

Brent Wadden talks to Lisa Wilson

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BY LISA WILSON



Brent Wadden is a Canadian artist who has been based in Berlin since 2005. His paintings and weavings range from colourful displays of symmetry to subtle monochrome motifs of repeating shapes. By applying tools and techniques from handicraft traditions to contemporary designs, he blurs the line between the traditional categories of fine and folk art. Lisa Wilson is a folklorist and self-taught painter currently working as a graveyard conservator in the ghost town of Port Royal, in Newfoundland.

WILSON:

So you live in Berlin now, but can you talk about where you are from?

WADDEN:

I grew up in a fairly small town called Glace Bay, on a smallish island off the east coast of Nova Scotia called Cape Breton. It's been kind of a bum place to live since the '80s, with its population in constant decline. We've sadly managed to use up most of the natural resources that our parents relied on for survival. I kind of want to say that, because of its location and depressed economy, the island lacked culture, or at least the kind I was searching for in my teens. But thanks to dial-up, I had access to all kinds of new information that was not available at the time. It allowed for a whole underground scene to develop around music and skateboarding that wouldn't have been able to exist otherwise, and that connected a bunch of random kids from many small towns across the island.

WILSON:

Does Glace Bay have any heroes for you? What have you left behind and do you ever hope to retrieve it?

WADDEN:

Sadly not so many heroes. I have admiration for the local characters that seem to exist in every small town, but there is no one I have 100 per cent admiration for. I have a large extended family and many of my good high-school friends still live there, so it's always a good time to go back and visit. Besides my friends and family, I have a shitload of art supplies and music equipment and a few boxes of random nostalgic objects stored at my parents' house that I've been too stubborn to part with over the years.

WILSON:

Do you ever consider going back to set up a studio?

WADDEN:

You know, it's always in the back of my mind, but I can't see it materialising just yet. It would be too hard to go from a big city back to a small town. I moved to the mainland in the late '90s to go to art school and even then, just moving a few hours away, you were seen as a bit of a traitor for leaving the island. But with that said, if I came across a decent studio space, I would definitely consider spending more time working there while trying to keep my connections off the island.

WILSON:

I agree that parts of eastern Canada can feel cut off from the rest of North America—do you see those feelings of isolation as linked to your early visual endeavours?

WADDEN:

Looking back on when I was living in Nova Scotia, I don't think I was so aware of its isolation from the rest of the world, because at that point I'd never experienced influential things like art or music first-hand. It was only natural to experience it in other ways, such as through books, magazines and television. It was only once I left that could see certain elements of the Maritimes that don't exist anywhere else, such as the domination of craft as the prominent art form.

WILSON:

You once told me how much you admired the National Film Board [of Canada]'s *Folk Art Found Me*, a documentary about outsider art practices in Nova Scotia. Can you see anything in these artists that you also see in yourself?

WADDEN:

What I find most fascinating about the artists in the film is that they come from a place that doesn't exactly support their kind of creative output, yet they still manage to survive. I totally admire the purity of the objects they make and their ability to utilise whatever materials are at hand.

WILSON:

You work in a few different mediums—weaving, painting and drawing too—but it's clear that you are hooked into some recurring imagery.

WADDEN:

There has been a continuous evolution throughout my work, but stylistically, it's true that there is something that has been tying it all together from the beginning. One constant is how a shape or colour directly influences and/or enhances the next. When painting, I can change the composition or colour over a dozen times before it feels right. I've been weaving now for about two years, which is such a different process from painting. They are so different, yet complement each other nicely, because when weaving, I'm forced to have some kind of plan before I start.

WILSON:

Your recent paintings tend to have a symmetry to them. What do you see when you look at them, and what do you think other people see?

WADDEN:

All of my most recent paintings are formed using a rigid grid structure combining horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines disrupted by one or more circles. The contrast of geometric and organic forms create portraits of characters. They are getting more and more abstracted and less obvious as portraits, while still utilising the basic framework. Some people notice the characters instantly while others can miss it entirely, which I think is a good sign that the paintings fulfill different needs for different viewers.

WILSON:

What kind of references and influences do you draw from?

WADDEN:

I draw inspiration from all over, but mostly I'm attracted to objects that are handmade and have some kind of special quality to them. It's hard to explain, but I can admire a Picasso just as much as a crusty wooden lawn ornament my uncle made in 1987. You can check out my blog, where I post reference material as well as my own studio progress on a semi-regular basis.

