

Arts & Entertainment



Artist Stephanie Wilde installing her exhibition at Boise Art Museum.

POSSESSION

*The Art of Stephanie Wilde
Inspects the State of
Human Relations*

By Chris Schnoor

Visual art as a means of social commentary is an old and established tradition in America, but it's not seen much in Idaho.

Once we had the late Ed Kienholtz cranking out forceful, sometimes frightening projects meant to provoke moral outrage, but he was one of a kind. There are others, like Marilyn Lysohir, with a more subdued critical vision, but for the most part Idaho's straight-laced, heads-down demeanor discourages anything too blatant. The trick is to subsume the message beneath a veneer of virtuosity.

Meet Boise artist Stephanie Wilde, a master at this approach. She has more than a few things to say about the state of human relations in our culture today in her show at the Boise Art Museum (through Feb. 21) called "Possessed by the Furies," but she knows how to get us to take this pill, even willingly.

She succeeds for several reasons. First of all, Wilde is not pushing a political or social agenda, so her art lacks the self-righteous tone of dogma or propaganda. Rather, her message is a thoughtful one that has evolved out of personal grief, self-evaluation and observation.

Second, the beauty of the work, with its painstakingly rendered surfaces, elegant lines, and polished presentation, invites the viewer to stay with each piece, take in its details, and consider its message.

Finally, Wilde has a genuine, almost scholarly interest in different cultures, and her work can be seen as a dialogue with her discoveries. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of symbols and relies heavily on them in her art. This abundance of symbolism makes her ink and acrylic paintings seem from another time, when artists filled their works with obscure clues to lofty ideals decipherable only to those in the know. Her art has an intellectual and spiritual dimension that sets it apart from the run of the mill.

While this current body of work evolved out of the death of the artist's mother, it brings together the strands of earlier projects of Wilde's over the last decade and a half.

"Possessed by the Furies" argues that we live in a time of polarization and extremism, what Wilde calls a "sickness of the ego." Her mother's death in February 1994 brought her face-to-face with mortality, which in turn caused her to examine her own behavior toward her fellow human beings.

Eventually this personal journey led to the issues of decency and denial of death and illness in our society. In contemporary America she finds strong evidence that prejudice, arrogance, dishonesty and self-indulgence are the furies that possess us generally and have allowed for a

resurgence of political and social fanaticism on the right.

But this is not the first time Wilde has considered death, the taboo of illness, our fragile sense of self and humanity in her art. Since 1982 she has investigated the impact of AIDS on our own and other cultures and the prejudice, denial and lack of compassion that greeted this disease, not unlike the medieval response to the Black Plague.

Also, in the '90s she has used her art to question her own eccentricities and shortcomings as well as to examine mainstream American culture's apparent inability to grow intellectually or spiritually. Elements from all these series inform the current work, as do her personal experiences as a woman, artist and art dealer in Idaho.

“**P**ossessed by the Furies” is not your typical exhibit of two-dimensional art. Wilde puts almost as much care into the presentation as she does the execution of these works, and how they are presented plays an integral role in the mood or message she is striving to communicate.

The nine subjects are rendered in two mediums: combinations of acrylic paint and ink on ragboard panels mounted on Masonite blocks, and small graphic works etched or embossed on accordion-formatted paper and presented as limited-edition art books. These latter pieces echo their namesakes in paint, but the imagery is more concentrated and intense.

Rather than present the paintings in the conventional manner, Wilde has had seven black wooden pedestals constructed on which the paintings, many of them triptychs, lie face up and tilted slightly forward. Though they resemble pulpits, they also suggest the book lecterns in Christian Science reading rooms. This approach adds an element of solemnity to the exhibit, forcing the viewer to look down as if bowing his or her head in reverence. Only two works, *Man Radically Falls* and *Tug of War*, hang on the wall.

The paintings are in black, white and red. Black and white represent the contrasting extremes of human behavior referenced in the subjects. Wilde says that the stark contrasts underscore that there are no gray areas in these matters. Red connotes power, anger or danger—the demons that lurk behind innocent appearances.

The art itself is labor-intensive. Wilde does her ink work over heavy layers of acrylic and adds the finishing red touches in acrylic. Hundreds of acrylic dots, and ink dots atop of acrylic ones, create an overall beadwork effect. Packed with meticulously rendered, dense geometric and symbolic patterning, plus intricate (and, again, symbolic) decorative motifs, they provide almost too much to take in. The boxed book sets of etchings and embossings, too, are immaculately crafted works. Clearly, this is an artist who is possessed herself.

In nine chapters, if you will, Wilde paints a grim picture of end-of-millennium American society, from our intellectualizing of illness and death and ostracizing of AIDS victims in *Man Radically Falls* to the callous dismissal and putting out to pasture of the aging in *Spent Force*, to cults of violence in *Shorn Heads* and our children's fascination with guns in *Where Are Their Parents*. None of this is news, of course, but her unique and personal way of visualizing these issues makes them worth revisiting, and a number of her points, like the gun issue, hit close to home.

Among those of particular relevance for Idahoans are Wilde's commentaries on the religious right and its efforts to acquire power and dilute, in effect, the separation of church and state. To take something that is intended to be a personal, private source of hope and distort it into a dogma that legitimizes denial of medical services to women and uses children to demonstrate against things they can't understand is for Wilde the worst kind of extremism, one that offends her own spirituality and humanity.

In *Pointing Fingers Suffering from Savonarola*, Wilde portrays those who “use religion to coerce others into a faith system” as smug and arrogant and gives the various symbols of the movement a totalitarian dimension. (To emphasize just who she is referring to, the etching of this image in the books is subtitled *The Christian Coalition*.) These sentiments are insinuated in the manipulation and hidden agendas that are the subjects of *Tumblers and Jugglers* and *Opinionated Cacophony*, as well.

To me, the most striking work in the

show is the three-paneled, almost minimal *Thicket of Deceit*. The panels are slender and vertical, with two-thirds of the image taken up by a jet-black night sky in which one can discern leaf forms. The textured surface somehow reflects light in a way that suggests the presence of starlight. Below, in tightly drawn dense foliage, masked figures emerge only to be devoured by a dragon in an allegory of political correctness and peer pressure. The message is not exactly crystal clear, but visually the piece is very handsome. I recommend you use the magnifying glass provided by the museum and check out the remarkable detail work.

Wilde herself has learned from experience how gossip and opinions can damage lives and livelihoods, and so her *Opinionated Cacophony* might even be considered autobiographical. The sweetness and innocence of the women is belied by the hidden daggers two of them hold, and by the writhing vermin and birds of prey that surround the trio. Scenes of death on their skirts suggest the destructive power of words and innuendo. Is the figure in the center the artist herself, caught at the mercy of the fractious Boise art scene? No comment.

On Thursday, Dec. 3, at 5:30 p.m., Wilde will discuss this body of new work and guide viewers through its many levels and meanings. It is not a show that one simply strolls through casually, given the virtuoso craftsmanship and the message it imparts, but it is also not a show to be missed. **BW**