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“Books Read and Unread are Turned into Totems, with Every Scuff Intact”

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Books Read and Unread Are Turned Into Totems, With Every Scuff Intact

Today's artists are a bookish lot. Whether or not they actually read a great deal, their reverence for highbrow literature can approach idolatry. But the painter and sculptor Steve Wolfe has taken his bibliophilia to unrivaled extremes. With extraordinary skill and ingenuity, he creates copies of used books that are so true to their subjects that it's hard to believe that they're not the real thing.

Mr. Wolfe's magical illusionism is displayed in a lovely small show of works on paper at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Some of the 30 paintings and drawings from 1988 to 2005 in “Steve Wolfe on Paper” represent the well-worn covers of modern classics like “On the Road,” “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Waiting for Godot,” almost all from his own library. They also include reproductions of old vinyl records, like “Mary Poppins” and “The Velvet Underground & Nico” and singles

Intellectual trophies that could be taken from many college graduates' shelves.

by Joni Mitchell and the Loving Spoonful.

Copying book covers may seem like a simple-minded idea, but the experience of Mr. Wolfe's works is surprisingly rich — visually, conceptually, psychologically and sociologically. Above all, you sense in his art a kind of monkish devotion that turns feats of technique into icons of a deeply personal religion.

“Steve Wolfe on Paper” continues through Nov. 29 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600 or whitney.org.

Steve Wolfe on Paper

Whitney Museum of American Art

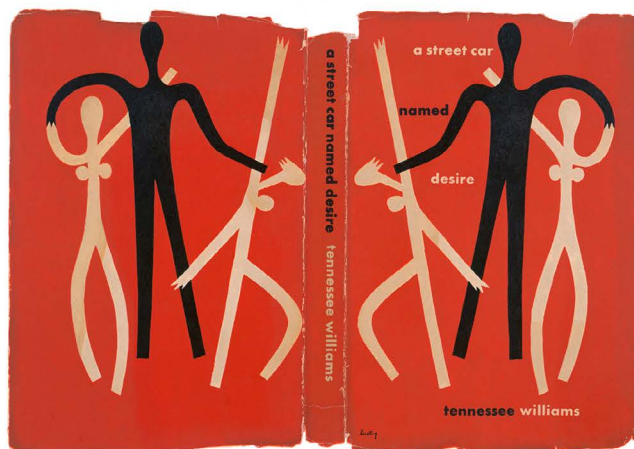
After noting the overall design of given pieces — many of which will be familiar to people who, like Mr. Wolfe, attended college in the 1970s — a viewer's first impulse will be to look for evidence that it was indeed made by hand and not by some high-quality reproductive technology. With creases, cracks, abrasions, tears and stains reproduced as faithfully as the typography and illustrative matter of the original book covers, the paintings are curiously confounding.

Trompe l'oeil paintings by 19th-century Americans like John Frederick Peto and John Haberle are incompletely convincing, partly because they include three-dimensional elements that are obviously flat when viewed from the side. But Mr. Wolfe's paintings are flat, just like the surfaces they represent — or at least seem to be.

In fact, they consist of multiple layers. Beginning with a foundation of modeling paste exactly congruent with the outline of his subject, Mr. Wolfe combines painting and silk-screening in different sequences, and uses fine tools to carve into the surfaces to create various textures. For written words he relies on photographic silk-screening.

All this technical complexity remains pretty much invisible, however. If you didn't know they were works of painstaking craftsmanship, you'd think they were the treasures of a rare-book collector.

With their fine grooves rendered by bristle brushes, the copies of black vinyl records are also amazingly realistic. The truth is revealed by the depthless central holes. Because the paper exposed in the middle and the scuffed label of the record are almost continuous, it is evident that what you are looking at is the painted illusion of only one side of the disc.



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Mr. Wolfe’s primary vocation is sculpture. Almost all the book pieces are studies for — or after — three-dimensional versions. He also makes painted and silk-screened cardboard boxes that appear to be filled with books, though in reality there are no books below the top layer.

One of these sculptures is included in the show. An open former liquor carton, stacked on top of another closed box, holds “Lolita,” biographies of Erik Satie and Montgomery Clift and a birder’s guide. Like the single-book works, the carton sculptures resonate poetically, evoking generations of nomadic college graduates who can’t bear to part with their libraries — as if by giving up their books they’d be losing pieces of themselves.

Painted studies for the top layers of carton sculptures depict from two to a half-dozen books abutting one another within rectangular formats. They are like visual jam sessions, with different sorts of photographs, abstract designs, illustrations, type styles and paintings by Picasso, Mondrian and Warhol producing jazzy harmonies and discords.

Since almost all his works are based on books from his own collection, Mr. Wolfe’s oeuvre amounts to a kind of intellectual as well as emotional self-portrait. Except for some popular items like a Tintin comic book and a biography of the Beatles, it is mostly material from the mid-20th-century Western canon. It represents what passed for literacy before the academy was taken over by the multiculturalists and in that sense suggests nostalgia for the world as it was when the artist was young.

You might wonder, did Mr. Wolfe read all these books? One of a number of pieces rendered in graphite acknowledges that he did not. “Study for Unread Books” presents three tomes in a stack with only the top one visible: “Moby-Dick.” Viewers who remember being defeated by Herman Melville’s exhausting allegory will be amused. They will also recognize the powerful, nearly erotic spiritual aura that great as well as not-so-great books have for those who love them.



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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

In Steve Wolfe’s trompe l’oeil, familiar books and vinyl records are painstakingly reproduced. Top, “Untitled (Mumm/José Cuervo Cartons).” Above left, “Untitled (Study for ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’).” Above right, “Untitled (‘Mary Poppins’).”

