

We're still learning from George Wallace

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George Wallace might have appreciated the twine of ironic reversal in two current Hamilton exhibitions featuring his work.

In one show, Wallace's famous Daedalus sculpture is given some unexpected elevation. Finally.

Daedalus is usually shown rooted to the ground, in keeping with its theme, the abortion of flight. But for the show of Wallace's work at the McMaster Museum of Art, curator Ihor Holubizky has put the paunchy, weary-armed anti-hero, with the self-nullifying iron wings, on a pedestal.

After all this time, it seems only right. He's been standing there for so long, Daedalus, his puzzled gaze raised longingly to the sky, his wings pulling his arms to the earth. Who would begrudge him this tiny holiday of liftoff, however symbolic and curatorial in nature? The show is called George Wallace: as I was saying.

A few miles away, at Bryce Kanbara's You Me Gallery on James Street North, another Wallace sculpture, Educational Experiment, which is supposed to stand 24-feet-high, is lying in pieces on the ground like something from a James Taylor song. Ten years ago the piece was roughly cut apart to fit in storage at Mohawk College.

But it is not all defeat. The notes to the show say that its display at the gallery is part of a movement to "resurrect" the work. Ah, hope. The resurrection. Ah, failure. The fall. Flight and gravity. These are common concerns in the art of George Wallace. It is hard to know which side is getting the last word, and that ambiguity is part of his work's powerful frisson and dishevelled charm.

Wallace, who died last summer at the age of 89, was not only a prominent artist, in Canada and internationally, but also an educator of enormous influence in Hamilton. He taught art at McMaster University for 25 years. Many prominent Hamilton artists studied under him, including You Me's Kanbara. Noted Canadian artist John Hartman was also one of his students.

So it is good to see his work being featured so promptly upon his passing, even if it has to be, in the case of the You Me show, a damaged sculpture.

The McMaster museum show, by contrast, gives us Wallace's art under optimal conditions. The works, which include prints and sculpture, are presented in the company of some of Wallace's letters as well as works by other artists, historical and contemporary, who influenced Wallace's aesthetic and were influenced by him.

And yet, as lovingly and respectfully as the pieces are displayed at the museum, the tone is never ingratiatingly sentimental. Yes, Holubizky puts Daedalus on a pedestal. But only so he (Daedalus) can get a closer look, figuratively speaking, at the beautiful but wilted wings of the dead crow in the print by Paul Fournier, which is hung above the sculpture. It's almost cruel, yet somehow still comic.

Holubizky "gets" Wallace. The black humour, the coexistence of the tragic with the comic, the gravity of the absurd, the periodic secretions of hope, however feeble, and the drawing up of flight plans.

Holubizky wasn't one of those who knew and/or studied under Wallace. But he reveals that, as a boy, he saw one of Wallace's works in Toronto, and never forgot it.

In this show, Holubizky has succeeded in establishing a kind of conversation. Between Wallace and the other artists whose works appear -- everyone from Degas and Piranesi to Turner, Kollwitz and Hartman. Between Wallace and a contemporary audience.

The show is hardly a comprehensive look at Wallace's oeuvre but it uses the pieces it has to great effect. The striking *Benevolent Angel*, with its illusion of speed and takeoff, shows Wallace's distinctive vision clasped in a mastery of technique, from the cantilevering and weight distribution to the welding of the steel and engineering of the armature.

In a piece like *Self Portrait With Dark Glasses*, there is a playful foreshadowing of the postmodernism that Wallace must have sensed building in the art world, with its recursive games of self-reference and infinite regression.

There are other pieces, prints, like *Ecce Homo*, *The Death of Judas*, and *Bombed Hotel In East Bourne*, fantastically done but about which it's hard to decide if they are strictly harrowing and expressionistic or some combination of irony and melodrama.

There is even a wonderful early drawing, from 1952, in conte and crayon, called *The Bed-Sitter*, which shows Wallace's magnificent gift for shaping scenes out of often unconventional line strokes.

What comes across most vividly in this tight, thoughtful, playful show is Wallace's completeness as an artist. He has the individual style, the intelligence, the technique and the gift. But also that rarest ingredient -- personality.

It laughs and sighs through these works, as though he were still with us. He is, not just through the art but also the great pull his personality continues to exert on people like Kanbara and Holubizky. That's the power of it.

George Wallace: as I was saying is on at the McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University campus, until Aug. 28.

Educational Experiment is showing at You Me Gallery, 330 James N., until July 4.

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