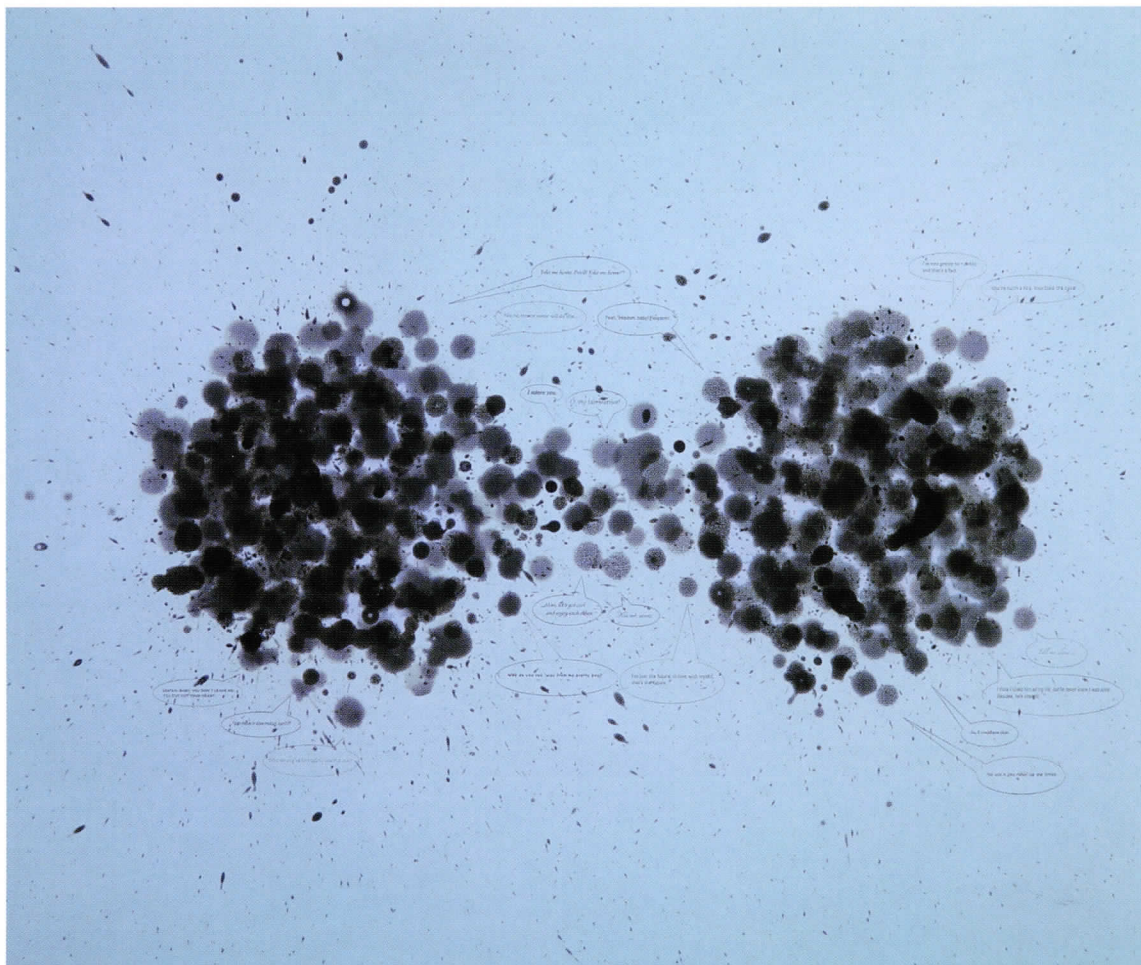


# Overview



Fred Wilson, *Exchange*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with color aquatint and direct gravure. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.

## Fred Wilson

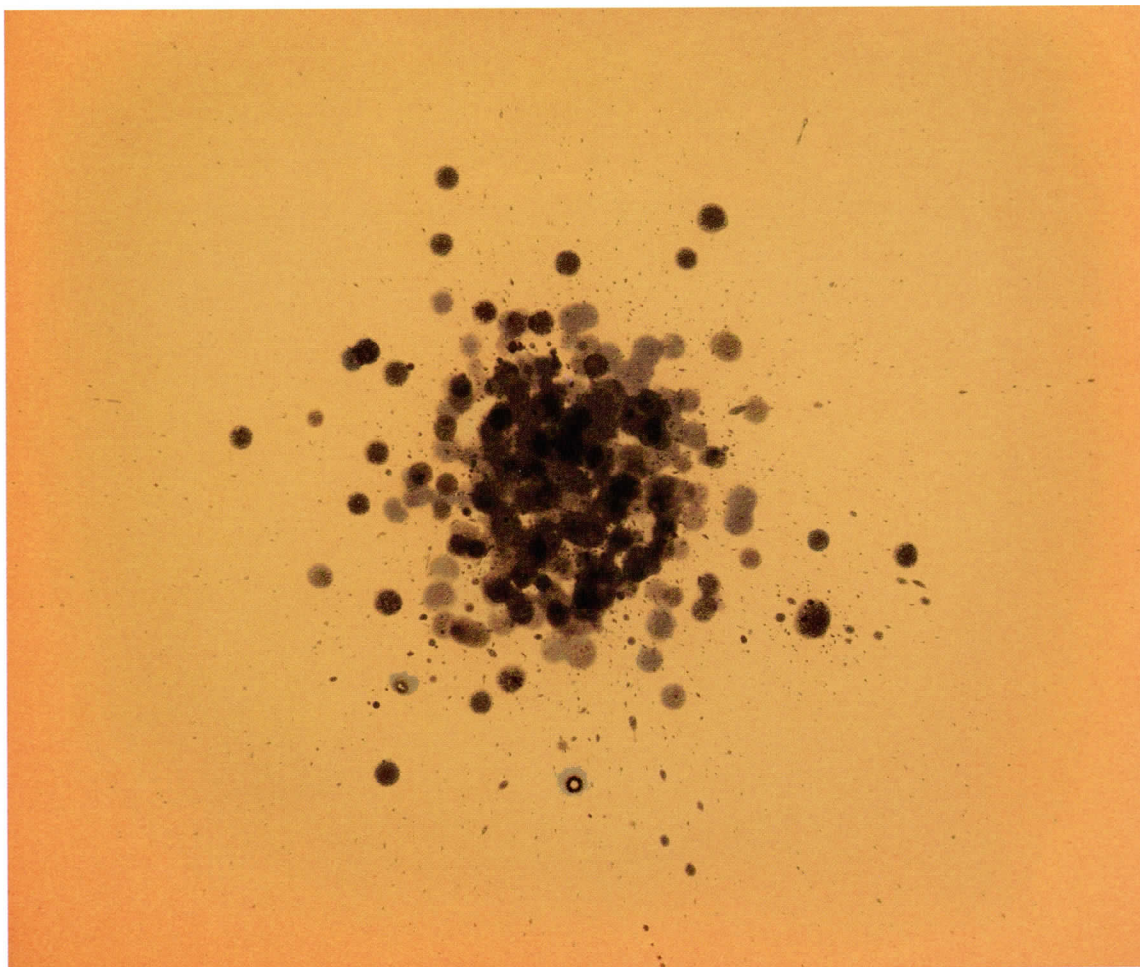
The weather was very hot last summer in Venice, the hottest summer many Europeans could remember. We stood in line at the Biennale for perhaps half an hour to get in to Fred Wilson's installation in the United States Pavilion. In the narrow shadow of the pavilion's roof, to the right of the line, stood a black man with purses laid out on the ground—we had seen many vendors like him on the streets of Venice. A woman, leaving her husband in line, picked up one purse after another, holding it, posing with it, moving back to the line to show it to her husband. When she settled on one and tried to purchase it, the black man made a slight, polite gesture of denial with his hands, shook his head, spoke softly with her, smiling pleasantly. She went back to the line without the purse, shaking her head in disbelief.

The United States Pavilion is an elegant neoclassical build-

ing fronted by enormous columns. On each side of the door, flanked by the columns, was a muscular caryatid, three times as tall as I am. The caryatids' arms were upraised to hold up the building. Carved white draperies swaddled their bodies and formed turbans around their heads, which were black. It took a close look to grasp that the figures were photographs on scrims. The actual statutes are in Venice in the Friari Church, holding up the tomb of the Doge.

When we stepped into the rotunda just inside the door of the pavilion, the air conditioning encompassed us. "This is one thing the Americans do really well," someone in line behind us said, exulting in the cool air. A large traditional Venetian glass chandelier hung from the ceiling, absorbing rather than reflecting the light. It was made of hundreds of intricate pieces of black glass, beautiful and graceful like an





Fred Wilson, *Bang*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with color aquatint. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 20. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.

exotic spider. In a wall niche on a pedestal stood a statue of a black man dressed in courtly livery. In place of his head was a world globe, oversized for his body but not disturbing the equilibrium of his posture.

We were in a museum. As we moved into one of the side rooms, we saw old Venetian paintings of noblemen of a hundred years or more ago. One of the paintings was a portrait of a black man, richly dressed, surrounded by paintings and books. The label explained that he had been adopted by a princely family and inherited great wealth. In another painting a black servant blended into the dark background; he would have been unnoticeable if a tiny spotlight had not picked him out. Small objects—like an “Otello” dark chocolate bar—were in display cases; larger objects—like headless figurines in gold glass uniforms with black arms holding trays—were on pedestals. People lingered, reading labels, speaking softly. Was it the air conditioning or the art that so entranced them? Occupying most of one wall was a collage of photographs juxtaposing black faces from old Venetian paintings with black faces of people living in Venice today. I thought I recognized the face of the man who had been “selling” purses outside.

Fred Wilson has said that being in a museum “slows you

down to allow for a different kind of intellectual and sensorial experience.” He speaks of the “actively engaged, thinking, feeling audience” within a museum’s “seeming passivity,” but acknowledges that only “those in the know” feel comfortable there. “I think museums have hoped that people of color would change so museums would not have to,” he says, adding that many museums now do what they call multicultural exhibitions to bring in the community, but “the displays are just the same old Euro-American view.” Wilson, himself, has always felt comfortable in museums, having spent a good deal of his childhood in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Modern Art. He grew up in New York. His father was an international consulting engineer (he and his father lived for a time in Egypt). His mother was a schoolteacher. “I thought all kids knew about art from their moms,” Wilson says. Shortly after graduating from the State University of New York at Purchase he worked in the education departments of the Met and the AMNH, and later was an installer at MOMA.

Speaking of his work as an artist whose specialty is rearranging museum collections to create his own exhibitions, Wilson points out that he uses the same design techniques that museums use. “I just like to shift the information to show



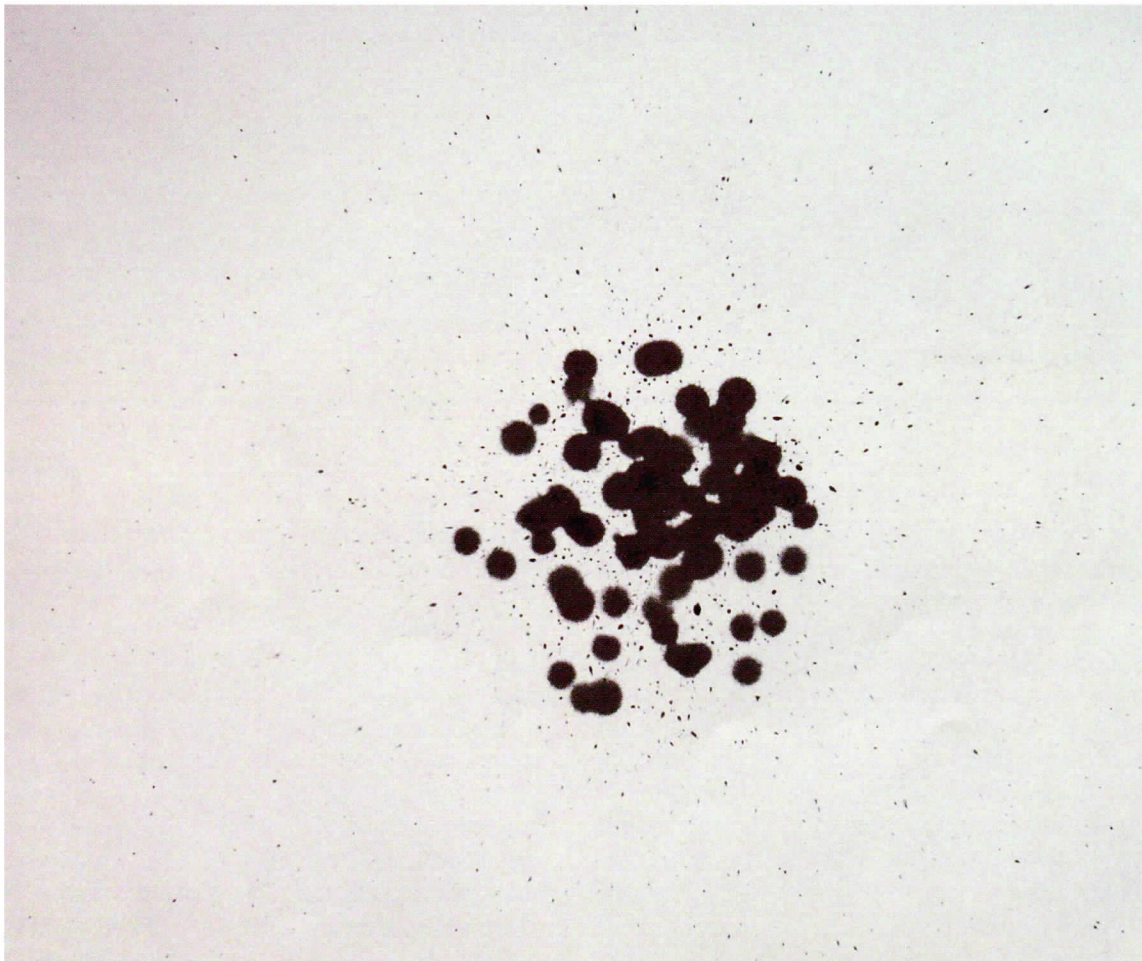
how a slight adjustment in emphasis or subject can expose the museum's point of view." In a work titled *Speaking in Tongues* at the De Young Museum in San Francisco, for example, Wilson displayed American and European furniture, sculpture, and paintings from the collection using the installation style of the ethnographic section of the museum. He used display cases and dramatic lighting in abundance. He showed some objects in ways that rendered them useless but beautiful—there was an ornate overturned table, and a chair with its legs facing out toward the viewer. He placed a sculpture so close to a painting as to partly obscure it, and described the painting, on its label, as "painted fabric." Although Wilson sees his work in museums as "a critique on many different levels," his criticism is not rancorous. "The museum is a microcosm of the society to which it belongs, and it is impossible to see cultural biases if you are deeply imbedded in the culture," he says. He, himself, didn't grow up in any one culture; his background is Euro-American, African, Cherokee, and Caribbean. After taking college dance classes, he went to Africa to study African dance, and that trip gave him a new way of seeing things. "My experience there allowed me to see beyond the pervasive, persuasive American conditioning about every aspect of life." Much of his subsequent work has

set up ways for others to step for a moment outside that conditioning, to experience "a perceptual shift which is a real thrill."

"Textbook history? I believe barely a word of it," Holland Cotter wrote recently in the *New York Times*. "[History] has as much credibility as a Hollywood movie. Like the movies, it's all about formulas: good guys, bad guys, win, lose. But, as the news of the day keeps reminding us, every win is a setup for a loss; angels and devils change sides all the time." We live in an age of deconstruction. Academics look for opposite views of whatever ideas we take for granted, political operatives spin all the time, and we know that truth is a complicated concept.

Wilson's work, however, reaches for truth through visual means, dislodging the grain of salt we carry around to defend against deconstruction. When he displays slave shackles next to ornate silver items, our eyes confirm something we hadn't thought much about but already knew.

"The story is shifting rapidly," he says. "When I was growing up, images of black people were singular and negative; now they are multi-focal. It's a different kind of struggle now, but there are still power games about race being played—from Clarence Thomas to O. J. Simpson. How people look



Fred Wilson, *Dawn*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with gampi chine collé. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 15. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.



is still more important than how they think. It's still about image. I'm not interested in blackness per se. I'm interested in invisibility—and style.”

Wilson's style is calm and orderly. He creates beautiful artworks, often with a touch of humor. In Venice, moving from the “old master” room of his installation at the United States pavilion, we found ourselves in a “contemporary” room with four televisions simultaneously showing different performances of the opera *Othello* next to a dizzying alcove-room of black and white tiles. Nearby were drip shapes of black glass. The flat drops on the floor were endowed with eyes that looked upward quizzically. All Wilson's work, clearly, does not involve rearrangement of museum collections.

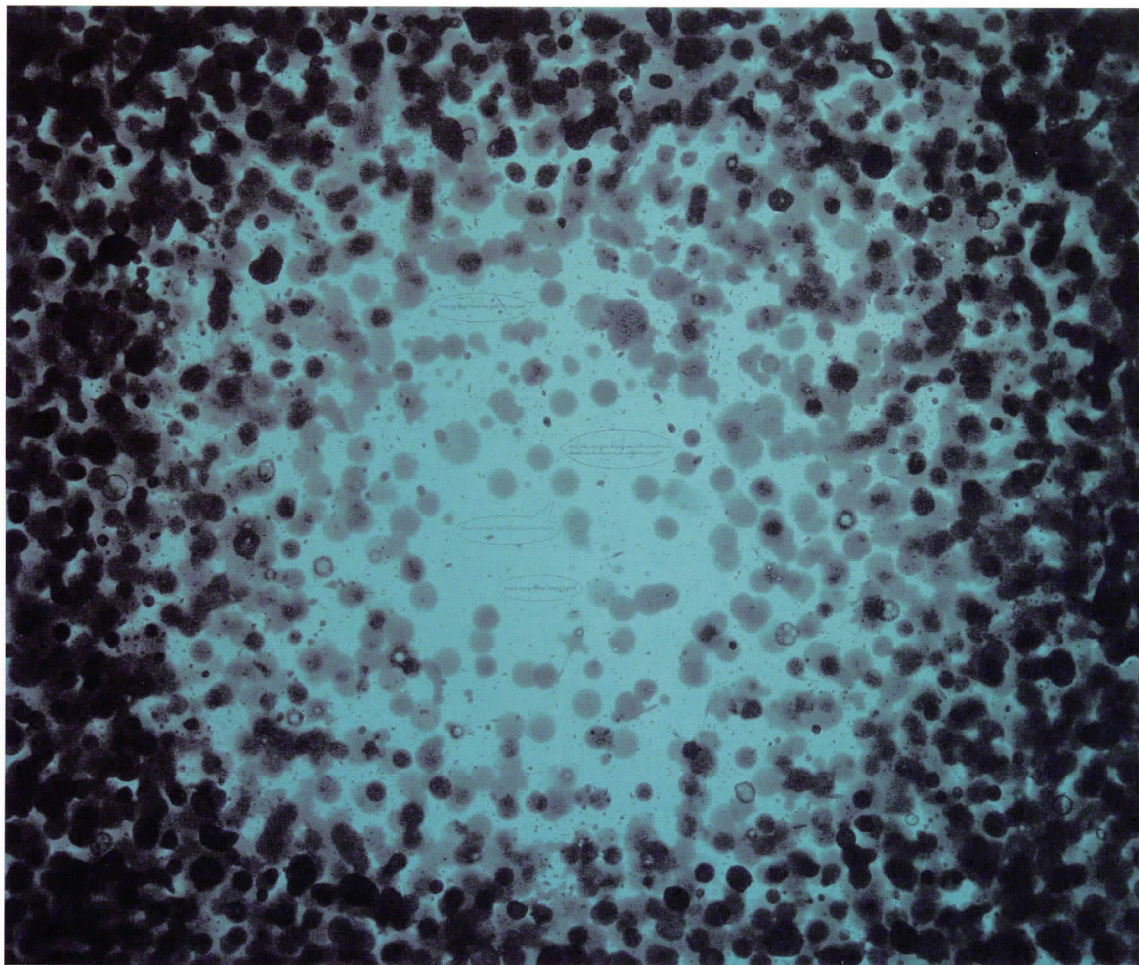
“I have been thinking about creating more things from my own imagination,” Wilson told Jane Ingram Allen in an interview for *Sculpture Magazine* in May, 2003, just prior to his Venice installation. “This is what artists usually do, although I have mainly arranged objects created by others. I think a lot of this new work is coming from things that are happening now. With my mother not being well and the things that happened on September 11, I have been thinking a lot about relationships and what's really important in life. It's great to create this kind of work in addition to the museum

critique projects. This work of my own creation is what I am excited about now.”

The six etchings you see illustrated here are about relationships. When Fred Wilson came to Crown Point Press, printmaking in general and etching in particular was new to him. He liked the idea that this work would not be “one precious object” and wanted it to be “very direct, rather elemental.” He had already begun dropping ink onto paper to make drawings, and the glass drops were underway.

At Crown Point, he worked with spit bite aquatint, dropping acid onto copper plates. “In my work, I'm usually pretty sure of what's going to come out,” Wilson told me later. “I usually think I know what people will see. But in this case, I just did it. It's exciting and scary. I have no idea what others will see in it, or how they will relate it to my work.”

Wilson points out that these are literally spots, ink spots, and are elemental whether you see them that way or as something large and very far away, in outer space perhaps, or small and very near—microbes maybe. In any case they are in a way invisible, not something we normally see or pay attention to. They are pulsing, changing, expanding; worlds are exploding. “All kinds of things are going on in this microcosm or macrocosm,” Wilson says. In fact—look closely—



Fred Wilson, *Convocation*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with color aquatint and direct gravure. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.



(continued from page 4)

there are conversations going on in three of the prints. In the ones called *Exchange*, *Convocation*, and *Arise!*, tiny word balloons float among the spots. Here is a sample of the words in *Arise!*: “You lie, devil, you lie!”...“Goodness, how dark it is!”...“Come if we must die let us meet death the noblest way.”...“Haul ass, the black man is on the march!”

The words were all spoken by characters in literature, black characters created by white writers from Shakespeare to Herman Melville, to Arthur Miller, to Jean Genet.

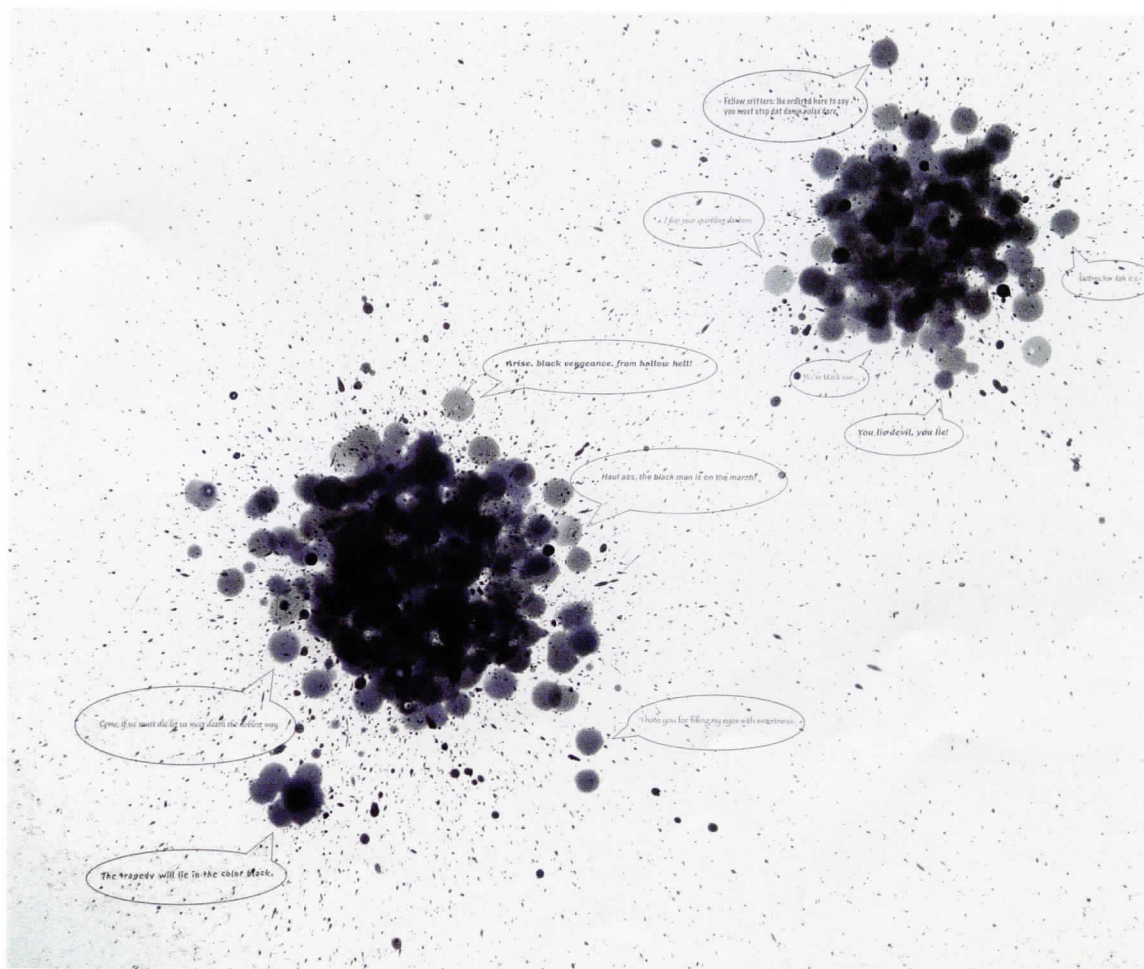
All the characters are black, and one of them (from Genet’s *The Blacks*) is also gay. Even though there is only one gay voice here, the conversation in *Exchange* seems to be about being gay: “I think I loved him all my life, but he never knew I was alive”(from Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band*)...“O’ my fair warrior!” (from Shakespeare’s *Othello*)...“I’m too pretty to rumble, and that’s a fact” (from Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*)...“You’re such a fag. You take the cake” (from *The Boys in the Band*.) “That print just bubbled up,” Wilson told me. “I didn’t expect it. There is an exchange of lovemaking by this *stuff*: these planets, microbes, or whatever.” Speaking of the verbal ex-changes in all the prints, he

said, “I refashioned these characters by putting them together. I took them out of their contexts and put them in context with other voices to see what would happen.”

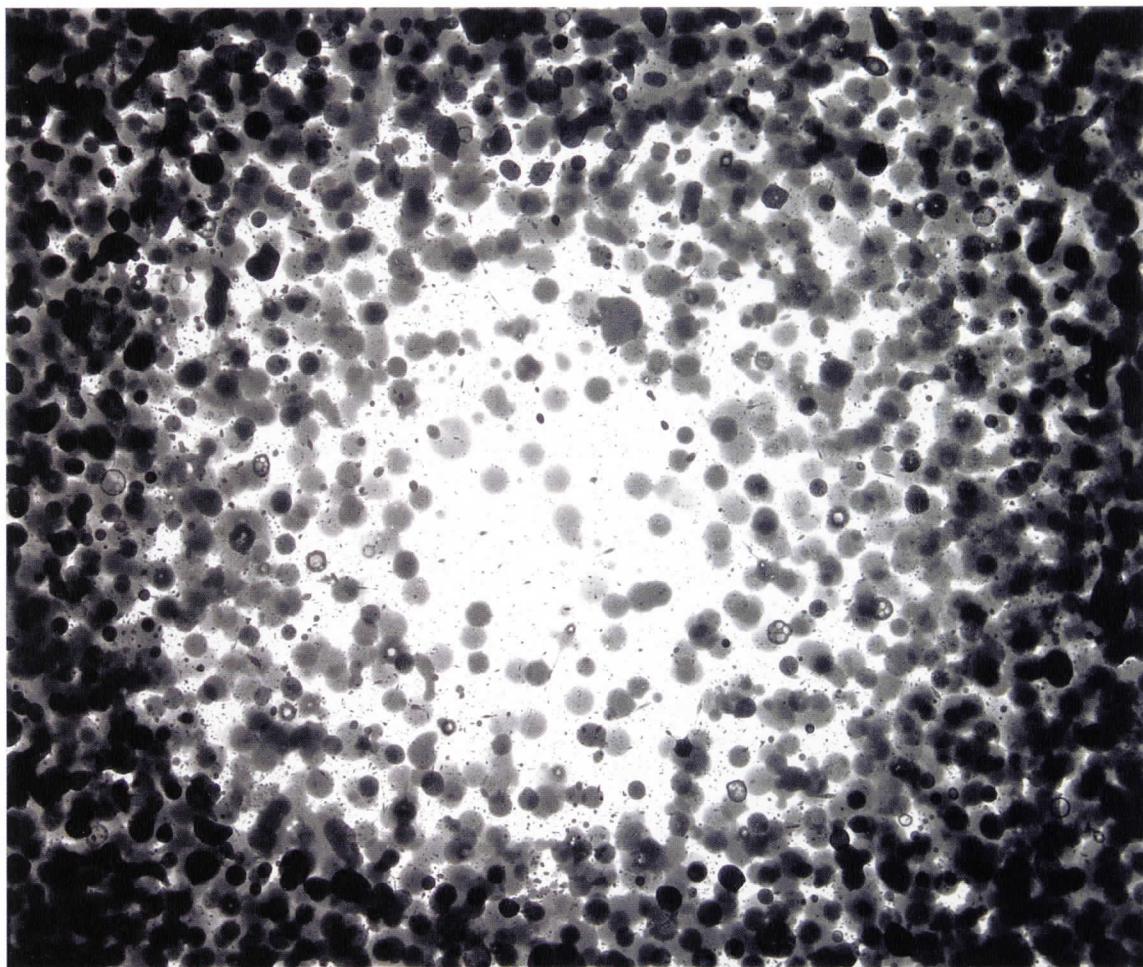
There are three prints without words: *Bang*, *Dawn*, and *We Are All in the Gutter, but Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars* (a quote from Oscar Wilde). “In my own mind,” Wilson says, “I think of the characters in the prints that don’t have talk balloons as not talking at the moment, or talking so quietly that you can’t understand them. But of course once someone takes an artwork home, it is what it is to the person who has it.”

The quotes from Fred Wilson in the first part of this text come from an interview with Maurice Berger published in the catalog *Fred Wilson Objects and Installations* published by the University of Maryland, 2001. The Holland Cotter quote is from an article in the *New York Times* on the Mayan culture, April 9, 2004. Quotes following the Cotter quote, except the one attributed in the text, are from Wilson’s conversations with me.

—Kathan Brown



Fred Wilson, *Arise!*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with direct gravure. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.



Fred Wilson, *We Are All in the Gutter, but Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.

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