PAULA WILSON

Born 1975 Chicago, IL; Lives in Carrizozo, NM

EDUCATION
2005  MFA, Columbia University, New York, NY
1998  BFA, Washington University, summa cum laude, St. Louis, MO

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2019  Paula Wilson: Entangled, 516 ARTS, Albuquerque, NM
2018  Paula Wilson: Floored at Williamson Knight, Galerie Suzy Shammah, Milan, Italy

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
The Studio Museum Harlem, New York, NY
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
The New York Public Library, New York, NY
Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA
The Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY
Art in Public Places | New Mexico Arts, Albuquerque & Santa Fe, NM
Saatchi Gallery, London, UK

Paula Wilson: Entangled

516 ARTS

516 Central Avenue SW, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102
Open Tue – Sat, 12-5pm
505-242-1445  •  516arts.org

516 ARTS is a non-collecting contemporary art museum in the center of Downtown Albuquerque that celebrates thought-provoking art in the here and now. Our mission is to connect contemporary artists and diverse audiences. 516 ARTS presents relevant exhibitions and public programs, which feature a mix of local, national and international artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
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ABOVE: Paula Wilson & Mike Lagg, Yucca Moth, 2019, ash, pine, black walnut wood, acrylic, oil, resin, beads, nectar, fishing line, photo by Madeline Cass  •  COVER: Paula Wilson, Seed, 2018, silkscreen, monotype, woodblock print, acrylic, oil on muslin, elements made in public program with Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts & The Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE, photo by Etienne Frossard
The Naturalist
By Alicia Inez Guzmán

When the wind kicks up, which apparently is a lot, Carrizozo looks like a smudge on the horizon. The Sacramento Mountains to the southeast and nearly everything in the greater Tulúma Basin turns gauzy with fine dust. Come closer and there lies another landscape—the Valley of Fires—lava fields that look like bulging hunks of charcoal ground interspersed with spiny desert fauna, agaves and cacti; and, I dare say, the most ubiquitous grove of yucca plants in all of New Mexico rising from the surroundings.

Walk into artist Paula Wilson’s studio and two 20-foot-high yucca tapestries hang, dark silhouetted contours she printed with woodblocks on muslin fabric. The old Ford garage where they seem to float is connected to two century-old buildings in Carrizozo, El Cibola Hotel (where her partner, Mike Lagg, has his woodworking studio) and the Lyric Theater. The trifecta makes up a good chunk of Twelfth Street’s historic district.

Moving to Carrizozo from Brooklyn ten years ago was what Wilson calls political, a break from an art world center where the way in which she wanted to be an artist wasn’t possible. In her current body of work, Wilson says she read African Americans to the Great Outdoors, by Caroline Finney, which describes why, “Black people have a different relationship to the environment,” because, in part, of the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.” Environmentalism excluded African Americans from its purview over the course of the 20th and even 21st centuries. Where that movement created gatekeepers to police bodies of color, Wilson responded by turning toward the yucca and yucca moth—looking to nature for a beneficial relationship.

Treating the yucca and yucca moth as pollinators, in particular, are rapidly endangered by climate change and industrial agriculture. Bees receive the lion’s share of the attention, but what of other pollinators, those like the yucca moth? In this body of work, Wilson calls our attention to the moth and the flower, symbols of the desert, on the one hand, and, examples of biological mutualism, on the other. Having evolved together, the yucca and the yucca moth are entangled to the point that one would not survive without the other. Wilson puts a microscope on this relationship, making her art a call to ponder the poetics of the natural world in tandem with her own.

In one monumental figure, a woman’s arms are out-stretched, her body a patchwork of tapestries—black, white, and red printed abstract patterns. Only her core and face are painted with thick, gestural strokes. Curly salt-and-pepper hair frames her head, as she looks straight forward, a dormant yucca rising up from her center. Below, a red vessel with two figures kissing, sharing one contour between them, lies amongst tiny debris. It symbolizes the yucca moth larvae burrowed and hibernating in the ground waiting for summer. Altogether, it’s a self-portrait—Wilson as herself and as a towering yucca plant. In one scene of her film Spread Wild, Pleasures of the Yucca, she is also a yucca moth, sensually flapping her wings under the ambient light of the Lyric Theater’s stage. Lagg is her only audience.

To Wilson, making self-portraits is a way of inserting herself into art history, of becoming a larger-than-life yucca plant or where she doubles as a yucca moth show this mutualism, a meditation on how what surrounds Wilson gives her life, and, in turn, entangles us.

There, as in real life, her clothing is handmade—sewn and printed herself—another work of art. The film is a mirror of her life, one spent creating worlds within worlds and artworks within artworks. In this space, motifs recur as do figures (self-portraits), together forging an entire visual mythos where Wilson not only makes art, but also different versions of herself within it.

Entangled, as she says with Lagg, Wilson is also entangled with herself, with place—Carrizozo—and with making narratives that capture that life. Her monumental figures as a larger-than-life yucca plant or where she doubles as a yucca moth show this mutualism, a meditation on how what surrounds Wilson gives her life, and, in turn, entangles us.

“Having evolved together, the yucca and the yucca moth are entangled to the point that one would not survive without the other. Wilson puts a microscope on this relationship, making her art a call to ponder the poetics of the natural world in tandem with her own.”

Alicia Inez Guzmán grew up in the northern New Mexico village of Truchas where she first began hearing stones around the land. With a PhD in visual and cultural studies from the University of Rochester, NY, she now writes for local, national, and international publications on histories of land use, culture, and contemporary Chicano and Indigenous art. She is the author of Georgia O’Keeffe at Home and was a 2017 Creative Capital Foundation Arts Writers Grant recipient. She is currently Senior Editor of New Mexico Magazine.

Paula Wilson, Yucca (interlocking), 2018, woodblock print on muslin, 87 x 161 inches
Paula Wilson, Salty & Fresh (video still), 2014, video, 8 mins 30 secs
Paula Wilson, Spread Wild: Pleasures of the Yucca (video still), 2018, video, 2:04 minutes