

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 14, 2023

VMFA's Exhibition *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist* Explores the Experimental Work of the Virginia-Based Painter and Photographer

Willie Anne Wright's First Museum Retrospective Examines Six Decades of the Pioneering Artist's Career



Anne S at Jack B's Pool, 1984, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), silver dye bleach print. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment

Richmond, VA — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) is excited to announce its upcoming exhibition *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist*, a retrospective of the photographer and painter's remarkable 60-year career. The exhibition will be on view at the museum in Richmond from October 21, 2023, to April 28, 2024. Admission will be free.

"The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts recently acquired more than 230 photographs and 10 paintings by Willie Anne Wright, along with her comprehensive archive," said VMFA's Director and CEO Alex Nyerges. "Many of these works will be included in the upcoming exhibition *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist*, the artist's first career retrospective at a major art museum."

Though an influential innovator, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924) deserves greater recognition for her artistic contributions. Born and raised in Richmond, Wright attended the College of William and Mary, where she audited art classes while pursuing a degree in psychology. Although she exhibited a few paintings as a student, Wright

did not pursue art seriously until 1960, when she — by then a married mother of three — enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at the Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University). While initially focused on making paintings, serigraphs and drawings, Wright shifted mediums to pinhole photography in 1972.

Curated by Dr. Sarah Kennel, VMFA's Aaron Siskind Curator of Photography and Director of the Raysor Center, *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist* shines a light on the artist's contributions to Pop Art and as a pioneer in alternative photographic processes and the use of pinhole photography.

“Endlessly curious and experimental, Willie Anne Wright merges a deep interest in historical forms with a contemporary, irreverent sensibility,” said Dr. Kennel. “Her paintings and photographs explore the pulse of media culture, the pull of the past and the ways that gender and history shape experience. Her eye for both the enduring and the idiosyncratic and her mastery of her chosen media infuse her work with humor and liveliness.”

The exhibition includes 69 photographs and nine paintings by Wright. From playful and irreverent scenes of everyday life to ethereal evocations of the past, her paintings and photographs examine pop culture, feminine identity, the pull of history and the shifting cultural landscape of the American South from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist highlights different phases of Wright's artistic journey. The exhibition begins by tracing her trajectory from painting to photography, showcasing her Pop Art paintings and prints made in the 1960s and 1970s. One of only a few women working in the Pop Art genre, Wright's paintings grappled with the impact of mass media, television and popular music, including the iconic 1960s musical group Diana Ross and The Supremes. Yet these works also reveal that she was fascinated with the past and often integrated canny references to the histories of painting and photography into her work.

In 1972, Wright enrolled in a photography course with the aim of learning how to use a 35mm camera to document her artwork. Instead, she discovered pinhole photography — one of the earliest and simplest forms of the medium — and soon devoted the bulk of her creative energies to making photographs. She became one of the leading figures of the pinhole photography movement and was among the first artists to use Cibachrome color materials directly in her camera.

The exhibition showcases her earliest photographs, her exploration of color photography and her experiments with cameraless photograms. Wright's humorous and sympathetic takes on contemporary life are captured in her photographs of dreamy bathers; glistening backyard pools; surreal compositions of found objects; portraits of self-possessed pregnant women and complex, layered photograms that evoke Victorian culture and imagery.

The exhibition also includes work from Wright's best-known series *Civil War Redux*, in which she photographed Civil War reenactors. Wright's engagement with history and place is also represented in captivating works from her *Southland* series, in which she explored the layered mythologies and vexed histories of the American South. These quiet, light-infused black-and-white photographs reflect on the complexities of the region's past as well as the beauty of its landscapes.



Willie at Ruth's Farm, 1984, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), silver dye bleach print. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment



Green Supremes, 1969, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), acrylic on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment

Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist concludes with a focus on Wright's photograms. Works from her series *Channeling the Past* reveal the artist's sophisticated use of nineteenth-century source materials, including Victorian dresses, antique baby clothes and early vernacular photographs, to create evocative, moving narratives. This section also examines Wright's fascination with the *Brugmansia* flower, which she incorporated into lush floral photograms, and her final series based on illustrations for the tarot.

“What unites Wright's broad body of work is her curiosity, playfulness and experimental attitude to both seeing and reimagining the world around her,” said Dr. Kennel.

For more information about this and other exhibitions and programs at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, visit www.vmfa.museum.



Gracie with Dress, 2005, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), gelatin silver print photogram. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment

Exhibition Related Programs

Willie Anne Wright's work will be the subject of a talk by Dr. Kennel on Thursday, October 19, 2023, at 6:30 p.m. in the museum's Leslie Cheek Theater. Tickets to the lecture are \$8 per person or \$5 per museum member and available at www.vmfa.museum.

Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated soft-bound book, published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, will accompany the exhibition *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist*. The publication, available for sale in the VMFA Shop and online beginning October 16, 2023, will include essays by Kennel and Dr. Sarah Eckhardt as well as contributions by Madeleine E. Dugan and Kate Kaluzny.

Willie Anne Wright's Archives

In March 2023, Wright donated her archive to VMFA's Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library. This collection of papers, preliminary drawings, source materials, correspondence, work prints and other items lend a personal perspective on the artist's life and career. The museum now possesses the largest and most comprehensive museum collection of Wright's works.

Sponsor Information

The exhibition *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist* is sponsored by the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, The Chrisman Family Foundation, Community Foundation for a greater Richmond, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Garner, Jr., Dr. and Mrs. William V. Garner, Nancy and Wayne Chasen, Hamilton Beach Brands, Inc., Mr. James. W. Klaus, Teri Craig Miles, Patsy K. Pettus, and the VMFA Council Exhibition Fund. VMFA is also grateful to the following sponsors: Page and Sandy Bond, Laura and Stephen Holdych, Candace H. Osdene, Lewis and Tina Stoneburner, Adele and Robert Van Divender, in memoriam, and Deborah and Mark Wlaz. Marketing support for special exhibitions is provided by the Charles G. Thalheimer Fund.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation's

finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.vmfa.museum.

#

Media Contacts

Jan Hatchette | 804.204.2721 | jan.hatchette@vmfa.museum

Amy Peck | 804.773.1791 | amy.peck@vmfa.museum

MacLaine Bamberger | 804.204.2702 | maclaine.bamberger@vmfa.museum

200 N. Arthur Ashe Blvd., Richmond, VA 23220