

NEWS RELEASE

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(RIDGELY, MD—October 9, 2017)

***Presence and Place*, Paintings and Drawings by William Willis, on View through Dec. 1 at Adkins Arboretum**

A powerful and mysterious energy runs through William Willis's work. In *Presence and Place*, his show of paintings and drawings on view through Dec. 1 at the Adkins Arboretum Visitor's Center, his compelling, semi-abstracted trees and water, snakes and flying birds pulse with a vitality that is barely held in check. There will be a reception to meet the artist on Sat., Oct. 21 from 3 to 5 p.m.

Being out in nature is key to Willis's art. At least once a week, he bicycles with his son and other members of the Talbot Mountain Bike group on the trails in Tuckahoe State Park. Many of the paintings in this show grew from encounters with the park's trees and waterways, and a strong feeling that they are living entities permeates the show.



William Willis, "After the Rain," oil on canvas, 18" x 20"

Anyone familiar with the way Tuckahoe Creek swells in a rainstorm and floods into the forest will recognize the trees rising from swirling water in "After the Rain." As water streams around their trunks, gray paint marked with white scratches identifies a beech, while peculiar cream-colored spots on a bluish trunk denote one of the forest's many sycamores.

Willis's need to be out in nature came early. Growing up in Florida, he often visited the woods near his home and began developing his keen sense of observation. Although he taught for two decades at the Corcoran School of Art and several other colleges and universities and has exhibited in numerous solo museum and gallery shows, he has continued to spend time hiking, bicycling and camping since settling in the Eastern Shore town of Preston in 1980.

Willis is keenly interested in how a sense of living presence can be picked up by honing one's awareness. He has long been interested in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies that emphasize developing awareness, but he also traces this back to earlier times when it was essential for humans to use all their senses in order to survive.

Noting how a hunter will sit still for hours on end, not focusing on anything specific but being aware of everything around him, Willis said, "There's a kind of side vision, a kind of indirect approach where your vision starts to open up to everything. There's an obvious theory that meditation came from that kind of silent watching and sitting still. As they say, when you do that, the world comes to you—you don't have to go to the world."

Whenever he paints or draws, Willis goes through a deeply intuitive process of search and discovery. It's obvious that the finished image doesn't come easily. The trees, logs and meandering vines he paints are almost cartoonishly simple, but they are scarred and worn. Often, seemingly unrelated images partially show through from underneath. It's as if he is thinking on the canvas, painting, then scraping parts of the image away, then painting some more. He may even cut up a canvas and collage part of it into another artwork. It's a process of intense interaction, paring it down and building it up again in new ways until it hums with energy.

Certain motifs frequently recur in Willis's work. There are pine trees with sweeping zigzag branches, sinuous lines that evoke snakes or twisting vines, and concentric rings of water borrowed from traditional Japanese screen paintings. Each of these contributes to the multilayered themes that give his work its astonishing richness. One favorite image is a flying goose.

"That image happened when I moved out here from the D.C. area and I was into lots of Hindu mythology," he explained. "My friends teased me, 'So you're doing waterfowl paintings now.' Hamsa is a Hindu mantra, but it's also the goose. The whole thing is about how the goose can dive down out of the darkness and live on the surface of the water. At the same time, it can fly away to freedom."

This show is part of Adkins Arboretum's ongoing exhibition series of work on natural themes by regional artists. It is on view through Dec. 1 at the Arboretum Visitor's Center located at 12610 Eveland Rd. near Tuckahoe State Park in Ridgely. Contact the Arboretum at 410-634-2847, ext. 0 or info@adkinsarboretum.org for gallery hours.

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Adkins Arboretum is a 400-acre native garden and preserve at the headwaters of the Tuckahoe Creek in Caroline County. Open year round, the Arboretum is the region's resource for native plants and education programs about nature, ecology and wildlife conservation gardening. For more information, visit adkinsarboretum.org or call 410-634-2847, ext. 0.

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