**Materials On Hand: The Art of Ellen Wilt**

*A curatorial essay by Srimoyee Mitra*

*Materials On Hand: The Art of Ellen Wilt* is a retrospective exhibition that spans fifty years of the artist’s expansive art practice. During this time, Wilt has consistently experimented and explored new ways of working in a variety of two dimensional mediums including, oil, acrylic, and watercolor. Since the 1970s she has incorporated collage into her practice using whatever materials she has available to her. These range from butcher paper, aluminum foil, and tissue to balsa wood, toothpicks and other found objects. She creates mixed media paintings, cut outs, rubbings and installations that reimagine the agency of mundane objects and invite viewers to look again.

Ordinary chairs are recurring motifs in her work. She places them outside the domestic setting, where they encounter the waves of the ocean; sometimes they float in the ebb and flow of the water, at other times they stand strong against the undercurrents. While these chairs are vacant, they are not abandoned. They appear to be cared for and brimming with potential as they integrate questions of memory, place, and transience with an anticipation and desire for the days to come. They can be understood as a metaphor for the artist’s subjectivity and personal vision.

Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Wilt has lived and worked in Ann Arbor since 1949. Her life and work involved her daughter, her husband — the noted painter Richard Wilt — and fostering a vibrant arts community as an educator in the Academy and beyond. While she taught art at Eastern Michigan University for 17 years (1969-85), she also developed numerous community engaged projects that empowered first-time and emerging artists to show their work. It was not until she retired and was well into her 70s that she turned her focus to her own art practice. Her work was duly recognized with numerous awards from the Michigan Watercolor Society, Washtenaw Council for the Arts, and the Holland Friends of Art between 1984 and 1993.

For the first time in the last three decades, this exhibition brings together 60 carefully selected works from personal and private collections that highlight Wilt’s artistic contributions in Southeastern Michigan. Her intuitive and playful bricolage way of working reveals the scope of her achievement and her specific interest in the Michigan region and its landscape. She has developed multiple bodies of work that feature bridges, tunnels, and bodies of water where multi-layered scenes of rescue and survival unfold. Just like the chairs, they convey a sense of community, empathy, and desire. The everyday struggles and victories of ordinary people have been a consistent source of inspiration for the artist throughout her life.

In 2016, Wilt created a modest collage, *Enough is Enough*, that features a faceless child dressed in the Star Spangled Banner, with her arms raised playing with a toy gun that is pointing up at her. Her mouth is open, as though she is screaming. Wilt used cutouts from biological illustrations to create the figure’s arms and legs with nerves, bones and muscles exposed underneath her skin. This timely and deeply personal work reverberates with urgency to remind viewers that we are all human.