



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Tom Wudl, 2020
July 17

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Tom Wudl on July 17, 2020. The interview took place at Wudl's studio in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Matthew Simms for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. Well, here we are. We're recording. And this is Matthew Simms. And I'm speaking with, via Zoom, with Tom Wudl in his studio in Los Angeles, California, on July 17th, 2020. And this is for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art's pandemic project where we've been reaching out to friends and talking to them essentially about, you know, what the experience of working in the pandemic has been.

So how are you? How are you doing?

TOM WUDL: I'm doing well, thank you, very well. I'm good.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And uh do you want to speak a little bit um about the exhibition at LA Louver? I know that the exhibition was up—I'm trying to look at the dates that it was up. It was up, more or less, right through this period of pandemic, from March 11th, I believe, through May the 2nd. Has that been extended?

TOM WUDL: June. They extended it to June 20th, but now it's closed. Yeah, and—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay, okay. Well—

TOM WUDL: Yes?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Talk to me about about that experience, how that went.

TOM WUDL: Well, we were able to have the opening. And the very next day is when everything really closed. I was actually very pleasantly surprised. I thought we were going to be there all by ourselves that night because it was already clear that the, you know, um shutdown was going—was imminent. But many people did show up and were very supportive. And then that was that, you know. And then for the last couple of weeks of the exhibition, the gallery was able to invite people by appointment. People could call, make an appointment, and they had a few visitors after that. However, I have to say that they did a—they did everything they could to give the exhibition an online presence. And in many ways, I believe the show got a lot more viewership because of all their efforts nationally and even internationally than it would generally have been. And one of the highlights was that at some point, either the second week or third week of the exhibition, the online magazine of the Royal Academy in London featured this exhibition as one of the 10 best shows that was going on around the world at the time. So that was completely unexpected and very sweet.

[00:03:11]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: So you know, the gallery, really they put together a beautiful online presentation of the whole exhibition, the catalog, the essay for the catalog. So they did everything they could. And what can I say?

MATTHEW SIMMS: I watched some of the videos. Yeah, they were—you know, you really had a sense—obviously, one wants to see the work in person, but you really did get a sense that you could feel, as best as possible, as though you were having the experience of moving through that space at the LA Louver and seeing your work. The show was *The Flowerbank World*.

TOM WUDL: Right.

MATTHEW SIMMS: That was sort of the general—can you tell me a little bit about the origin of this—of this broad kind of context or [inaudible]—

[00:04:05]

TOM WUDL: Well, *The Flowerbank—The Flowerbank World* is taken from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. And as you might know, the last decade or a little longer, that has been the primary text that's preoccupied me, um, personally as well as artistically. And, um, so, you know, that's where the title for the show comes, and most of the titles of the artworks are appropriated from from the Sutra. And I do want to emphasize that it's an English translation, that it's really brilliant, and it's the best one around by Thomas Cleary. And it's just astonishing to me that that, in itself, is such an accomplishment, for someone to have taken this text and made it available, right, for our generation for the first time in the history of the world, really. So it's pretty great.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And the work, itself, could you talk a bit more about the specifics of some of the work? Um I don't want to start to describe it because you were the—you were—you've made it. Some of the key concerns in it, perhaps?

TOM WUDL: Well, um, how shall I put it? You know, I used to say that my intention was not to illustrate the Sutra. But to some extent I am doing that. It's unavoidable. And I'm not going to try to go to great lengths in denying that, you know, although my intention is not to be an illustrator. But it's just turned out that way. That, that seems to—uh, I believe that's what I'm doing.

[00:06:24]

The Sutra itself, there's a great deal of symbolic imagery. And it, you know, one of—it's called the *Flower Ornament Sutra* in translation, the *Avatamsaka*. And the—so there's a lot of floral imagery. And there's a lot of ornamental imagery, particularly with jewels. But you know, visually it's very rich imagery, but symbolically we're not talking—the flowers represent teachings of various sorts, practices of various sorts, as well as do all of the ornamental kinds of, you know, fabulous descriptions.

So the text itself is just something from the—from the very first time I read it, the very—when I got through reading the first paragraph, I just knew it. I knew that this was something that I'd been looking for always. And somehow I'd been preparing myself in order to meet the challenge. And the kinds of descriptions in the Sutra are really evocative in the best way a literary source can attempt to do in describing every potential facet of all of creation. You know, I'm not trying to say this to be affected or anything. But that's really what's going on there. So the potential is just vast. And one of the phrases in the Sutra that comes up often is unbounded. You know, there's just no limit to to it.

[00:08:29]

I don't know if I've really answered your question, but that's sort of—the the paintings themselves, the drawings are—uh, my imagination is motivated by that. And, um, one of the things that I want to communicate visually is this unimaginable vast propagation and proliferation of endless activity that allows everything to manifest in the world, like you, and I, and this conversation, right. If you just stop and think for a second of the possibility—one of the—one of the themes that comes up frequently in the Sutra is that you might be able to actually take an inventory of every single atom and every single, you know, subatomic energy event in the universe, but you are never even going to come close, even if you can do that, to the unending vastness of these teachings.

[00:09:59]

And you know, visually, um, one of the strategies that I employed to try to communicate this, the minutiae that are continually propagating, proliferating, and allowing all of this to manifest, by these tiny little pips. They're little clubs. And, um, they—for me, the thing that is really effective about that little club image is that it's simultaneously figurative and emblematic. It's a very flat, emblematic image, but it's also figurative. And because of its structure, it's a really nice visual metaphor for molecules and atoms clustering together. That's —

MATTHEW SIMMS: Lobes, kind of lobes of that are kind of together.

TOM WUDL: Yes. You can imagine them coming together in any number of configurations.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And I've seen these appearing on petals of flowers in some of your—you know, when one looks very closely.

TOM WUDL: Correct.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I'm interested to know how this idea about this infinite kind of, um, diversity, how does that then relate to the practice of attentiveness to detail? I guess that's the question.

TOM WUDL: Well, okay. You know, what I've said before is that the minute I began looking into the Sutra, not only did I understand that it would be my artistic companion for life, but also my contemplative companion. So like all Buddhist texts, the Sutra is not meant as an instruction manual, but it is intended as a motivator to meditate. There's never—there's not one line in the Sutra that is instructive in that way. It is primarily, in my opinion, a motivator to meditation. And anyone who meditates knows that the vast literature on meditation practice, even the instructional literature, which is vast, is useless. It's of no consequence. It's not a substitute for sitting in meditation.

[00:12:59]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: But the nature of meditative states that are described in the Sutra are definitely a motivator. And ultimately, the primary motivator is that the kind of liberation that one is practicing is meaningless unless it's done with the intention of liberating everyone. So it's not a narcissistic activity or a solipsistic activity at all in terms of its intention.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Does that then—there's so many questions, I keep—they're starting to—

[00:13:49]

TOM WUDL: So yeah. And just let me finish because I think I just went on and on. To answer what you actually asked, about attention, is this, that the word Zen means only one thing. It means attention. Zen does not mean what you—it's usually misinterpreted as being somehow in some trance of some sort. It's just the opposite. It means full, attentive, um, perception of every single moment that's going on, purely just attention. And I don't know, I can't speak for any other meditator in the world, but my experience has been this, that my practicing this attentive behavior on a daily basis has not only contributed but facilitates my capacity to attend to the kind of detail that I want to, you know, actualize in the artwork, that it's not a matter of patience because patience means tolerance, and attention is without tolerance. It has no beginning. It has no end. It's just attention. And therefore when one is um attentive, there aren't these kinds of limitations that we might associate with patience or tolerance. Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And this is—this is all fascinating to me. Um, to what degree then is there any analogy between the kind of attentiveness associated with Zen and the process that you kind of engage in in the—in the creation of your work? Is there any—are there analogies, or are these totally separate activities?

[00:16:07]

TOM WUDL: Well, they're separate [laughs], but they're also not separate, you know. I'm sorry.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Sure.

TOM WUDL: I wish there was—I wish there was a less, um, problematic way of answering the question. But it's both.

MATTHEW SIMMS: That's the best answer. It's both and.

TOM WUDL: Right. I, you know, I can't put it any other way. So I'm, I'm ultimately, my—in the essay that I wrote, one of the concluding sentences, towards the end of the essay, is a very clear declaration on my part, that my intentions as an artist are exclusively aesthetic. And that says it all. And to me, the aesthetic is, is representative of the sacred. It can't be any other way. I'm not saying that the sacred doesn't have other ways of being actualized in life and in the world. But from my experience as an artist, that's the only conclusion that I can come to, that one of the primary um actualizations of sacredness is in the aesthetic.

And this became really evident to me many, many years ago when I went to Japan for the first

time. You know, the Japanese, in their classical period of their civilization, I would say they were born to teach the world what aesthetics really are. You know, every person that travels to Japan, unless they're an absolutely, pathetically insensitive individual, comes back overwhelmed with—especially if they've gone to Kyoto and to Nara and Kamakura and immersed themselves without even ever having heard of Zen, or without knowing anything about Japanese culture, without having been able to understand the calligraphy. It doesn't matter. Just the immersion in that aesthetic environment is transformative and overwhelming. So you know, that's where I live as an artist, not in Japan, necessarily, but in the aesthetic realm. Yeah.

[00:19:09]

MATTHEW SIMMS: I've been lucky to have had that experience of going to Japan, going to Nara and these places. And just having studied them in textbooks and then seeing them in reality was a—was a real revelation. And when I—

TOM WUDL: Oh, oh, and just let me interrupt you for a second. You know, the great Buddha in Nara —

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Todaiji.

TOM WUDL: That huge lotus that he's sitting on, that each petal is actually ornamented, engraved with texts from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Wonderful.

TOM WUDL: Because that image—that Buddha, itself, is representative of the, symbolically, of the entire immensity of creation. And it's really interesting that, out of all the Buddhist texts, that's the one that they chose to, you know, contribute to the actualization of the image. Next time you're there look for it [laughs].

[00:20:12]

MATTHEW SIMMS: I will. If you'll allow me to interpret your own part in this —

TOM WUDL: Sure.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I see you as participating in this generative kind of infinity in the sense that the work that you create, the ways in which you come back to these things—always different, always new, always part, however, of a kind of, um, meditation, if you will, on some of these themes—as I looked, certainly I've seen when I came to your studio, had the opportunity to see the work in person, and then when I saw again through the images of the exhibition, I was astonished by the fact that, you know, no two work—everything is a—is a starting from scratch in a way. Would you accept that as a—

TOM WUDL: Yes, yes, because I'm—you know, again it's a—it's a tricky position to be in because I'm not—I don't see myself as a proselytizer of Buddhism. I'm an artist. But as an artist, this is the thing that motivates me. This is where I—this is where I live. But as an artist, creativity is the most important endeavor, the most important engagement. And creativity does not necessarily—the emphasis for me with creativity is not on self-expression but on discovery. So discovery means that everything is going to be fresh, right. And, uh, I would like to think—and this is a tricky thing for me to say. But still there's no way of saying it in a simple manner.

[00:22:08]

What you are alluding to is something that I feel, in my own small way, I'm contributing to the visual tradition of sacred imagery, particularly Buddhist sacred imagery, in that it's a new way of looking at things. You know, generally the Buddhist community is, I think, sadly, uh, parochial and very, very small-minded in terms of their visual demands. You know, to them, a contemporary interpretation of Buddhism is to have a silhouette of a Buddha with all of this stuff going on. But it has to be a Buddha, if you know what I mean. The Buddhist identity and representation of Buddhist themes have to somehow engage this orthodoxy of imagery which, you know, is wonderful and beautiful and has a particular—has had a particular function. But we live in a very different world today. The American Buddhism, the European Buddhism is still essentially the same Buddhism. But it's very, very different. And I'd like to think that I'm bringing something to this discourse that is a fresh interpretation of this material.

[00:23:57]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I think you've done an amazing—I mean what can I say—an amazing job. That's, that's my personal perspective on it. And we only have a couple minutes left. I don't know if—there are so many more things we could talk about. But if there are any things, thoughts that you would like to leave us on, things about what's next perhaps or other broader consideration.

TOM WUDL: Well, well what's next for me is that one of the centerpieces of the exhibition is a piece that's in progress, right, so. And it's likely—and I'm not saying this to be melodramatic, really, but I don't know, you know, I'm 72 years old. I don't know if I will live long enough to be able to finish that piece. But that's definitely—even now while I'm, you know, in this period of confinement, I've been basically working on that piece because one one of the components is—let's see, where's the camera?—is these little polyhedrons that are made out of paper and painted and, you know, there's just a whole bunch of them that I've been doing, for instance. So that when I finally get that piece back from the studio, from the gallery into the studio, I'm going to continue working on it. And that's going to be my primary focus. I also have a drawing that I started about over two years ago that I'm still working on. So that's it, in terms of what's coming. Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I think we'll all look forward to seeing how those things take form. But I wanted to thank you for participating in this and wish you my very best.

[00:26:04]

TOM WUDL: Okay. I appreciate it, and I wish you my very best, and thank you. So take care.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Thank you. I'm going to stop the recording now.

TOM WUDL: Fine.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]