

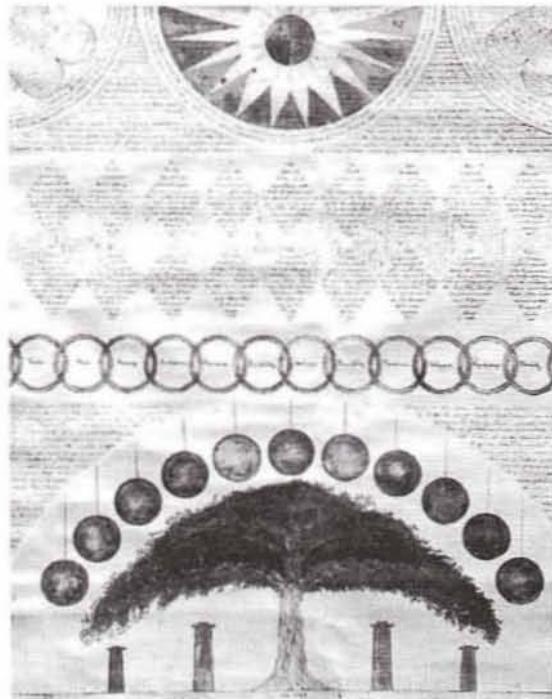


Blind Man
in the
Temple

David Wilson

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The City of Peace (1844)
Shaker Drawing

The inspiration for *Blind Man in the Temple* comes in part from early Arabic genealogical charts, but principally from the Shakers, a now defunct religious cult based in America. The Shakers thrived during the early part of the 19th century and evolved originally from a small branch of radical English Quakers. Followers of this faith led a simple life dedicated to ideals of communal living and asceticism. Committed to productive labour, they believed that to make a thing well was in itself an act of prayer and always sought perfection in their work. Shaker industry and ingenuity produced numerous inventions including a rotary harrow, a threshing machine, the circular saw and the common clothes-peg. They were the first to package and market seeds and at one time were the largest producers of medicinal herbs. Despite persecution for their strict lifestyle and beliefs, the Shakers flourished economically and contributed

a distinctive style of architecture, furniture and handicraft to American culture which has had a lasting influence on its design.

In particular, Wilson looks to the visual songs or poems made by Shaker women. These drawings were pattern-based and depicted the heavenly sphere and the natural world, serving as visual exhortations to conform to order and its attending virtues. The works, believed to be inspired by a divine hand - "The Instrument" - were concrete and visual representations offered to Believers for emulation, and as protection against a chaotic and ungodly world. Some of these patterns, possibly derived from the ceramic commemorative plates made popular as decorative family records by American folk groups of English descent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, took the form of circles linked by lines of text. The circles represented people and the text, often in an unknown "spirit language", chronicled the various relationships between them. *Blind Man in the Temple* hinges conceptually on the nature of connections; the shadowy ties that exist between people, their worldly environment, and a spiritual realm. It hardly needs to be said that links such as these are not always direct. They can be, and usually are, much more ambiguous. Connections float and can be disconnected, interconnected, broken and rejoined, interrupted or diverted, closed or open, straightforward or convoluted, short-term or sustained. There are a myriad of layers, threads and ways to unravel or read such bonds.

Wilson prefers to make work that is personal in origin, as close as possible to 'self' and to the moment, and he has been prompted to think about connections because he is far from home and is, at least temporarily, separated from a great deal that is, or was, familiar to his everyday life. Living in a different country alters the perspective you have on life in your customary territory. It changes the way you think about your work and the ways you interact with those you spend time with on a daily basis. Established patterns are turned on their heads, and you must blindly make your way through other people's routines, belief systems and ways of life. The insulation provided by this cultural complacency is punctured, leaving you vulnerable, senses alert, to the disorientation - as well as the stimulation - of a new way of thinking.

So it is that in *Blind Man in the Temple*, aluminium foil, normally used as a house lining, has been given a different character. The material is transformed, its familiarity made strange. Its origins are not concealed but by giving it a new context, by framing it a different way, an element of invented mystery permeates the whole. Over 700 circles develop relationships with each other via the lines joining them. Each operates at an individual level, and is self-sufficient to a degree, but adopts many different roles when related to the others. The obviousness of the circles is at the same time flavoured with an elusiveness, so that they at once represent both isolation and connection.

The dim lighting in the Annex serves to heighten the atmosphere of sensory deprivation hinted at by the title, while also emphasising the play on reflections. The mirror-like quality of the material itself invites us to make our own connections, to combine them with those already established. The shimmering luminous surfaces fracture, deflect and absorb the light rays, all the while making and breaking associations that are warm and cool, fragmentary and whole, soft hued and impenetrably brilliant. The resulting shadows make tantalising allusions to realms beyond immediate comprehension and appreciation.

The process of change, of transformation, that any person or object undergoes when transported to a different environment or placed in another milieu, is of critical interest to Wilson as he explores the nature of perception and reality. For the Shakers, the song/poem drawings promoted meditative edification, and Wilson is interested in how people access this state. The Shakers had no model or framework to follow, so it was their labour, their craft and the familiar activities of their day to day home life that were transformed into a spiritual manifestation. In Wilson's work emblems and motifs recur and the processes he employs frequently involve repetitive actions which are reflected in the end result. By repeating the process, the action takes on a mantra-like quality, allowing a disconnection from self and a connection to something else. Such a process unfolds like the tracings of a journey, open to a multiplicity of meanings and possibilities. "The journey is mine," says Wilson "moving to the point where it is yours".

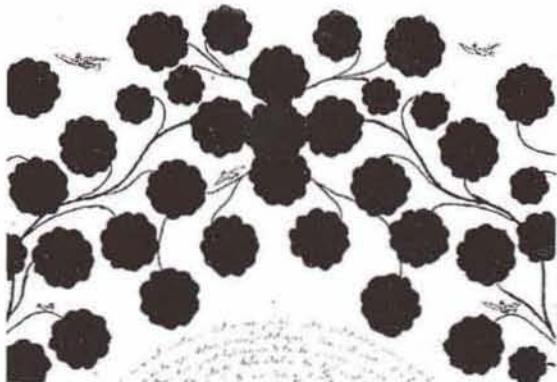
Information about the Shakers and the two illustrations shown have been sourced from the following books: Flo Morse, *The Shakers and the World's People*, New York, 1980 and Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism*, Indianapolis, 1993.

David Wilson is a visiting artist and art lecturer from Tennessee, U.S.A. *Blind Man in the Temple* is a site specific installation created for the McDougall Art Annex during Wilson's visit to New Zealand in 1996.

Wilson completed an M.F.A at the University of California, San Diego and has studied with Italo Scanga, Allan Kaprow and Manny Faber. He teaches at the University of Tennessee and has participated in both solo and group shows throughout the United States and in Australia.

Recent exhibitions have been held at: Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York (1996); Florida Center For Contemporary Art, Tampa, Florida (1995); Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, Tennessee (1994); Southeast Center For Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina (1993); Performance Space Gallery, Sydney, Australia (1992).

Text: Elizabeth Caldwell Design: Simon Mulligan
Cover: Based on a preliminary drawing by David Wilson



A Bower of Mulberry Trees (1854)
Detail from Shaker Drawing

