



*Gerald van de Wiele: Variations
Seven Decades of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture*

curated by Jason Andrew

Black Mountain College
MUSEUM  ARTS CENTER

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This historic retrospective captures seven-decades of art by Gerald van de Wiele; an exhibition that highlights the artist's distinctive calibration of color and line while tapping the pulse-rhythm of the natural world.

Gerald van de Wiele: Ever the Dreamer

by Jason Andrew

Black Mountain College has a rich and complex narrative. It's a story full of many colorful characters, suspenseful chapters, and historic scenes. One such narrative that hasn't been told, until now of course, is the story of Gerald van de Wiele.

“By the time I was in my early teens, I knew I wanted to be a painter. There was no question about it,” van de Wiele told author and historian Martin Duberman in 1968, “I didn't know what it meant and everything, but I knew a lot about art at a very early age, maybe even 13 or 14 years old—maybe even earlier. And the path ahead seemed very clear. I knew that's what I'd be, a painter.”¹

Gerald van de Wiele was born in 1932 and raised in Detroit. He attended Cass Technical High School from 1947-1950. One day, a recent grad of the school by the name of Ray Johnson visited his class “singing the praises of a place called Black Mountain College. That was the first time I heard of the place.”² Later, one of van de Wiele's instructors, Donald Thrall, who drove Willem de Kooning down to Black Mountain College in 1948, returned with an 8mm color film he had made of his trip. “[Thrall] was so impressed with the school that he took some home movies to bring back and show them to our senior class.”³

In 1950 van de Wiele attended the Art Institute of Chicago on a National Scholastic Scholarship to study art. “I wanted to go to the Art Students League because I had my eye set on New York City, but because of the competitiveness of that application, I was encouraged by my teachers to apply to the Art Institute.”⁴

“I didn't stay at the Art Institute too long,” van de Wiele told Duberman, “Too much freedom went to my head and I just didn't stick with the regimen at school. I think I quit after about three months, sort of kicked out, and I spent about a year in Chicago just bumming around.”⁵

Although van de Wiele didn't quite take to the stiff curriculum of study at the Art Institute of Chicago, two sketchbooks from this period (on view in this retrospective) are examples of a very disciplined young artist who not only sketched from Modern Masters like Picasso, but also gravitated to study objects and artifacts in the Art Institute's rich collection of African art. These studies of masks and figural sculptures mark the beginning of a life-long fascination with the diversity of traditional arts from around the world and came to inspire van de Wiele's own personal mythology of nature.



Gerald van de Wiele
Untitled (Black Mountain College) (1956)
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.
Collection of Judith Dolnick, New York

In 1952, van de Wiele received his acceptance letter to attend Black Mountain College on the same day he received his draft notice. But before he entered the service, he joined fellow artist and friend Jorge Fick for a trip out West to Los Angeles where the pair later took a train to Guadalajara, Mexico. The memory of visiting Lake Chapala during this trip is captured in the 2017 painting titled *Chapala*.

Enticed by letters of enthusiasm from Fick, who had arrived at Black Mountain College, van de Wiele made several trips to the College. Still today he brags about his routine of hitchhiking overnight during his service in the 2nd Marine Division based out of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. On his second trip during August 1952, “I met Franz Kline and he was such a down-to-earth, easy-going guy.”⁶

van de Wiele’s military service began in May 1952 and continued until May 1954. By September 1954, he had decamped to study art and poetry at Black Mountain College. “After the service, I wanted a place where I could paint,” he told author and independent scholar Mary Emma Harris in 1971, “and a place where I could be near people that I thought would be very, you know, very stimulating to be near.”⁷

At the time of his arrival at Black Mountain College there were nine instructors and seven students. The faculty consisted of poet Charles Olson (Rector), writer/director Wes Huss, painter Joe Fiore, and composer Stefan Wolpe. Although there were visiting artists coming to the campus including writer Robert Duncan and poet Robert Creeley (who van de Wiele came to fisticuffs with in a love tryst over student Martha Davis), the student body comprised only a handful of students that came and went including Fielding Dawson, Jorge Fick, Joel Oppenheimer, Dan Rice, Ann Simone, Naomi and Mona Stea, and Jonathan Williams.

The actual painting instruction was delivered by Joe Fiore. As van de Wiele told Vincent Katz in his book [Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art](#), “Joe was very low key in the way he taught. He’d let you bring out what you needed to bring out in yourself. He didn’t push ideas. He allowed you to develop what you wanted to develop.”⁸

Despite the failing conditions at the college, van de Wiele didn’t mind. He was “looking more for a place to paint than to pile up credits.”⁹ van de Wiele further explained to Martin Duberman:

“I needed a place to paint. At 22 years old, I needed a place to sit down and be able to do nothing but paint. I had always painted, you know. I wasn’t a beginner, you know, by any means. So I wasn't going to a school to learn about art. And I wasn't going to a school to learn about poetry. And I wasn’t going to school to get an academic education.”¹⁰

When classes were suspended during the winter of 1954, van de Wiele returned to Chicago. While there, he convinced two friends, painter Richard Bogart and sculptor John Chamberlain, to follow him back to Black Mountain College in the spring of 1955.

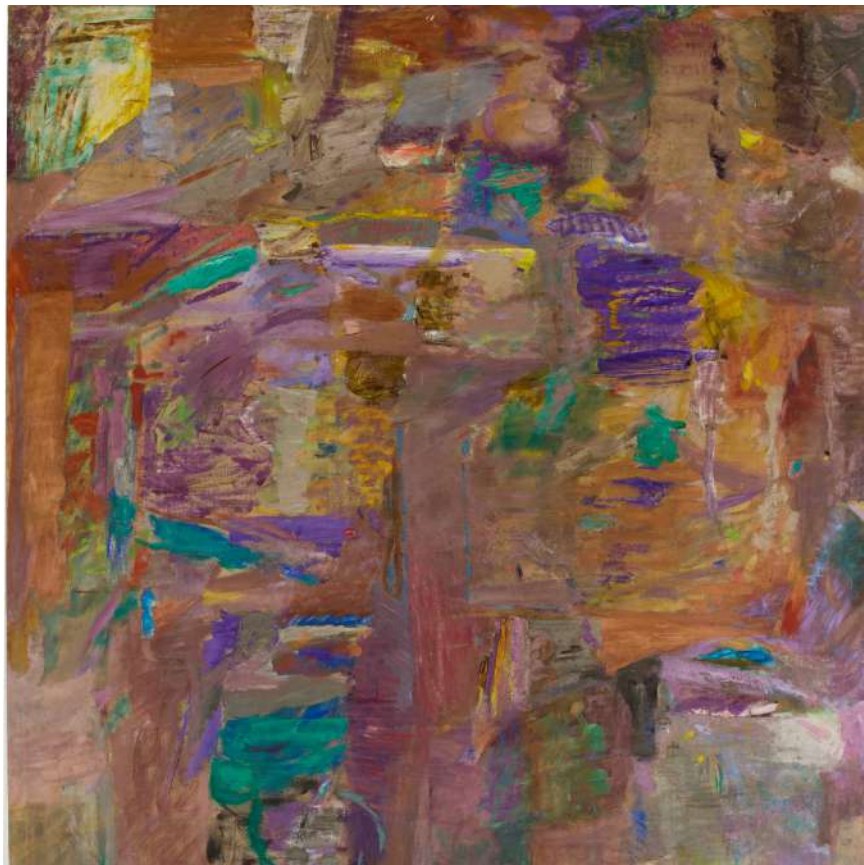
At the College, van de Wiele grew close to artist Joe Fiore and poet Charles Olson who in 1956 composed and dedicated “Variations Done for Gerald van de Wiele.” van de Wiele told Martin

Duberman, “I don’t believe I ever in my life felt that I belonged any place as much as I felt I belonged at that school. I loved that place.”¹¹ His work from this period ranged from quick portrait studies of fellow students to fully realized gestural abstract works in paint.

“It was a shock to me, you know,” van de Wiele told Duberman as he recalled learning of the college closing. “I had left in the middle of September [1956]. When the term ended I left and went back to Chicago.”¹² Knowing the college was closing for good, he made Chicago his home and reconnected with a tough band of young avant-garde artists that included Robert Natkin, Judith Dolnick, Richard Bogart and John Chamberlain. These young artists, including van de Wiele, had been either first year art students or just considering art school when Willem de Kooning’s *Excavation* arrived at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1951 and won first prize at the Institute’s *60th Annual American Exhibition: Painting and Sculpture*. The painting turned the emerging art scene in Chicago on its head.

In an interview with historian and critic Dore Ashton, van de Wiele describes his discovery of de Kooning and the new American movement of Abstract Expressionism:

“I wasn’t aware of Abstract Expressionism at all until I saw de Kooning’s *Excavation* at the Chicago Art Institute in 1952. Soon after I encountered Kline’s work, and although I was never an Abstract Expressionist, these painters had great mystery for me. They were the last things I can remember that had this mystery for me.”¹³



Gerald van de Wiele, *Wells Street* (1956), Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Private Collection, Brooklyn

In the Spring of 1957, van de Wiele married fellow painter Ann Mattingly and later that summer he and the gang of artists led by Natkin, opened a co-operative gallery in an old storefront at 1359 North Wells Street financed with with some leftover money from the Natkin/Dolnick wedding in March and additional support from chemical-engineer-turned-artist friend, Stanley Sourelis. The group “took over a down-at-the-heel shop that had seen better days as a restaurant, and sad days as a plumbing establishment,”¹⁴ and named the gallery *The Wells Street Gallery*. The folk singer, and later civil rights icon, Odetta lived upstairs.

Van de Wiele had his first solo show at the Wells Street Gallery in October 1957 and, in November of the same year, his work was selected by guest jurors Franz Kline, Philip Guston and Sam Hunter to be included in Chicago’s annual exhibition *Momentum 1957*. His artwork from this period is categorically expressionistic yet features a tunneling into the tonalities and subtleties of the natural world.

By late 1959, nearly all of the members of Wells Street, including van de Wiele, had joined John Chamberlain in New York City. Seeking to establish himself, one day van de Wiele walked into the Leo Castelli Gallery. That introduction lead to part-time work and later, his first solo show in New York City at the gallery. The large oil on canvas titled *Castelli* (1962), which is featured in this retrospective, headlined van de Wiele’s show at the gallery in December 1962 (which incidentally took place between solo shows by Lee Bontecou and Jasper Johns). The work along with others in this series was inspired by the bird-wing paintings of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).



Gerald van de Wiele, *Castelli* (1962), Oil on canvas, 70 x 66 in. Collection of the artist

In 1963, van de Wiele was included in a group exhibition of drawings at Leo Castelli Gallery, which included works by Bontecou, Nassos Daphis, Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Moskowitz, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and Jack Tworkov.

The critic, Dore Ashton, in a July 1964 *Studio International* article on the artist described, “His paintings reflect a dreamlike shifting of perspective, from the elaborate and certainly strange manners of [Carlo] Crivelli and [Cosimo] Tura to the equally elaborate and strange idioms found in recent American painting [...] phrased as they are in a language of abstract form and fanciful color, they assume qualities and associations derived from a symbolist inclination.”

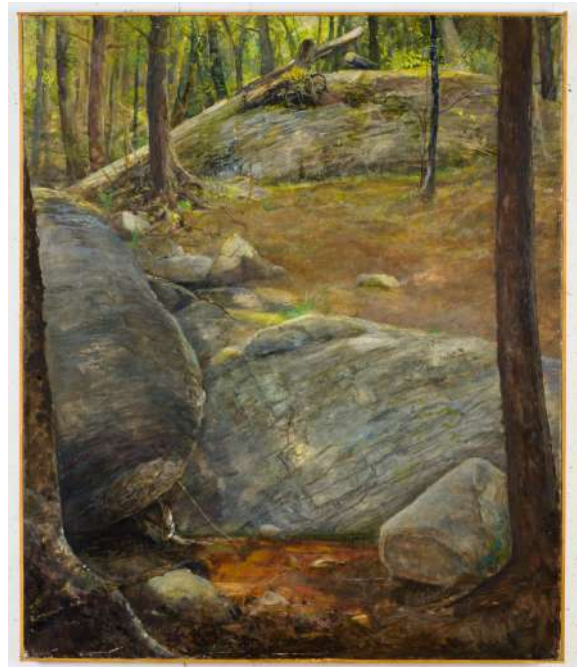
With the rise of Pop-Art, and van de Wiele’s own inclination to move towards more representational pursuits, the artist left Leo Castelli for the Peridot Gallery, exhibiting there on and off until the mid-70s. He continued to support himself and his family of five children working odd jobs including as a framer at Dain and Schiff.

“In my own way, as much as I was influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, I had such a kind of a traditional beginning, that I never could get rid of it. You know, I was always working against my natural... my own natural bent. But I worked in abstract painting from 1950 until probably 1963. I suppose the culmination of my work as an abstract painter came in my first New York one-man show that was at Leo Castelli’s. And that was kind of the summit [...] I had been feeling, I think, for a long time that I wanted to go back and to painting representationally again...to go back.”¹⁵

In 1975, van de Wiele was offered an artist residency at Harriman State Park. For ten weeks and with family in tow, he painted and sketched on the 47,500-acre park generating work not necessarily directly from nature, but from memory. The culmination of the work was presented in a regional exhibition curated by Alan Gussow at the Joslyn Art Museum in 1976. *Harriman Summer* (1975) on view in the retrospective originates from this period.

During the late 70s and 80s, van de Wiele found a foothold as a freelance photographic re-toucher. In 1983 at a dance party in a loft on Bowery, van de Wiele met his second wife the painter and sculptor Lynn Rosenfeld who had studied at the New York Studio School with Sidney Geist and Nicolas Carone. The pair continues to share a loft on Allen Street where they live and work.

Van de Wiele’s work from this decade features a return to abstraction and a strong affinity for symbolist preoccupations and surreal-like dreamscapes. It also highlights the introduction of



Gerald van de Wiele, *Harriman Summer* (1975),
Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 37 in.
Collection of the artist

woodcarving and sculpture. In works from this period, van de Wiele seems to be living Paul Klee's masterly formula "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible."¹⁶

Although van de Wiele's work slipped out of circulation from the mainstream comings-and-goings of the New York art world, his connections to artists, poets, and composers remained true. A color-rich painting from 2005, on view in the retrospective, is dedicated to his neighbor, friend, and Black Mountain College alumna the painter Pat Passlof (1928-2004). The work shares their expressive vision.



Gerald van de Wiele, *For Pat Past* (2005), Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 50 in. Collection of the artist

In works like *Agon* (2008), *Twin Suns* (2008), and *Apollo* (2016), van de Wiele taps the mystic tales inspiring the Greek tragedies, while *Toru* (2008), is dedicated to the Japanese composer and writer Turu Takemitsu (1930-1996).

In the most recent period of the artist's work (2000-present), we see a defining path in van de Wiele's abstractions toward the natural world. His current paintings, sculptures, and drawings all seem to conceptually follow a direction, not so unlike that of the early American Modernist Arthur Dove (1880-1946), whose paintings channeled the matter and texture of real objects in order to shape his most radical abstractions.

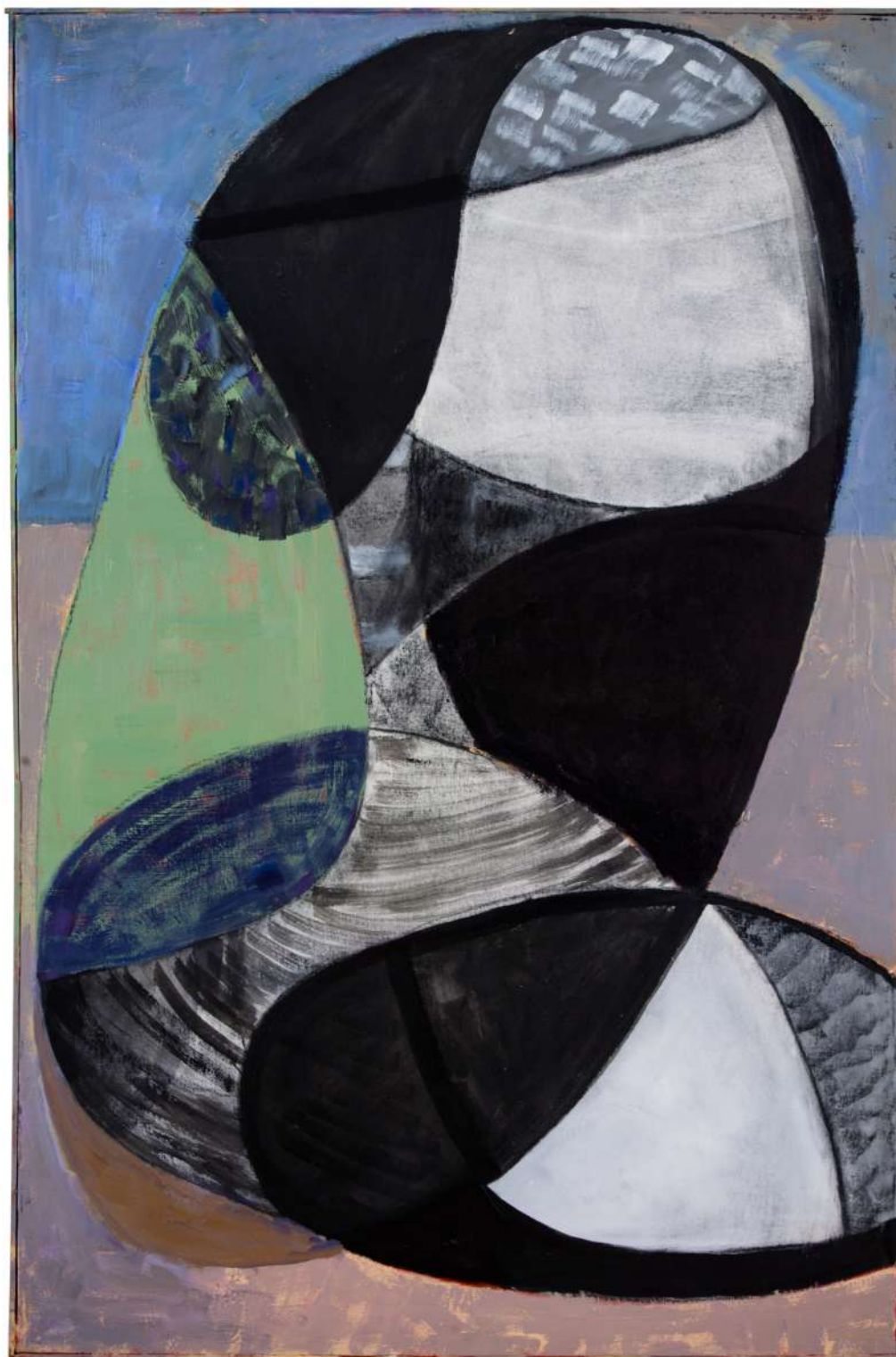


Gerald van de Wiele, *Odyssey* (2016), Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 32 in. Collection of the artist

In a painting like *Odyssey* (2016), we see van de Wiele expanding a personal philosophy that is not so unlike that of Paul Klee, who acknowledged the reality of the world he sees, but does not consider what he sees to be the “one and only world.” Like Klee, van de Wiele should be considered a dreamer, one who at once accepts reason but continually gives himself up to the liberation of the subconscious.

As interest in the artists and the history of Black Mountain College increased, so did the interest in van de Wiele’s work. He was among the few featured in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, curated by Vincent Katz for the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, in 2002. More recently a selection of his early drawings were included in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957*, the first comprehensive exhibition featuring the artists of Black Mountain College to tour the United States curated by Helen Molesworth for the ICA, Boston. The exhibition toured Hammer Museum, Los Angeles and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus. His work was also featured in a major re-visit of the Wells Street Gallery in an exhibition organized and curated by Jason Andrew in New York in 2010.

Gerald van de Wiele continues to paint and play with poetry from his studio on Allen Street in New York City.



Gerald van de Wiele, *Apollo* (2016), Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 39 in.
Collection of the artist



Gerald van de Wiele, *Chapala* (2016-17), Acrylic on panel with artist's handmade frame, 25 ½ x 28 ¾ in.
Collection of the artist



Gerald van de Wiele in his Allen Street studio, New York, January 2018. Photo: Jason Andrew

For over seven decades of my life—variations in paint and subject.

All of it is important to me, and I hope, gives evidence of the reverence I feel for the history of art—near and distant. A re-imagining of images in a fresh light is my intention and passion.

William Carlos Williams wrote, “I have done what I can, in the extremity to which I have come!”

Art doesn’t care, it only changes. Being part of that change is my satisfaction.

-Gerald van de Wiele, 2017

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The work of Gerald van de Wiele is represented by Artist Estate Studio, LLC, Brooklyn. His work can be found in the public collection of The Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC; Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Asheville, NC; Chase Manhattan Bank Collection, New York, NY; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; University Museum of Contemporary Art, Amherst, MA; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA; Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE; Smithsonian Art Museum, Washington, DC; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS; among others.

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- ¹ Martin Duberman. "Interview with Gerald van de Wiele," March 20, 1969. Martin Duberman Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, p. 44
- ² Jason Andrew. "Interview with Gerald van de Wiele," January 2018, Allen Street, New York.
- ³ Marry Emma Harris, "Interview with Gerald van de Wiele," April 9, 1971. Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina April 9, 1971.
- ⁴ Jason Andrew. "Interview with Gerald van de Wiele," January 2018, Allen Street, New York.
- ⁵ Duberman, p. 20
- ⁶ Duberman, p. 8
- ⁷ Harris, p. 2
- ⁸ Vincent Katz, ed. *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) p. 210
- ⁹ Interview with the artist, Allen Street, New York.
- ¹⁰ Duberman, p. 45
- ¹¹ Duberman, p. 40
- ¹² Duberman, p. 53
- ¹³ Dore Ashton. "Gerald van de Wiele: Transmutation of Form," *Studio International* (July 1964) p. 21
- ¹⁴ Edith Weigle. "Here's Hope for the Unknown of the Avant Garde," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, September 29, 1957, Part 7, 7.
- ¹⁵ Harris, p. 8
- ¹⁶ Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. *Paul Klee*. (Paris: Les Editions Braun & Cie, 1950) p. 14