

This exhibition was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Menil Collection, Houston.

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This exhibition was curated by Franklin Sirmans, Terri and Michael Smooke Department Head and Curator of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Carter Foster, Curator of Drawings, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Panel discussion with Steve Wolfe, Franklin Sirmans, and Carter Foster
6:00 p.m., Thursday, April 1, 2010

NOTES

1. All quotations by Steve Wolfe are from e-mail exchanges with Franklin Sirmans, April–May 2009.
2. Eleanor Heartney, "Steve Wolfe at Luhring Augustine," *Art in America* 84, no. 11 (November 1996): 114.

Cover: Untitled (Study for Mosquitoes), 1999. Oil, screenprint, modeling paste, and paper mounted on board; image: 6³/₈ x 4³/₄ inches, sheet: 13 x 10³/₄ inches. Collection of Gail and Tony Ganz

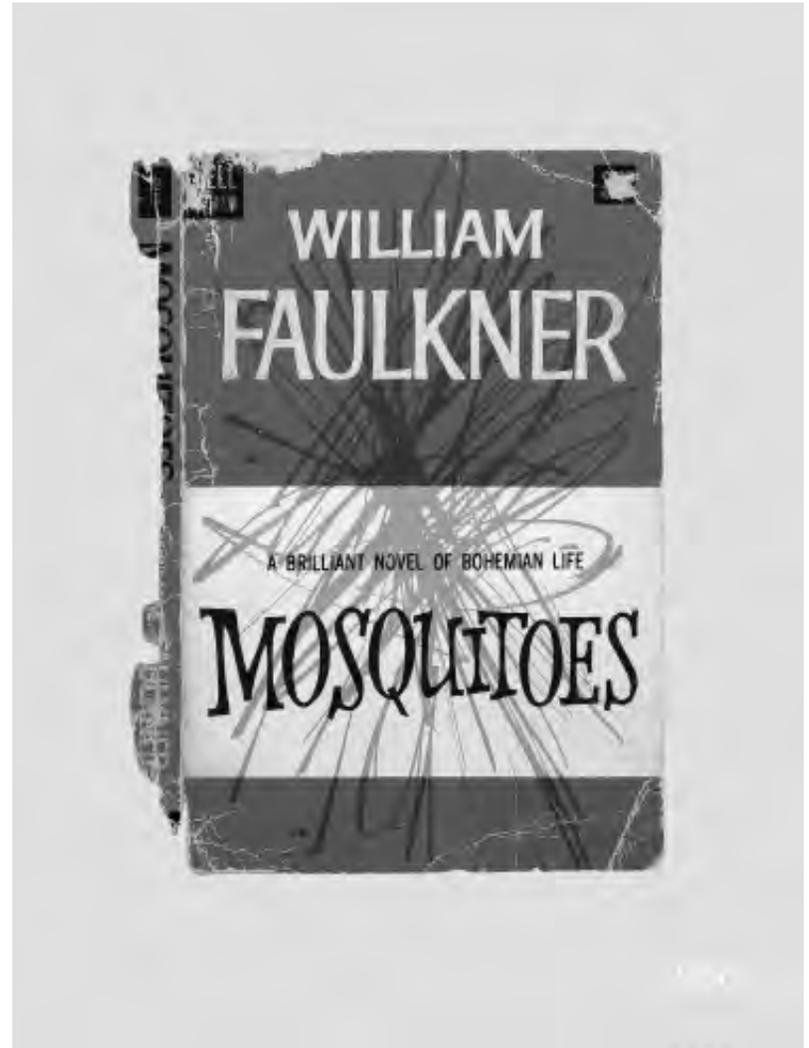
All works © 2010 Steve Wolfe. Photos courtesy of Luhring Augustine, New York, and Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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STEVE WOLFE ON PAPER



THE MENIL COLLECTION

April 2–July 25, 2010

Since the mid-1980s, Steve Wolfe (b. 1955) has meticulously created sculptures and drawings of astounding craft and visual presence. Embracing trompe l'oeil, a traditional form of representation that seeks to realistically depict the subject exactly as it appears, he uses modeling paste, graphite, and ink to create illusions that “fool the eye.” With tattered books and vinyl records as his subject matter, Wolfe mines personal and collective histories to create a distinct cultural catalogue of the 1960s, '70s, and beyond. This exhibition, “Steve Wolfe on Paper,” is the first in-depth look at his paper-based works.

Like many artists of his generation, Wolfe moved to New York City in the late 1970s to begin his career. He has said of this period:

I was pretty much teaching myself how to draw and paint in a way that I never learned in art school. I wanted to be able to render things realistically, and then hyper-realistically. I drew and painted friends who posed nude, scenes from life inside my saltwater aquarium, photographs of film stills, and objects that were around my work area . . . I guess a turning point was when I decided to paint and draw the sketchbook I was drawing in . . . I did a lot with that image until finally I made a three-by-four-foot painting of the sketchbook that was verging on being a sculpture . . . and decided that . . . a painted sculpture of a book hanging on the wall in the way a painting would involved some interesting and twisty logic.¹

Expanding from the sketchbook, Wolfe gradually built a library of re-creations. Personal book and record collections tell stories, and as Eleanor Heartney said in a 1996 review of Wolfe's work, “few possessions are more revealing of their owner's personality, preferences, and self-image.”² Predominantly referencing his own collection, Wolfe's representations of books form an archive that not only reflects a self-portrait (they include novels by favorite authors such as Colette, Gustave Flaubert, and Vladimir Nabokov), but also chronicles a generation coming of age in the 1960s. His depictions range from classics of adolescence, like J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, to the mature readings of an adult artist, such as Gertrude Stein's *Picasso* and John Cage's *Silence: Lectures and Writings*.

Although books are mass-produced, Wolfe portrays individual books. Describing one piece, he said: “I began . . . a Penguin paperback of *Anna Karenina* that I had read on the beach during the summer. The illustration . . . [was] very complex with lots of images. The book itself was puffed up to twice its normal



Untitled (Study for *Nine Stories*), 1992. Oil, screenprint, lithography, and modeling paste on board; image: 7 x 8¾ inches, sheet: 12 x 13¾ inches. Collection of Daniel Weinberg. Photo: Anthony Cunha

size from being read with wet fingers and from having been exposed to sun and rain for several months.” The wrinkled, cracked covers and the creased pages—evidence of the reader's personal and tactile relationship with the object—are painstakingly reconstructed in Wolfe's work, suggesting that this interaction is just as important as the text itself. The patina of use may not be as immediately apparent in his depictions of record albums, but looking closer, we see that the well-worn vinyl grooves and the scuffed details of the circular label are carefully rendered.

Wolfe's re-creations are astonishingly realistic, and our immediate desire is to touch the “books” and “records.” Yet this desire—enhanced by the artist's decision to portray objects that *must* be repeatedly handled in order to be appreciated—is simultaneously thwarted by the inappropriateness of such an action. With careful craftsmanship and a deft sleight of hand, Wolfe transforms books and records into art objects. In our virtual age of Kindles and iPods, his trompe l'oeil pieces provide a compelling counter to an increasingly ephemeral world.