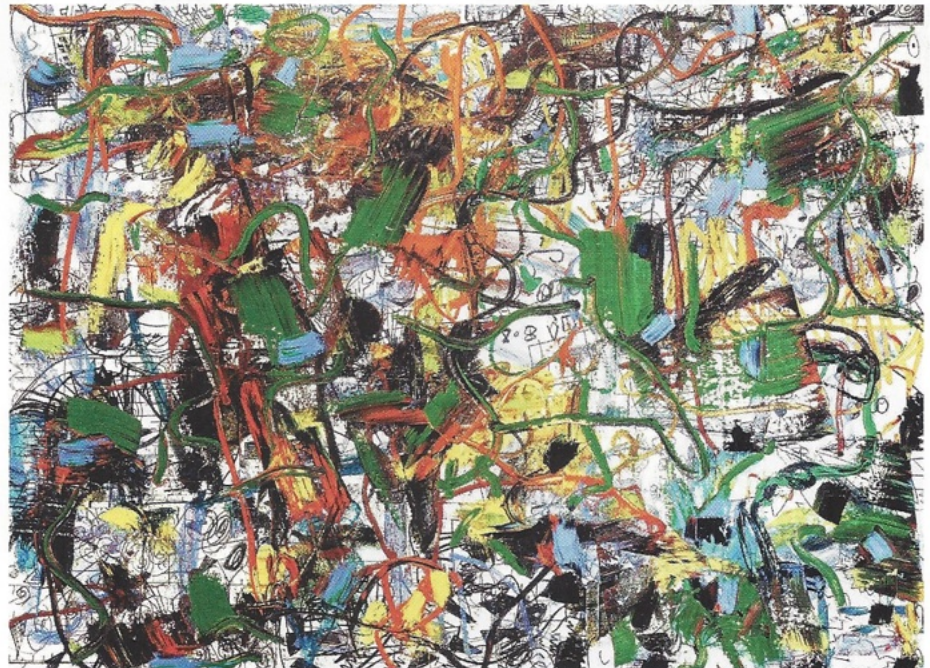


Above, left to right: *Untitled*, 2003, oil, mixed media on canvas, 48 x 36 in.; *Untitled*, 2002, oil, mixed media on canvas, 60 x 48 in.

Below: *Untitled*, 2003, oil, mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

on time, Modern Art came to Houston, largely through the influence of the de Menil family. Wray became intoxicated by the new art that he saw: Mondrian, the Russian Constructivists, Modigliani, van Gogh. Art became the center of his universe—and Houston became too small to hold him. He ultimately left school, boarded a steamer, and arrived in Paris with \$20 in his pocket; he also came to Europe with an unquenchable thirst to see, to learn, and to create.

Wray worked his way through Paris, studied in the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, even drafted in an architect's office in Denmark, all the while looking at and making art, selling when he could. Wray's work from the period shows clear influences of Klee and Dubuffet, among others. But the art-making that spoke to him most deeply came from the European abstract expres-





Above, left to right: *Untitled*, 2003, oil, mixed media on canvas, 50 x 38 in.; *Untitled*, 2004, oil, mixed media on canvas, 60 x 44 in.

Below: *Untitled*, 2003, oil, mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in.



sionists of the CoBrA Group, whose freedom and spontaneity “set my foundation,” as Wray said later.

Two years later, Wray came home for Christmas, not expecting to stay. However, Houston was now the seventh-largest city in the country. Suddenly, Houston seemed ready for him. Wray found work in the recently established Contemporary Arts Museum Houston under Donald Barthelme, who brought Wray’s work into his “Ways and Means” show in 1961. In 1962, James Johnson Sweeney, the new Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, fresh from the Guggenheim in New

York, began mentoring Wray after he was invited to participate in the 1962 Southwest Painting and Sculpture Exhibition. Soon, Wray was honored with a Ford Foundation Purchase Award and, with Sweeney’s help, obtained a guest artist fellowship at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. He eagerly uprooted his studio and moved with his new young family to California. It was 1964. He had arrived. Or so he thought.

By 1967, Wray was back in Houston, the second of several returns. He liked L.A. well enough, but the raw excitement of boomtown Houston, combined with its sustaining network, offered him the best opportunity to make art the way he needed to make it.

Wray’s timing was propitious. Within a few years, James Harithas, the new director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, offered Wray a solo show that would occupy both floors of the museum



Untitled, 2007, oil, mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



Untitled, 1996, oil, mixed media
on canvas, 48 x 48 in.


and include a catalog. By the time the show opened in 1975, Wray had filled the walls. Wray's art at this time was largely about earthy monumentality, texture, size, and simple—almost archaic—architectural forms. His show was a critical success. Yet personal disasters in quick succession thereafter shook him to his core. A studio fire destroyed most of his work. He went through a difficult divorce. Both of his parents died. Then, the deepest blow: the eldest of his three sons was killed in an auto accident.

A fierce determination to make art, regardless of the circumstances, guided Wray through these wilderness years. He lived hard, spoke his mind, and stepped on toes. Even so, his art began to take on a greater delicacy and complexity. His love of line and brilliant color began to make significant incursions into the underlying

structures of his oils; layering and the palette knife became important ingredients.

Following a teaching appointment at Wayne State University in Detroit, Wray lived for a time in the high desert of Albuquerque. In 1989, he returned to Houston for the last time. He bought a small house, built a spacious studio, and devoted the last two decades of his life to his work.

He passed away in his home in January 2011.

Wray showed his work virtually every year from 1959 forward. Wray's works have been exhibited world-wide and are in many of the finest museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. 



Untitled, 2008, oil, mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 in.