

A Unique Radiance

Wilson's Giant Step Forward

By Thomas Albright

Wes Wilson has dropped out of public view for so long that he almost belongs to the "what ever happened to" department. Now he's back, however, with an exhibition at the Poster Gallery, 2266 Union street, which reveals what he has been up to these past few years. To me, it is unexpectedly exciting, and it may even turn out to be important. That's when enough other people decide that it's exciting, too.

The show is divided between Wilson's newer work and a selection of original layouts for the posters he designed for Bill Graham during those historic years at the Fillmore auditorium. There's not much to say about these — by now they've become classics and collectors items — although they strike some heavy chords in the nostalgia department.

LINES

Unlike most of the other big name poster makers, who have either zapped into turning out underground comic or producing record jackets and zany T-shirts, Wilson has quietly developed along more conventional "fine art" lines. Wilson's new works in this show, at least, are smallish watercolors which carry his former preoccupation with Art Nouveau a giant step forward into the realm of Expres-

sionism.

Most of these watercolors portray single human figures, sometimes portraits, often nudes, enclosed by interiors of intricately patterned upholstery, carpeting and walls hung with lettered posters and strange pictures. The old, sinuous, Art Nouveau contours remain, but instead of crisp, black outlines, the borders of Wilson's figures are parallel hands of vivid color, and



Wes Wilson's "Winter in Lagunitas: The Essentials of Heat"

on complex, obsessively repeated abstract design elements remains, too, but Wilson's new forms are more self-enclosed, compacted and cellular, like sections of tissue viewed through a microscope, and bring to mind some of the stylistic devices used by Hundertwasser.

So far, so derivative. What makes the whole thing click is a unique transparency and radiance which Wilson achieves with his watercolors, so that they take on the quality of stained glass windows, with a light source behind — or inside. And that indefinable plus in art which gives the finest of these works a haunted, compelling Presence in the spirit of Edvard Munch, but without looking in any way like him.

"modeling" is done with globules of color and tone so that they seem to liquify, much like the images in solarized color photography. The old "psychedelic" stress

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