

ON DISPLAY

A 97-Year-Old Artist's Vision is Still Growing

"Open Story" is not a retrospective, but a chronicle of Nancy Wissemann-Widrig's still-developing body of work.

By Dana Nielsen Clark

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Nancy Wissemann-Widrig painted "Early July" in 1983.

Courtesy Caldbeck Gallery

Most nonagenarian artists planning shows of their work create retrospectives, sculpting an authoritative narrative of their life's work. In "Open Story," Nancy Wissemann-Widrig's show now open at Rockland's Caldbeck Gallery, the 97-year-old artist has instead hung landscapes from 1974 beside ones finished this year with no final interpretation offered. There is no invitation to stand outside the work and call it finished, because Wissemann-Widrig is still working.

Wissemann-Widrig was born in 1929 in Jamestown, New York, where her mother taught Latin and her father managed the family's furniture factory. The family kept a small hotel in Chautauqua for the summers, and it was there, in a program built originally for visiting Sunday school teachers, that a teenage Wissemann-Widrig took her first art classes.

At Syracuse University she studied painting, then went on to Ohio University for a master's degree, where she met a fellow art student named Helen Friend, of Skowhegan, Maine — a friendship that would end up informing where she spent summers for most of her life. After graduation, the two women moved to New York and sublet a loft from the painter Charles Duback in the building where Alex Katz and the sculptor Bernard Langlais also lived. Wissemann-Widrig introduced Langlais to Friend on the strength of their matching accents; the two wed and eventually settled in Cushing, on the St. George River. It was visiting them there in 1968 that first launched

Wissemann-Widrig and her husband, the painter John Wissemann, north of their North Fork, New York home for the summer with their three young children. They found a cottage down the road from the Langlaisses, sight unseen, and she has been painting there every summer since.

Across six decades, the artist's woods, fields, and flowers have accumulated into a leitmotif. In "Friendship Land," circa 1975, two birch trunks rise from a loose pile of lichenized granite on a slope thick with fern, saturated in gold-green light. "Early July" (1983) moves closer and into a clearing of incandescent new growth at the edge of a dark wood. The eye moves through the understory, catching on flashes of orange jewelweed and yellow daylily.

Wissemann-Widrig told me that "Blue Woods" — winter trees rendered in cold, bruised blues — was directly inspired by her daughter Melanie Essex's recent paintings, in which a single color establishes the prevailing atmosphere (though she hasn't told her daughter this yet). "Bouquet," circa 1980, plants a red enamel pitcher of snapdragon and celosia against the wind-swept landscape of autumn trees in nearly the same palette. The composition counterweight is given by a single fallen marigold.

The artist wants, she told me, to share something of the breathless shock of beauty she feels looking at flowers — the raw essence she believes eclipses anything a person could invent. In "All Over Again" (2025), tulip, lily and iris bloom edge to edge. A painter friend remarked the painting looks as if Rousseau had paid a visit to Matisse while he was in bed cutting silhouettes from construction paper, a comparison that comments on its play between depth and flatness; flowers overlap and recede, yet their crisp silhouettes snap to the surface, activating the shapes between them. Wissemann-Widrig has long admired Matisse's "The Red Studio" as a personal touchstone, captivated as a young artist by the way it holds a room in believable depth even as the entire scene is drawn into a continuous field of red.

After more than sixty years of marriage, John Wissemann passed away in 2022. Wissemann-Widrig has said that her younger years were spent painting in the middle of family life, and that she now lives what she calls the solitary life of an artist. She keeps a notebook meant for appointments that has become, in practice, a sketchbook; on the phone, she drew a pair of candlesticks from her chair overlooking the St. George River. She told me that if this coming winter resembles last year's, she'll turn back toward interiors — the rooms of her North Fork home, quiet now in a way they weren't for decades.

In "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," esteemed science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin questions the accepted definition of what a story is. The familiar version moves forward: a hero sets out, encounters an obstacle, overcomes it, arrives somewhere complete. Le Guin calls that the "killer story," tracing it back to a hunter aiming a spear at a target.

But, drawing on the anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, Le Guin proposes another candidate for humanity's earliest tool, drawn not from the hunter but the gatherer: a sling, net, or carrier bag that one would use to gather food and carry it home. Rather than the linear direction of a spear hurtling toward a target, a bag picks up meaning from the objects it makes room for over time.

Each painting in "Open Story" carries something forward, while making room for another encounter. Wissemann-Widrig's body of work remains open. It tells the story of a woman who knows that a subject returned to is never a subject used up.

"Open Story" will be on display at the Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm St. in Rockland, until Sept. 27.