

## EAST CITY ART



# Wade Carey interviews Wesley Clark, on Academy 2012 show at Conner Contemporary Art

By Wade Carey, August 6, 2012



Wesley Clark, Four Five Six, 2012, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

*I sat down to talk with Wes Clark on July 9, 2012, at his home in Hyattsville, Maryland. He is one of the featured MFA students in a show entitled Academy 2012 at Conner Contemporary Art, located at 1358 Florida Avenue, N.E. This is the 12th annual group show of the work of local student artists sponsored by the gallery. The show is by now a highly anticipated event in the Washington's art world's annual cycle. It runs through August 18th. The transcript of our conversation has been edited for concision and clarity.*

**Wade Carey:** Academy 2012 is just the latest of a pretty long line of shows stretching back to when they were still on Connecticut Avenue near Dupont Circle. Where they are now, obviously, is why East City Art is so eager to encourage people to visit Conner Contemporary and the other galleries in the neighborhood. I want to lead off with a question that came from my conversation with Jamie Smith, the curator of the show. When we were walking around the gallery I had my own first impressions of the work in the show. First and foremost, I want to congratulate you because I really love the two pieces that you put in the show. Before that, I had searched the Internet for information about you and visited your website to see what you had been doing. I hoped to get a representative sense of your personality, the one that you project through the Internet. I asked Jamie to explain to me a little bit more about the triptych [*Altered*, 2012, oil paint, shellac,

lumber, plywood, masonry nails, spray paint, 90 x 91 x 35 inches]. I was curious to know what was going on there. One of the things she said was something that I had not really caught in the work that you had been doing previously, either in your commercial or fine art work. There is a sense of trying to imbue history in to a piece of art. She said that you mentioned it in your artist's statement and in your conversations with her. Tell me why that is a starting point for you and tell me how you build either a narrative into the piece, a story that you have, or how do you make up the story?



Wesley Clark, *Altered*, 2012, courtesy Conner Contemporary Art, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wesley Clark:** Once that questions hits, my thoughts start to spiral off. As far as putting history into the piece, a lot of it came with the idea of memory. It started with a piece in graduate school [at George Washington University]. The whole memory and history concept started with work in grad school. That is why it is not represented on the website. I got to a certain stage of a piece and I automatically felt like it belonged in the time of my grandparents to the point where it was easily visually seen on the wall, in a home, people passing by, it was just so clear. It was that idea of historic memory.

**Wade:** Like something you didn't actually experience but it is in your body?

**Wes:** Right, exactly. I began to think along those lines. I then started to think about history, in general. How does history play into memory? Once I did a little bit more research on memory and the science of memory,

I read that every time you recall a memory, you are changing that memory. It was said that the truest memory is found only in someone who has amnesia, who can no longer remember it. You cannot unlock it. Looking at history and finding that world history is a recorded memory, how do you have true history? That is where my work begins to come about. Building a narrative with that work—with history—was my goal – beginning to think what it had been through, what life it had lived. My idea had been essentially to kind of put the work on a stage. You are coming in, you are either assuming that this piece may have been found or it has been made to look this way. If it has been made to look this way, then why? I am not trying to fool you about it having been found. I made it all. The wood is all straight from Home Depot but there are little keys and triggers in there that tip your mind back and forth. “Is it plywood? Plywood has not been around but for so long... But I have this feeling of age and history.” I think when we see things we naturally begin to build stories about them whether it’s true or not—just to solve it. Like, there are scrapes and scratches on the side. Well, it must have been when this or that happened. And we naturally infuse stories into objects. It is funny. I catch my wife; we do this all the time. She’ll see someone walking and she’ll say they’ve been walking this way and lay out a whole path. You don’t know that! You just made that up and yet it is so real to you. It could be true; it could not be. It is that playing of peoples’ own interpretations of what they think has taken place. For example, with *Four Five Six* [2011, oil paint, plywood, latex paint, shellac, 89 x 62 x 10 inches], the target-looking piece, when doing these woodworks, I began to create a narrative in my own mind as I am working. I’ll ask myself, “Why is this scrape here?” And I’ll answer, “These teenagers that were hanging out in the area where this piece was abandoned, had been throwing bottles at it, they had been picking at the paint, scratching stuff.” A questions and answer is going on about why this and that mark has been made, maybe this one is an original from when they were throwing something at the target. This is going on all the time while I am making the marks.

**Wade:** So, this is spontaneous as you are creating the piece, the memory is creating itself at the same time. It’s not planned out in advance like a history line that you then try to put into the work. You are really just tripping off of the work as you do it. The piece itself is giving you the memories at the same time.

**Wes:** Exactly. It is a dual process. And it is funny because that story is just for me; it is just me answering, as I am making the work. I do not expect that to be the viewer’s story.

**Wade:** They have their own story to make.



Detail, Wesley Clark, Four Five Six, 2011, Copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wes:** Right. So, that is the origin. For instance, *Altered* [2012, oil paint, shellac, lumber, plywood, masonry nails, spray-paint, 90 x 91 x 35 inches], had a slightly different take on that. I saw a piece of furniture in Restoration Hardware that made me think of safari-like trips, which then made me think of colonial Africa and people carrying luggage through the jungle, setting up camp every night, a big elaborate set up that would be put up and brought down when it is time to travel. That armoire became this triptych. Is it an armoire? Is it an altarpiece?



Work in progress, Wesley Clark, Altered, 2012, Copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wade:** That is how it feels when you walk up to it. It has a religious feel to it because of the angles of the three sides and the austere, church-like external part with the old patriarchs names carved on them. Then you come around to the inside and you see something completely different. Tell me about that.

**Wes:** First, it is what I would imagine to be the unexpected from the exterior. Naturally, I needed it to be totally different and yet relating. For me, I found it to be similar to sights, for example, like when you are riding on the train and you can see spots where the bombing has been so complete, where these cats are just loading up these walls. These are spaces that, for them, are sacred. There are positive and negative manifestations, like gang territory, and then there are just the cats that just do it. It is just what they do. But there is still a religious fervor about doing it. So, there is the idea of that power of putting one's name up, and their family or their crew, exalting them in that religious manner. It is like you are engulfing yourself in that. That is one way I was going with it, along with this idea that there was an aspect of the vandalism that is associated with graffiti and the warring aspect of church that has gone on throughout history. I used the example in my thesis paper of the obelisks taken from Egypt into Rome and then Christian crosses capped on top of them. To me, capping with the Christian cross is very much the same as spraying my name up on *your* wall. They are the similarities that I also wanted to talk about. There was also the thinking about Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael—Abraham being the father and from Ishmael, the Muslims come, from Isaac, the Jews continuing further on to the Christians. It is all the God of Abraham but yet all these wars have been going on yet it is still the God of Abraham that we are praying to. There are also more subtle differences, Jesus being the question mark, for others Mohammed, etc. Nonetheless, it still boils down to praying to the God of Abraham.



Exterior, Wesley Clark, *Altered*, 2012, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wade:** How many clues do you think you left on the inside of the altar? Obviously, from what I have heard, your work is pretty spontaneous. You are creating in the studio as a part of an almost physical combination of your mind and your body working together at the same time. Your mind is not out there first in front telling your body to do something later that's already planned out, although, obviously, you have larger ideas about the work. Inside of the three-piece altar, or armoire, has a lot of different styles, I mean, it seems there is a variety of styles of tagging going on. Does that have any relationship to the idea of the war that you are talking about?

**Wes:** Yes, it is about that overlaying. Here is a cathedral for Catholics, then the Moors invade and now this same structure is a mosque. There is an overlaying of aesthetic to a point that there is a mesh. The arches that I used are found in both Christian and Islamic settings. It is that layering that I am concerned with. It is funny because it wasn't just me who tagged on it. I had three other guys who came in and worked it because I actually don't even do a lot of tagging.

**Wade:** There is a whole lot of realness in it. I didn't know whether that was because you were so brilliant at doing a whole lot of different styles—they felt like they were from different people—or whether you created collaboration so that you got the real thing in the piece. I am glad I know.



Detail, Wesley Clark, *Altered*, 2012, Copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wes:** And in doing, one of the guys said, here, take the yellow, so it looks like we're going up at the same time. Even that idea that we were going out together bombing and we have the same colors and cans equals the same time period. I had never even thought about that. So, even the color layering is a time-significant factor.

**Wade:** It is really a strong piece. Also, something that you will read if you see my interview with Jamie [Smith], when I walked in, one of the things I felt about the show this year was that there seemed to be that a majority of the artists were in some search for the portrayal of what is "beautiful." There seemed to be a desire to look for beauty in the show, as a whole. That may have been partially because there is so much color in the show. I guess, for me, color and beauty, joy and emotional access, were all the same thing. As we talked and walked around the show, I realized that beauty was the first word that I used to describe it, but it means a lot of other things. Transparency, emotional immediacy, a story that is laid out, that is not obscure. Even though you are trying to tell a story, it is pretty easy. You hold out a hand to the viewer to go on this journey, to make up a story. Jamie said that you had the only thesis show at George Washington University and that it was a beautiful show. Am I right, that the whole show was about the idea of building history into works of art? Was that true for all of the pieces?

**Wes:** Yes, *Constructs* was the title of my show. It is all about that idea of constructed history, memory, and narrative.

**Wade:** Tell me more about how you got there, how you built your thesis show, and if you think it was a success or not. I realize I am asking you to do your own critique.

**Wes:** I was definitely very pleased. Not knowing this whole idea, this constructed history of memory, how evident would it be? How easily accessible would it be to others outside of those that had been seeing and critiquing with me back and forth. I was incredibly pleased about the reception of the work. People really were engaging with the work in the manner I had hoped. Now, how I got there... I came into school as a painter. In fact, my last year I wanted to get back to painting because I had moved into more sculptural/woody works the end of my first year. But, for one thing, I just kept on playing with these things that were in front of me. I had to go with the ideas that I had. How did I get there? It really took time. It took thinking through this idea, this memory. I was also looking at this idea of time sampling—thinking of something from the past, and then thinking about something current, and about that relation, how does it relate to me? I am always looking on the inside first, to my thought, my history. That work, I actually found, was probably the most autobiographical I'd ever done thus far. Thinking that and then being able to begin to see how other can begin to relate to this work, with all its multiple rings of meaning, and going out from there. The largest piece in the show was a wall installation of 242 7x7 boxes, about 5-1/2 inches deep, that were scraped, carved, marked, gashed, all made out of plywood [*Fluctuations*, 2012, 107 x 328 x 6, oil paint, shellac, plywood, masonry nails]. It made map-like forms. In their arrangement, you might see where the markings might begin to connect from one box to the next, and then all of a sudden stop. If you step back, you might see that same line picks up five feet away and can continue on. The arrangement was like a pixilated *thing*. It was built on a grid but, in the installation of it, was always a fluid thing. Every time I install it, it never has to be the same way. There is the idea of movement, of shifting and breaking away, or coming together, depending on how you are processing it. I felt it was really just a combination of everything I was learning at the time. I was learning about rhizomes and such things.



Wesley Clark, *Fluctuations*, 2012, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark



Detail, Wesley Clark, *Fluctuations*, 2012, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wade:** I am reminded that there is another thing about this show. Maybe it is about artists who are studying now, maturing and becoming fine artists, about to hit the world. That is, an interest in science. My first intention, when Jamie said that she would like me to interview you—I first wanted to know why you decided to go back to art school. You were a practicing artist, an adult working on commissions, doing things in the world as an artist. Then you went to school, back into the academy. I must ask you, before we go any further, why you did that.

**Wes:** For me, it was realizing that there was a level of conversation that my work did not have. I was beginning to show with others' that had that conversation. I recognized that. A good friend of mine, [Stan](#)



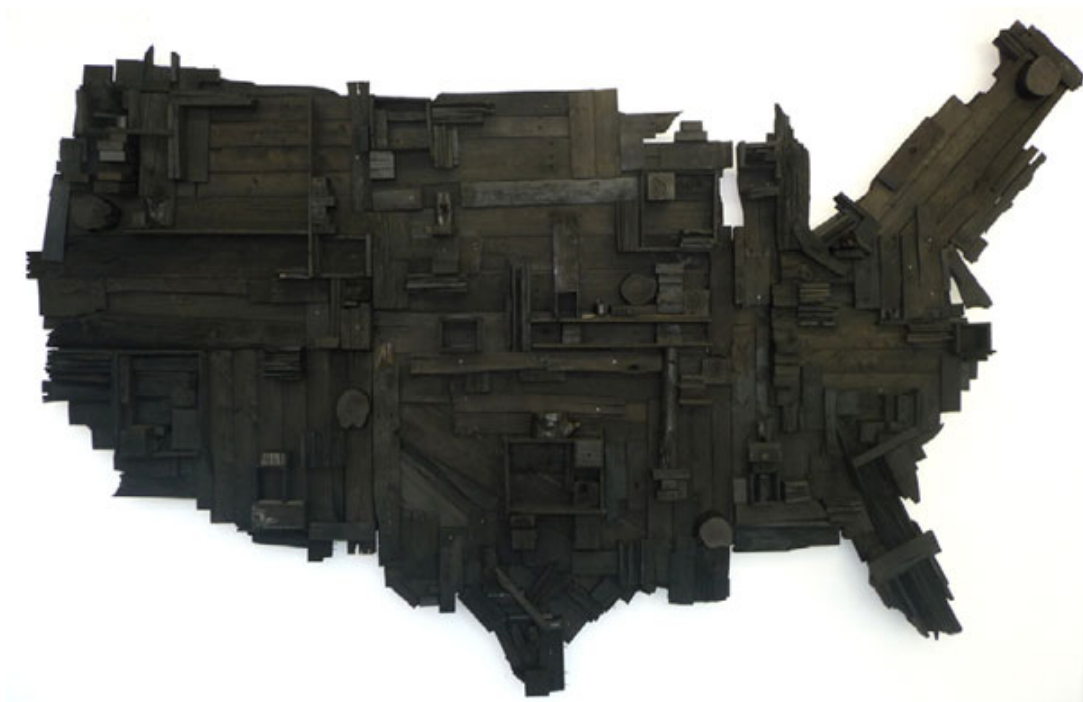
**Squirewell** was showing with me. We had been showing together for years. He went to MICA, came back, and his work was different and his conversation was different. I could see there was that jump in maturity in all of it. I think it was that criticality that began to show that I wanted to have, as well in my work and the conversation about the work—and all the ideas that were going into it. I was beginning to get there on my own. I realized that the work I was doing was based off of my readings of Carl Jung. I was beginning to dive into some deeper things. But grad school is an accelerant.

**Wade:** Yes, art school really concentrates your ability to learn about that stuff.

**Wes:** Right, and so, that was first and foremost why I went. It was to hone that critical thinking.

**Wade:** The show, and therefore your work, is united in another theme—of identity, the identity of an author of a work of art. Some explicitly produced work that had a direct reference to great artists of the past. Before, during, or after going through art school, did the echoes of great artists who came before you start to have more play in your work? Or, were they more just intellectual information?

**Wes:** While in school, in a critique with a visiting artist, I was introduced to the work of **Leonardo Drew**. His work in particular, shot me off in a direction, to a point that I had to work at not being a little Leonardo Drew. The first work I did after seeing his work was a large wooden piece, *My Big Black America* [2011, 4 x 144 x 14, salvaged and stained wood], which was probably very similar. When seeing his work, I was like, whew, there it is! I just dove straight into his work and then started watching the videos. Then, I actually got a chance to meet him last fall. His work had naturally been on my mind and I needed to work it out of me. That was probably the biggest influence that I found on my work so directly. Prior to that, honestly, I was not looking at a lot of artists, in order to try to find something new within myself, and hoping that there was not something already super similar out there in the world. On some level, though, I don't even think about that, at this point.



Wesley Clark, *My Big Black America*, 2011, copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wade:** How did you find GW? I mean, how was it working at GW, or learning at GW?

**Wes:** I thought it was great. They are very supportive and encouraged me to expand. If you have an idea, just go with the ideas, to keep pushing and not to feel stuck to one. I had been out for ten years [having received a BFA from Syracuse University in 2001] so I had been making bodies of work. That is what mindset I was in, making multiples and bodies of work to show.

**Wade:** Did you benefit from having somebody sort of stop you in your tracks and say, no, you're playing at something that is safe, or, you are repeating old habits?

**Wes:** Yes, I benefited from someone saying, you know, you don't have to finish that. That, alone, made me say to myself, really? You can just keep moving on. Mind you, in this case, it was like a 9 foot by 4 foot painting, something that I really wanted to do. But it was an extension of what I had been doing prior to coming to school. Then I've heard that with all the layers that are involved in my work to try peeling back and focusing—you can dive into one layer and really explore, and then, the next. Slowing down and even taking your time with it, which you can't really do in grad school because it is so short.

**Wade:** I don't know how much of it is part of the GW curriculum, but one of the things that I care most about is something that you have to learn in any other profession, which is how to be an artist. It is not just how to do the art. It's how to figure out how to execute the work you need to execute and still stay reasonably sane and alive and healthy. And it is about how to understand how the object that you create has a specific relationship to other people, and how you can control that—or, at least, be as skilled as possible—you maybe can never control it. To learn to be as skilled as possible at having what you want to happen to the works of art after you have done them. Some artists would just as soon burn them all and start over again and then burn them all again. Others would really like to sell the work, either privately or through a gallery system, or on E-Bay. Anything goes. Did you feel you got any of that from GW or was it just about the fine arts coursework?

**Wes:** No, they definitely were about the larger picture of being an artist, and sometimes it was a visiting artist coming in and really clarifying that, at times. One thing you realize is that, coming out of art school, it is not like coming out of a doctor's program. You are not going in to the hospital. They know that there are many options for you. They do stress the fact that you need be keen on proposals and residencies and the like, getting your hands into multiple avenues of the art world. It was not just about your studio practice. It was in the business and living of art.

**Wade:** When you began to be touched by art personally—so this goes way back to your childhood—have you connected on any level with the regional or locality, Washington DC, or with the artists who worked in Washington, like the Color Field Painters? Has there ever been any sense of geographic place in the art that you do?

**Wes:** No. For one thing, I am not very social, in going out and meeting a lot of people. That was another thing, just being in the art world here; I want to get out there more; that now is a goal. I did not know that there were things here to research. Also, I lived in Spain for three years as a child and I feel that time formulated a lot of who I am. From age 8 to 11, I was in that world. Coming back, I still felt that it was very much a part of me. I went back to study in Italy for a summer and found that it was great for me. I created the most work I had done the whole time I was at Syracuse. It allowed me to feel like I was in my own space, in my own head, where I like to be. I don't speak Italian, and so if you are speaking around me, it doesn't filter in and becomes background noise. I feel because of that I have always been naturally more internal with the work, not so much looking outside and knowing and seeing what's around me—until now.

**Wade:** OK, I have another leading question for you. In *Four Five Six* which has a very prominent place in the show, it is right in the front, the first thing you see when you come in. It is obviously a target. It has concentric circles. It is broken in two pieces. I know enough about it from the thesis that you were presenting. There is an invitation to create a story and to create some history. It is up to the viewer, the art appreciator, to make up whatever story he or she wants to. Where did the idea of the target come from? Was it just out of the blue? Was there something more planned about it?



Work in progress, Wesley Clark, *Four Five Six*, 2011, Copyright K. Wesley E. Clark

**Wes:** There was a show that we were doing at the school gallery that a friend of mine had wanted to do for a long time. She had wanted to do *The Donut Show*. It was just the idea of circular forms.

**Wade:** So, it is really just a riff on a donut. OK, that's a relief.

**Wes:** That is where thinking about the circular form even came into play. But then, the *Donut Show*? That doesn't mean anything to me. So, I had to begin to relate it to my own history.

**Wade:** How do you pick up professionally after you take a two year hiatus to deepen being in touch with your talent and what you want to do?

**Wes:** That is the question I am still asking. I feel like I am just now beginning to surface out of that foam, that in-between stage. I still feel that September or late August is when life begins again.

**Wade:** Some people are going back to school and other people are going to be alone again.

**Wes:** Right. I am not going back. So, now it is definitely an adjustment. Fortunately, I had an installation business, hanging artwork and mirrors around the city. I have been able to get back to that and just focus on that and advertise again.

**Wade:** You are rooted in Washington and you are going to stay in Washington. Do you think Washington is a good place for artists?

**Wes:** I do. There is always a mix of people coming in and out. I think that is the biggest thing. Also, you don't feel that New York pressure. There are a lot of artists here. I think it makes it easier in a sense to create here. Even when I visit New York I feel that if I say I am an artist there is too much expected already.

**Wade:** Are you the kind of person who socializes with artists, also, or not?

**Wes:** I am. That is a newer socialization. A lot of my friends that I went to school with were not artists and they were from here. They are still my core people that I hang out with on a regular basis. They are all creative. In fact, most of them are writers, more than visual artists. But now, more and more, because I want to maintain that conversation and those thoughts around art, I am hanging out more with artists that I know. Even now, a lot of them were in grad school at the same time with me so we are in the same group.

**Wade:** It is not just about this interview or this show, though I am so happy that Conner Contemporary does it. I want to make artists feel like they are at home in Washington, specifically on the east side. Art belongs where it can survive. East City Art, the website, is trying every way it can to feature, and to celebrate, the art and the artists and the venues that exist on the east side of Washington rather than the Northwest side. Obviously, galleries have to go where the market is. But I think what we are trying to do is celebrate the idea that the market can spread into areas that are almost artistically zoned to be more friendly to artists. Certainly, affordability has a lot to do with it. So, that is how East City Art got its name. Are there galleries or museums you think about going back to again and again because in synch with what they are doing here in Washington?

**Wes:** Well, [Civilian Art Projects](#), I really like what they have going on there. But again, I am just beginning to get out and explore different galleries to even know what is going on in the scene. Museum-wise, I go back to the [National Gallery of Art](#), West Building, a lot.

**Wade:** That place is magical. I remember it from my earliest childhood. That is what I worry about, in a way. That is what I was talking to Jamie about, too, about being an artist in Washington. It is almost like the gravity of the amount of great work that is all around you is a distraction. I do not know whether it is or not. Each person is different. Is it a source of strength for you to have so much art that has already been put in a museum—not a part of the act of creation in the community. It can be like they are memorials to the great art of the past. I was always longing, as a kid, for living art, for people who were doing art who were alive and not just art that had happened a long time before my time. It did not relate to my life. That's the source of my question to you. Is it a source of strength? Is it a distraction? Is it a negative in any way as you live in this town?

**Wes:** I think the way I've dealt with it in the past actually is I probably take it for granted that it is there, that so much is just there and accessible. NGA's space doesn't feed me in the same way as going into Conner and seeing the space, even empty, it feeds me. I feel the life in there. I look more to the galleries for life and go for the museums more for almost like meditation, in a sense.

**Wade:** You have been talking about putting your professional services back on track to make money. Is there anything else going on? Any travel to inspire you?

**Wes:** Actually, I am going to Aruba next week with my wife.

**Wade:** Lovely!

**Wes:** I am also working on the walls of a restaurant on H Street [NE] that is opening up near Conner. It is called Impala. I will be working on the walls to age them. It is allowing me to work and clear my mind of some of the grad school stuff. I also want to build an addition to my garage, in order to build a studio but that is going to take time.

**Wade:** That means that you want to stay here. You think this is the place to be able to work as an artist.

**Wes:** Right. Also, I will be getting into doing smaller scale models.

**Wade:** I am really happy to know that you are staying here. It is something that I am always going on about, helping artists to be able to flourish here, especially on the east side. Actually one of the artists that I interviewed last year, who was in the show again this year as a part of a team, Sam Scharf, he, like you, was an adult when he went back to take his next degree in art. He loves Washington. He is also passionate about thinking that Washington is a good city for artists. I am always searching out those artists to find out why. The critical mass is happening.

**Wes:** And artists are being supported more than ever before. You are starting to see the public works and that is a big part of it.

**Wade:** Yes and that is how Jamie and I concluded in our conversation. The money is there. It is a strong middle class town and even if people are coming and going they have expendable income and, especially when they are young, they ought to be starting to collect art. I tell them to start collecting when they are 25. Don't wait until you are 55 to collect art. It is not the kind of thing you should reserve for your old age. You should do it from the first moment you look at something and you love it. I am glad to hear that you think it is happening. Is there anything that you really wanted to be sure to accomplish by doing this interview, something that people should understand about your art?

**Wes:** I feel like a lot of the questions got to the heart of it all, just knowing that the work was really about engaging people in building and thinking for themselves about what the work is, and knowing that that is the purpose of the work. It is for them to create their own work, in a sense. That started when I began to realize that people at shows began asking me, what's it about, what's it about? No, I want to hear what your interpretation is because that is what makes it interesting for me. This is why I do the work, to engage with others in their minds and in their thoughts. I don't feel that I talk a lot socially outside of one-on-one conversation. This is how we have conversation.

**Wade:** I think it is important that people understand that they are welcome to have their own stories. The work of art that you created is not about you having a story buried in it. It is everybody's story and anybody's guess.

**Wes:** Exactly.