

Fred Wilson: Dramatis Personae

November 4 – December 22, 2023
1201 South La Brea Avenue
Los Angeles

November 4, 2 p.m. - Artist talk with Fred Wilson, LAXART Director Hamza Walker, and Pace Chief Curator Oliver Shultz



Fred Wilson, *Dramatis Personae* (Detail), 2022 © Fred Wilson, courtesy Pace Gallery.

Los Angeles – Pace is pleased to present *Fred Wilson: Dramatis Personae*, an exhibition of new and historical works by Fred Wilson, at its Los Angeles gallery. On view from November 4 to December 22, the upcoming presentation will situate the artist’s Murano glass works within his broader inquiries into the ways Blackness has been coded in the construction of Western art history. This will be Wilson’s seventh solo exhibition with the gallery since 2012, and it marks the twentieth anniversary of his project for the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Since the 1990s, Wilson has developed an expansive and influential body of work that spans sculpture, painting, photography, collage, printmaking, and installation. Through his interdisciplinary practice, he challenges and deconstructs assumptions surrounding history, culture, and race as they relate to conventions of display. Often seducing viewers through their visual and material opulence, Wilson’s works are marked by a cunning criticality, drawing our gaze only to occasion deeper reflection on social and historical narratives.

Wilson’s instantly recognizable works in glass—which he first began producing during a residency at the Pilchuck Glass School in 2001—were the subject of his landmark presentation *Speak of Me As I Am* at the American Pavilion of the 2003 Venice Biennale. Collaborating with artisans based on the Venetian island of Murano, he embraced the tradition of Venetian glassmaking while also breaking from its formal confines—Wilson’s use of black glass for his elaborate chandeliers was, and remains, a radical departure from convention. With these works, the artist embarked on a decades-long investigation of the repressed histories of Blackness in European culture and art, a subject that continues to play an integral role in his practice.

Organized across two separate spaces, Wilson’s forthcoming exhibition with Pace in LA will convene different yet related bodies of work from the past two decades, which have rarely been placed in direct dialogue with one another. The first part of the exhibition will focus on the artist’s intricate chandeliers, mirrors, and blown glass “drip” sculptures, created between 2005 and 2023.

Alluding to the troubled history of “the Moor” in European art and literature, the titles of many of the chandeliers and mirrors in the first portion of the show refer to Shakespeare’s play, *The Tragedy of Othello*, which tells the story of a “Moorish” military commander in the Venetian army who weds Desdemona, a Venetian noble, setting into motion a series of events that ultimately results in both of their deaths. Riffing on the complex racial dynamics and ambiguities in *Othello*—which reverberate through centuries of commentary on the play—these works include the chandeliers *Tears for Desdemona* (2015) and *Dramatis Personae* (2022) as well as *Emilia’s Mirror - Act 5, Scene 2* (2013). The second part of the exhibition will draw out a deeper set of subtexts that cut through Wilson’s practice, anchored by two vitrine-based sculptures—*Black Memory* (2005) and *Black Present* (2006). Evoking the language of museological display, these works feature black glass in a nod to the artist’s research-based installations of the 1990s, which critiqued the construction of racial identity in Western culture. The exhibition places these works in conversation with Wilson’s 2008 bronze bust depicting Ota Benga, an enslaved Mbuti man from Congo who was forcibly brought to the United States and exhibited at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, and at the Bronx Zoo in 1906.

Wilson’s bust of Ota Benga—forged in a classical style typical of heroizing European portraiture—will be presented alongside works from the artist’s Flags series that represent two different Congo states of the 20th century. Stripped of the flags’ original colors, the hard-edged geometric forms that constitute these two-dimensional works suggest the aesthetics of modernist abstraction. Yet, exhibited in proximity to *Ota Benga*, the flags take on a different resonance. Conceived as celebrations of Blackness, these works operate in several registers at once, reinscribing troubled histories of spectatorship and commodification that haunt the colonial history of the museum while also posing fundamental questions about the nature of identity, nationality, and belonging. Together, these bodies of work shed light on the underpinnings of Wilson’s practice as a whole.

At the fulcrum between the two gallery spaces in the exhibition, Wilson will present a bronze sculpture that juxtaposes a female figure rendered in the Greco-Roman classical vocabulary with a hieratic Egyptian figure. Interrogating the construction of “the classical” in the history of Western art, the “European” figure is decorated with a white patina, while the “Egyptian” figure is finished in black. This stark black-and-white palette thematizes the language of modernist reductionism and examines the essentializing dimensions of the relationship between identity and skin color. By reducing his chromatic palette to black and white, Wilson excavates the presence of Blackness—in this case, the assimilation of Egyptian aesthetics into the ideology of Classicism—in European history, laying bare the covert and often fraught ideologies and power relations at the core of the Western canon and the institution of the museum itself.

On November 4 at 2 p.m., Pace Live will present an artist talk at the gallery featuring Fred Wilson in conversation with LAXART Director Hamza Walker and Pace’s Chief Curator Oliver Shultz. Tickets may be reserved [here](#).

Fred Wilson (b. 1954, Bronx, New York) challenges assumptions of history, culture, and race, deconstructing the presentation of objects and cultural symbols. Beginning with his groundbreaking exhibition *Mining the Museum* (1992) at the Maryland Historical Society, he has staged installations of appropriated artworks and artifacts from museum collections. His provocative juxtapositions encourage viewers to question historical narratives and conventions of display, revealing undercurrents of ownership and privilege normalized by institutional practices. In 2001, Wilson began to expand his studio practice, producing ornate black mirrors, chandeliers, and other glass objects. His flag series includes paintings and panels based on the iconography of flags from Africa and the African diaspora. Wilson’s cultural interventions and studio production both remain linked to his critiques, uncovering marginalized history, negotiating identity, and questioning the politics of display.

Pace is a leading international art gallery representing some of the most influential contemporary artists and estates from the past century, holding decades-long relationships with Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, and Mark Rothko. Pace enjoys a unique U.S. heritage spanning East and West coasts through its early support of artists central to the Abstract Expressionist and Light and Space movements.

Since its founding by Arne Glimcher in 1960, Pace has developed a distinguished legacy as an artist-first gallery that mounts seminal historical and contemporary exhibitions. Under the current leadership of CEO Marc Glimcher, Pace continues to support its artists and share their visionary work with audiences worldwide by remaining at the forefront of innovation. Now in its seventh decade, the gallery advances its mission through a robust global program—comprising exhibitions, artist projects, public installations, institutional collaborations, performances, and interdisciplinary projects. Pace has a legacy in art bookmaking and has published over five hundred titles in close collaboration with artists, with a focus on original scholarship and on introducing new voices to the art historical canon.

Today, Pace has seven locations worldwide, including European footholds in London and Geneva as well as Berlin, where the gallery established an office in 2023. Pace maintains two galleries in New York—its headquarters at 540 West 25th Street, which welcomed almost 120,000 visitors and programmed 20 shows in its first six months, and an adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. exhibition space at 510 West 25th Street. Pace’s long and pioneering history in California includes a gallery in Palo Alto, which was open from 2016 to 2022. Pace’s engagement with Silicon Valley’s technology industry has had a lasting impact on the gallery at a global level, accelerating its initiatives connecting art and technology as well as its work with experiential artists. Pace consolidated its West Coast activity through its flagship in Los Angeles, which opened in 2022. Pace was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, along with an office and viewing room in Beijing. In spring 2024, Pace will open its first gallery space in Japan in Tokyo’s new Azabudai Hills development.

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