

# A CONVERSATION

*Mimi Gross lives in New York with her daughter Saskia. She is drawn to "real/artificial/natural/unnatural people, atmospheres and places." Her first exhibits were in Provincetown, at the Art Association in 1957 and at the Sun Gallery in 1958. Past works include: "Il Piccolo Circo d'Ombra di Firenze" (five friends who created a traveling shadow puppet show in Italy in 1961); short movies, painted sets, props and animations; large narrative painted sculpture projects; Ruckus works in collaboration with Red Grooms (1960-76) and many costumes and sets for dance groups including Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham and Douglas Dunn. She has had many solo shows and is currently represented by the Ruth Siegal Gallery in NYC. She grew up spending summers in Provincetown and continues to do so.*

grocery shopping, cleaning the loft once a week with Tim, getting the mail. In a way it isn't very interesting, but it gives me a lot of space between my times when I do work. It makes me more contemplative and more able to deal with people that I'm close to, which is very important to me. It makes me feel independent, the opposite of helpless.

**MG:** One of the interesting things about art students in art schools, especially in graduate art schools, is how few really know about being alive in the world as an artist. The couple of times I have been a visiting artist, the main question was, will I get a gallery, will I have a place to live, will I have an outside job, how will I manage. They have no clues.

**HW:** The quality of our lives is so different from lawyers or people in business. Less money, more time. When I

different. You can't go around on your own until you are older.

**MG:** Did you go from Barnard to the Studio School?

**HW:** I dropped out of Barnard after one year, then did two years of working shit jobs. I was demoralized by flunking out. But I was making pictures at home, then I took a course during the spring term at The New School. Drawing from life with Sidney Simon. He was very sweet, left me alone and did not tell me to do anything. Then, two years later in 1969, I went to the Studio School. Nobody messed with me for two years. I imagine I looked like a giant porcupine standing at an easel trying to draw. Nobody would come close to me, but they would say, good porcupine, don't shoot your quills, keep drawing. That was my first way of going public. In high school I did art

## MIMI GROSS &

*Helen Miranda Wilson is a painter who lives in New York and spends long summers in Wellfleet, where she grew up year-round. Her first show was at the Cherry Stone Gallery in Wellfleet. She has since had numerous solo shows in New York and elsewhere. Currently she travels to many points around the world to paint outdoors from direct observation. This spring she exhibited in San Francisco at the John Bergguen Gallery. For most of 18 years she has lived with the sculptor Timothy Woodman. She has known Mimi Gross for seven years. This conversation took place in New York in April, while Mimi was busy producing the set and costumes for "Matches," a new dance piece by Douglas Dunn.*

**Mimi Gross:** Preparing canvases, it's always helpful to have an assistant who will stretch and prime them. But it's nice also when you prime things yourself. You get familiar with the scale, so that when you are actually painting you know where your scale is.

**Helen Wilson:** Doing in-between stuff, as well as daily chores, accomplishes more than the task. The reading, the

give slide talks, I always try to say what I was doing otherwise when a certain slide comes up. I give a real simple chronological talk. I usually explain how I was getting money at that point. They say, gee, that's really interesting, your parents were giving you money, your parents weren't giving you money. They want to know all about it. At a certain age, that's more useful to them than art theory. Most of them are middle-class kids who think perhaps it would be nice to live the life of an artist.

**MG:** I had a clue because my father, being an artist, taught me how hard it was to support yourself. My family gave me an understanding of the lack of easiness of being an artist. They've been supportive of my work.

**HW:** Like you, I think I had a clue, because my mother was, among other things, a painter who stopped painting, while my father was a writer. As a child I had my own, very separate, social life. I grew up in the country. I spent a lot of time playing with kids who certainly weren't from artist's families. I had a very different life from friends I met later who came from families similar to mine. Here in the city, a child's life is very



Mimi Gross

Helen Miranda Wilson

privately the way other kids wrote poems. But you went to high school here in the city? I've seen beautiful pictures you made when you were 15.

**MG:** I went to Music and Art.

**HW:** In the sets and costumes you made for the Douglas Dunn performance, did you think it all up and then come to them with your ideas?

**MG:** Douglass and I have worked to-



gether for ten years, and I've known him for longer. He's one of my favorite choreographers and dancers. We've made many different projects together. My background was in cardboard costumes, mainly face front, used for the movies and animation, the camera stopped every second. You stood and waited, you sweated, you fixed your makeup. There was no continuity. Dance is continuous, with endless formal restrictions. The costumes have to be able to stretch and be washable, reusable.

**HW:** It amazes me that you are able to simply thrive on collaborations. My way of working is solitary all the time, whereas you do it both ways. **MG:** When other people are present, there is a kind of quasi-feedback that makes you feel somebody is looking at what you are

with wonder that you could just ask me. It was such an open process. I'd never worked collaboratively on anything visual before. I'm more private, maybe too low key.

**MG:** You might enjoy it, actually. Dance can be very low keyed, beautiful, with a drawing quality.

**HW:** I did paint some sets for the Wellfleet Actor's Theater, for Paul Suggs. I'm so gregarious that the work made me feel that I don't want to lurk at home by myself anymore. And then my whole personal structure began to fall apart. I found out a long time ago that if I spent just so many hours interacting with people, I feel like something very wrong had happened. There's not enough time for me to feel things. Do you remember when you started working collaboratively?

even though I have not been temperamentally able to do it, is that in New York it's so hard to get to know somebody outside social situations. You go out to eat with them or take a walk or go to a play, but you never get to act with them.

**MG:** My relationship with Red Grooms was largely influenced by the fact that we worked well together. We both liked to work all the time. That was how we spent time together, our way of communicating. We liked having people around. What really started our working with groups was working on movies, painting sets and props for our own movies. You learn how to organize. You have to know how long things take to make.

**HW:** I wish someone would do an article, not a judgemental article, on the difference between artists who use assis-

# HELEN WILSON



Helen Wilson

Mimi Gross

doing. It has nothing to do with the show. For me, the performance is second to the process before it. And there's an advantage to meeting people who aren't your chosen group of friends. You can have a wider mythology.

**HW:** The first time I called up here, you said, "Come with me this afternoon and paint," because you were doing some set. Nope, I didn't come. But I was filled

**MG:** Five of us did this puppet show in Italy. Five people traveled with a horse and carriage. We traveled for eight weeks, giving a puppet show every night. It was a little shadow puppet show that I had made up. We performed it from the back of the carriage, and a third person played a banjo outside. It was really beautiful. Until this day, people who saw it remember it well. It's their fantasy memory. I was 20. We went from Florence to Venice and back.

**HW:** When I was that age, I was a poet. Then I stopped writing poems and started painting. A very different thing, but I have never gotten away from making a single painting like a poem, alone in a room or outdoors. Then I went that one year to Barnard. I was still trying to be a poet. I went to learn Russian.

**MG:** You picked a hard thing to do. If you took English, you might have done well.

**HW:** I was good at languages, but academia included requirements like chemistry, which I wasn't good at. My adult life started when I dropped out. That is when I started reading in order to educate myself. One of the reasons I keep thinking about working collaboratively, now,

tants and artists who don't. In the theater, or in the way you and Red and all your helpers worked, it's seen as an open thing. But a number of artists producing today are able to have two or three shows a year by working with assistants, and they're invisible. I am not thinking this is corrupt. Rubens had assistants, all the Renaissance painters had workshops. It was a way of training. But these days, people don't usually give credit to their assistants, even when they do most of the work.

**MG:** The whole history of art has to do with apprentices who learn then to become masters.

**HW:** I would think it would be better than art school because you would be doing a job. But when an artist has a big show coming up in two cities and he or she employs two or three assistants, I wish some information would be included in reviews saying how many hands went into it. There is an onus not to do that because the art market is saying the work is a unique product. I have known a number of artists who were assistants who say, while they are working as assistants, that they would never use assistants themselves. I have never



used an assistant for anything. It's not austerity. I'm just interested in seeing what my limits are. If somebody buys a painting of mine, I have done every single thing on it.

**MG:** There is a big difference between collaboration and using assistants. You are now seeing me at the end of this two week binge of getting a lot of work done. One of the wonderful things about this recent project using assistants is that it was well organized. They built things and I was free to paint everything myself. This was a very hardworking crew that didn't talk. That is the best kind. They were all just working. Two guys were roommates and one guy knew the girl who recommended all three of them.

**HW:** One time I was sick and could not even vacuum. Somebody cleaned for me in Massachusetts. One of the things I loved about it was that I had to be very clear about what I wanted. I had to assess how long things would take and I had to organize one thing after another in the muddle of my mind in order to tell someone what to do, even on a simple domestic chore level. But I used to clean houses professionally so I know what went into it.

**MG:** After the fiasco at Ward's Island, where I made this big statue that after three years the Sanitation Department

took down, because the hospital didn't want to maintain it, I thought I would never work with anyone again. They thought it was a liability. Actually it was a woman waving, about 25 feet high, made with PVC pipes and other materials like cement, gaterboard, fiberglass and steel. The rats were on the grounds while we were working.

**HW:** Real rats?

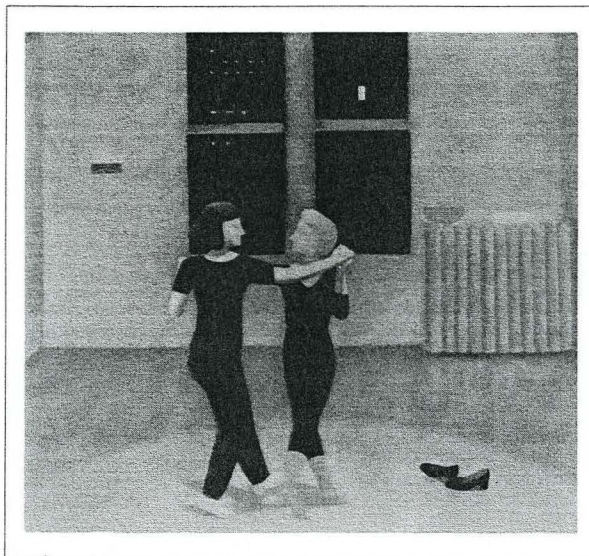
**MG:** Manhattan Psychiatric Center. Real rats and mental patients. A beautiful park but a terrible place. But, to change the subject, Helen, I have been curious to ask you for quite a while and I have been preparing this moment: Do you work totally from memory? Do you make drawings for your panels, for your cityscapes and landscapes? What gives you clues and cues as to your memory?

**HW:** I go out and on one afternoon or one morning I work from life on the Masonite panel, then that becomes the painting. I memorize it while I'm doing it as if it were a piece of music. If there's a cloud, I memorize it like a Chinese character, plus I get down the whole

standard of light and also the structure, the spaces and shapes. After that, I work from what I have down, on the same surface at home. No photos or sketches. Except for my nocturnes, which I memorize entirely. Sometimes I go back to check the profile of a mountain range. But a cloud or the specific quality of light — that's all from the first day. My friends who are realists, like Altoon Sultan, can go out day after day.

**MG:** As far as the content goes, your interest seems to be in the poetic moment.

**HW:** Well, it's like when you are outdoors and not thinking about a cigarette ad or buying real estate, or anything else



*Dancing at Home*, 1981

Helen Miranda Wilson

that people generally associate with landscape, such as the fact that it is your vacation and now you can have fun. It's more the sort of moment where you are obtaining it by looking at it intensely, being in the present. When they see something beautiful, people often feel they can't take it all in. They feel a great sense of sadness, a melancholy and longing, because they cannot keep the landscape. I stopped feeling that way when I started painting outdoors the way I do. When I am there, I am really able to be there. It's not a matter of taking home later, or even of interpreting. It's a matter of touching it all with my eyes, as if there were a dance going on and I step in and do it for a while, so that I don't feel like a wallflower. Taking a snapshot is not enough. But you, you work from life too, sometimes.

**MG:** I love to do people from life. That's my favorite thing. It has something to do with what you described about landscapes. Really being there with that person. I love the way every part of that person is the person. Even

drawing clothes, I would like you to know, if you only saw a shirt, that it was Tim's shirt and not anybody else's.

**HW:** Yeah, in every piece of DNA there's a code for the whole person physically. That's why people can make babies out of two cells. I was listening to a jazz program one night and a famous trumpet player was saying, "I want to play so when my momma turns on the radio in the middle of the night, she knows it's me without anybody having to tell her." One part identifies the whole.

Some people invent out of their heads and are satisfied with beautiful images. Unfortunately, there's a kind of narcissism where you don't get that surprise from the outside information. People that work from life, and look at something real and physical in front of them, see it through a triangular process, which gets them out of their head. I started doing landscapes to save my own life, so I would get away from what I was thinking, which was temporarily no fun at all.

**MG:** The *cul de sac* of art for its own sake is that things become stale, less vital or wanted in the world. Observation broadens our imagination.

**HW:** It gives a kind of refreshment. For the same reason I like it when there are friends in and out of my studio.

And I don't mean only painters reacting to my work in a sophisticated way. It isn't like I need approval, but I do need company witnessing the fact that I am witnessing and doing. They give me energy. I can number those people on my right hand. I give them that power because I trust them to care. Do you have anyone like that?

**MG:** I feel that Saskia, my daughter, is very like that. She knows me, but she also has a removal from my work. She doesn't mind being extremely truthful. She's observant and accurate. She wants me to be happy with my work. I love her and I presume she loves me.

**MG:** I love two writers, Kafka and Bruno Schulz, because they both have this irony, this sense of humor, in the middle of the worst shit. You talk about novels where people don't seem to love each other. Kafka doesn't even pretend to have people love each other. He doesn't write about it. Although it's an existing factor in human life, he doesn't concern himself. He writes about people



who live without love. That is a very strong modern statement that he's illuminated.

**HW:** I had a shadow cast over me this spring from reading too many novels where the characters acted on each other without love — novels like Maupassant's *Bel Ami* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*.

**MG:** The writers themselves certainly loved. That is something to keep in mind. They loved enough to transcend themselves, to describe other people as well as they could. In actual life, we are all familiar with the fact that the professional, well-known person has trouble coming across in that direct loving and affectionate manner with people close to them.

**HW:** There is a wonderful essay by Dr. Johnson about the difference between the writer and the writer as a person, the discrepancy between what one produces and who one is. I am not only a painter, I am a person who paints, wholly accountable. I remember reading a novel by Alison Lurie where people do love each other, and a character says, "You get the first thing you want in life. Usually you don't get the second thing as well." After I read that, I had to stop and put the book down on my chest. I thought to myself, my God, what's the first thing I want in life? I better

get my priorities straight. I didn't immediately think I wanted to be a great painter. I felt I wanted to be happy, to have a life, to be a mensch.

**MG:** Do you feel happy?

**HW:** My norm is that I wake up every morning happy, but it is so much more complicated a feeling than some friends of mine seem to mean when they say they are happy. Usually their happiness depends on all the things they can forget. The more things they forget, the more happy they are. And when they love it seems more like two junkies shooting up together in an abandoned building at midnight. But how about you? Do you feel happy?

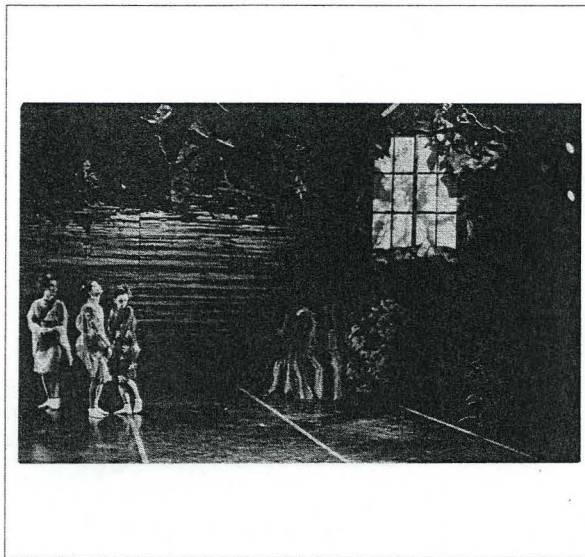
**MG:** I've had great moments. I had some cheap thrills last week when I watched the dance. They had no real rehearsal. Then came the first performance. The lights got together and the sound got together. It was a cheap thrill which I equate with a form of happiness. It was undiluted happiness for at least five or six moments during that performance. That is a very high ratio.

**HW:** It is the happiness of resolution after hard work.

**MG:** It certainly passes as fast as it comes. Already, it's real life again, a sort of passive time in this one week until the performances are over. The tensions were focused on one thing, but now it's back to paying the bills.

A subject I meant to ask you about concerned, not so much illustration, as images with words. I thought you might have some good examples or could talk about your feelings on reading, writing and imagery. Illustration works when it's not literal, as it does with William Blake.

**HW:** I hate on a gut level images that



Set and costumes designed by Mimi Gross

need any kind of text. But I feel that a correspondence which isn't linear or literal, between the image and a set of ideas, can be great. As in the different pieces of a John Ashbery poem. His poems don't happen one thing at a time, they happen more like paintings, all at once.

**MG:** You can read any part of it and it's all there, especially in a long poem of his, "As We Know."

**HW:** But if you think you are following the line of the poem as if it's a story, you don't get it.

**MG:** What about Tim's work? He has made images that are transformations from stories and myths. But it seems he digests an idea that may come from a story, and it becomes a visual idea.

**HW:** His stuff is very different from mine. He did a piece after *Moby Dick*, depicting an exact moment in the book. But sculpture is so physical, it somehow does not seem like an illustration to me. None of my "diary" paintings are actual moments in the narrative of my life. They were more like images that repre-

sented my memory of how I felt. They would be adequate to my feelings, but they would also keep the facts of my life veiled from somebody else's surveillance. I could hide in what would look like an actual image of something happening.

**HW:** While you were on the phone, I was sitting here drawing, thinking about what you were saying about the quality of getting to know somebody's face. Of course, you get a feeling. I have never drawn you before. When I draw a person, I am looking at the corners of the mouth. The most telling part of the face is always the line that a mouth makes when it closes. On your face, it's so delicate and mercurial that I redrew it two dozen times while you were talking on the phone, mesmerized by it. I still don't have. You know, it's the beginning of my trying to draw it for the rest of my life, if I'm lucky.

**MG:** Have you drawn Tim?

**HW:** I have drawn and painted Tim so many times. He's very easy. He has a beautiful, structural face, and he's a light person. Most light people like myself are indefinite. I wish I had brown eyes and dark hair.

**MG:** Alan Finkel has brown eyes and he's impossible to draw. His thoughts are quicker than the amount of time it takes to make a drawing. The inner thought of the

person is changing, and the eyes reflect those changes faster than you can possibly draw them. Five minutes later you feel each varied expression, each one complete. Until you know someone really well, you can't stop with a single pose or it becomes superficial.

**HW:** I loved painting heads. In '74 and '75, after I'd been to Italy, I did one head after another. It was very compelling to work with the person right there. In a way, it's a collaboration. Then, afterwards, you'd have their icon, or effigy. It evokes them in a very primitive way.

**HW:** In Catholicism they want so much the image of a dead person to still be there. Even today they'll be a photo of the person under glass on their gravestone. It's very interesting. I think once a person's dead, they evaporate. The mystery is that they exist in people's minds and in their artifacts, but their body is gone. That's what so amazing about people who are alive, when the bodies are here. But when you have an

(continued on page 172)



## GROSS / WILSON

(continued from page 121)

image of them, it becomes more than simply an identifying image, as it does with the statues of Egyptian Pharaohs, or the 10 million pictures of Jesus.

**HW:** Until I saw the sets you made, I did not understand how completely you think about the whole room. I see a sense of that work in your studio with your big pieces. With me, I will take a small physical thing and have in it an enormous amount of space. You will actually take on the space in which the physical things are. You would take over the whole room. I would like to make a little window into another world.

**MG:** You do manage to take a small panel and make enormous spaces with it.

**HW:** I'm not saying I have a reduced image. The implication tries to be very large, but it is much more an implied idea than your stuff which actually tackles three dimensions and is generally larger. In the set last night, that painting was 40 feet of a pond or lake with reflections, with all the leaves and the clouds above a tree house.

**MG:** I did all the painting except the massive leaves which were mass done. One guy stuck two brushes to a pole going back and forth with two shades of

green on it. The helpers made everything. They primed the cardboard and we together engineered how the thing would be put together. Naturally, a 40-foot painting has to be done in parts, all done here in my studio. In the theater it went around two walls. The tree we pre-fabbed by doing the trunk up to the ceiling. We made 12 or more branches that had sub-branches. It was all done with PVC pipes.

**HW:** I can make beds, I can do minor repairs around the house, and grow things in the garden, but the way you deal with tree dimension is beyond me. Which is why I hang around and love people who are able to do that. Tim is not as far gone as you are. You draw, and if it doesn't work, you just start popping pieces right out of the picture plane by cutting and bending it.

**MG:** I have rectangle-itis. I can't deal with rectangles, constantly struggling with how you make a composition.

**HW:** Maybe that's because you're more of a sculptor.

**MG:** How did you feel about the Cezanne drawings at the Modern, where he did many different drawings on a page?

**HW:** I didn't see it yet, but I have the book of Cezanne drawings that Tim gave me, so it is very familiar. There are so

(continued on page 182)

## GROSS / WILSON

(continued from page 172)

mary of Madame. You can tell he is looking at every bit of her face. It is very disturbing when someone is drawing you if you don't understand what is going on, because they are looking so intently. They are not necessarily looking at you at all. They are thinking about you in the most specific physical way, more immediate than making love, because that is so involved with one's own head.

**MG:** That is apropos the person being there, then gone. Have you ever made a portrait of a person, then done a spirit portrait of them?

**HW:** I did a couple of pictures of Francesca Woodman (the photographer, Tim's first cousin) after she died. It was very compelling making her image and thinking about her, trying to deal with the fact that she had killed herself. That is why I did them. One of them was called "Dancing at Home." She was inhibited about the idea of dancing with partners at parties. I told her, "You come on over. I'll put on a record and we'll practice having fun." That was just another thing that didn't happen. So I did a picture of her and me dancing in my loft after she died. Painting somebody when they are right there is very different from that. That is why I started doing landscapes after years of making my diary paintings, which were all fictional, out of my head. I wanted to start thinking about being connected to what was outside myself, to get some good surprises for a change, and it worked. □□