

William T. Wiley: *Mr. Sillyhead* series

Magnolia Editions is pleased to announce a new suite of unique mixed-media prints by William T. Wiley, whose retrospective exhibition “William T. Wiley: What’s It All Mean” will travel from the Smithsonian Museum of American Art to the Berkeley Art Museum in early March. Wiley is a prolific creator whose work has retained an extraordinary degree of integrity and timeliness in the face of the shifts and drifts of artistic movements and global events. As curator JoAnn Moser points out in the catalog for “What’s It All Mean,” the art world’s recent revival of interest in drawing and unpretentious, personal art serves as an excellent climate in which to review and celebrate Wiley’s ever-growing body of work.

In an interview at Magnolia Editions, Wiley explained that the Sillyhead character in this new suite is based on a found 19th century image, cast by the artist as a figure from his own past. *My wife*, Wiley told us, *Mary Hull Webster, when she was a little girl, she and the next door neighbor decided they would be married and they would be Mr. and Mrs. Sillyhead. So she always tells me I’m not her first husband: ‘before you, there was Mr. Sillyhead.’*

In developing the *Mr Sillyhead* series, an ink drawing served as the basis for a copper photogravure plate, which was printed at Magnolia Editions using black ink. Wiley then used ink, watercolor, and pastel to summon a variety of moods and themes. The lyrical text common to all of the images in the series has been embellished by hand with quips, commentary, and drawings unique to each print. In *Mr. Sillyhead with Abstraction*, the print issues an indignant reply to



Mr. Sillyhead with Abstraction, 2009
Photogravure with acrylic and mixed media; 29.5 x 22 in.

an invasion of abstract shapes from Wiley’s paintbrush: *Off me you bleeder / Just because I’m a print! you treat me as you wish / [...] Just get out of here with your big ol’ abstractions.*

The waggish charm of Mr. Sillyhead is offset in this new series by a bittersweet awareness of the machinations of the world around him. A *resigned, sardonic kind of look he has here*, Wiley commented to us: *he knows what it’s like out on the street.* As such, in addition to their shared love for Mary Hull Webster, Mr Sillyhead now has something else in common with the artist: as John Yau notes in the “What’s It All Mean” catalog, *[Wiley] is deeply in touch with his times, and how haunting they can be.*



Mr. Sillyhead with Prism (Detail), 2009 - Photogravure with acrylic and mixed media; 29.5 x 22 in.

Wiley created his first ink drawing of Mr. Sillyhead in 1997, when Bill Clinton began his second term as president of the United States and the Labour Party toppled decades of conservatism in England. The 2009 *Sillyhead* series, however, finds our dandified hero confronted with a very different political and economic climate. Wiley's text uses themes of youth and childhood to suggest both a loss of innocence and a newfound pragmatism:

From the *I kid you not!* opera
 A recent update for Mr Sillyhead..
 So now it's 2009
 You can hear us whine as we fall through the floor
 Can't take it no more
 & we're out the door of the house we thought we bought..
 with a contract around our wallet [...]
 Mr. G. says just a flaw in the model!
 As off we toddle
 goin full throttle.. ■



Mr. Sillyhead as Little Boy Blue, 2009
 Photogravure with acrylic and mixed media; 29.5 x 22 in.