



*Sue Wrubican:
Well Past the Echo*

September 9–November 18, 2017

Front cover image: *Ocracoke Path* (detail), 2006/2017



Within the Wreck 05, 2013/2017

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Greater Reston Arts Center (GRACE) is very pleased to present *Sue Wrbcian: Well Past the Echo*. I am particularly honored to be working with Wrbcian for my first exhibition at GRACE. I met Wrbcian when first visiting the campus of George Mason University (GMU) to discuss the developing partnership between the Arts Center and the School of Art at GMU. The meeting was followed-up with a studio visit and I immediately knew that I wanted to show her project in Reston. She has been in the DC area for over ten years yet has not had a major exhibition showcasing her work in the area until now.

In addition to the exhibition, Wrbcian will be premiering her artist book *Biography of Catastrophe and the Eventual Outcome of an Instant* at GRACE. A public book launch will take place at the Arts Center at which Wrbcian and I will be in conversation about her work. Programming for the exhibition will include two Creative Responses, for which a creative professional is invited to respond to the work in the gallery and then participate in open conversation with the audience. Finally, *Well Past the Echo* will act as the inspiration for young area artists and the Youth Art Month *Emerging Visions* exhibition. Local high school-aged artists will be invited to view Wrbcian's exhibition and then create their own work in response using the prompt "becoming."

As GRACE continues to grow, we strive to develop new and unique content to contribute to the cultural dialogue in the region and beyond. This would not be possible without the unflagging support of our Board Chair Robert Goudie and the

entire Board of Directors. Thank you to the Virginia Commission for the Arts, the Arts Council of Fairfax County, Reston Community Center, and Reston Town Center Association for regularly supporting programs at GRACE.

Together with the artist, we would like to thank Barry Broadway and Broadway Gallery, John Balano, Oscar Stevenson, the College of Visual and Performing Arts and the School of Art at George Mason University, Harry Mayer, Provisions Library, Annie Chen, Ben Ashworth, and Josh Sackett for their support of this exhibition.

The staff at GRACE—Erica Harrison, Sofia Blom, Sarah Black Sadler, and Maggie Edwards—go above and beyond every day and they keep the place cheerful. Thank you for all your hard work.

And, Sue Wrbican, your work is smart, engaging, thought provoking, poetic, beautiful, and more. I am truly grateful to have this opportunity to work with you and so proud to be presenting this exhibition. Thank you for sharing your work with us.

Lily Siegel

Executive Director and Curator



Three Trees, 2013/2017

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

In recent years, Sue Wrbcian has taken on the role of a contemporary Surrealist. Surrealism, or *surréalisme*, coined by French poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917, promoted the practice of automatism—spontaneous writing, drawing, and painting, which relies strongly on chance and Freud's theory of the unconscious.

Wrbcian opens her narrative in her book *Biography of Catastrophe and the Eventual Outcome of an Instant* (2017) with allusions to both chance and the unconscious. When a hurricane disrupts her camping trip on an island, the artist is forced to break down her tent for fear of destruction. Instead of taking pictures of her camp in the storm, the artist allowed herself to keep moving to allow the next opportunity to present itself. The following year she embarked on a trip cross-country with the intention of being truly free ("free of an agenda was the agenda"¹). Again, Wrbcian encountered a hurricane, though this one had long passed and left a trail of devastation in its path. Strong winds and destruction become the starting point for Wrbcian's game of free association and reveling in unexpected encounters.

The exhibition *Well Past the Echo* brings together all the resultant tropes from the journey for the first time—photographs, an artist book, maquettes for unrealized sculptures, and a site-specific installation using sails the artist has collected as raw sculptural material. Wrbcian is a trained photographer and poet so it is not surprising that she chooses to tell the story of her project through an artist book. The title of the book and the eponymous project, *Biography of Catastrophe*, nods back to Wrbcian's first photographic projects as a portraitist, a visual biographer, and alludes to her

¹ Sue Wrbcian, *Biography of Catastrophe and the Eventual Outcome of an Instant*, 2017, artist book.

surrealist inclinations. She opens the book with a definition borrowed from author and activist Rebecca Solnit:

Catastrophe comes from the Greek *kata*, or down, and *streiphen*, or turning over. It means an upset of what is expected and was originally used to mean a plot twist. To emerge into the unexpected is not always terrible...²

This definition could very well summarize Surrealism. The narrative in *Biography of Catastrophe and the Eventual Outcome* of an Instant leads the reader through the events that resulted in the artworks on view in *Well Past the Echo*. The leading images in the book are a series of more traditional landscapes and portrait photography. The visual narrative is soon interrupted by a stark image of a destroyed sailboat. This image marks a shift in both content and in process. The photograph has been manipulated to look like a photogram, a technique in which objects are placed on photographic paper and exposed to light leaving behind their outline. The Surrealist Man Ray (1890–1976) may be the most well-known practitioner of the photogram; in fact, he renamed the method “Rayographs” after himself. Wrbican does not make photograms but emulates the look in several images through a combination of collage and straight photography. After coming upon this hurricane-wrecked ship, Wrbican found herself accepting the gift of her first sail, which led her to sculpture and American Surrealist Kay Sage (1898–1963). Sage is known for her paintings of desolate landscapes inhabited by bare scaffolding and sculpted sails.

Wrbican first discovered Sage’s work when photographing a sail on an undeveloped island beach. She was struck by the similarities in their practices and continued

² Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 10.

to pursue the connection by incorporating aspects of Sage's paintings into her work. The first images were made during a residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation on Captiva Island, Florida. There, Wrbican sculpted her sails amongst hurricane-ravaged trees and photographed them in the landscape. Her studio was next to that of an aerialist and they began collaborating to make sail sculptures that the acrobat could move in and around. The resulting photographs emphasize the forms made by the fabric with just hints of the human figure visible. Again, Surrealism comes to mind—specifically the way that male practitioners often used photographic images of cloaked female bodies and dismembered body parts in their photographic collages. Wrbican reverses the roles as a female artist by showing a male body literally bound in cloth. She also aims to empower; instead of cutting up the body of her subject, she presents the figure as one of awesome strength, capability, and beauty.

In addition to making photographs in response to Sage's images, Wrbican has created two large-scale sculptures taken directly from Sage paintings, one on the grounds of the Seligmann Center, a place Sage visited frequently—the former home of Surrealist painter Kurt Seligmann and his wife Arlette, in Sugar Loaf, New York. By building three-dimensional models of Sage's painted structures, Wrbican not only actualizes the hallucinatory images from Sage's two-dimensional renderings but makes them relevant for the contemporary viewer, challenging the definition of catastrophe to be one of potential alongside devastation.

Wrbican states explicitly in *Biography of Catastrophe* that she wants to bring attention to Sage's work and question why Sage's name and oeuvre is not as



Within the Wreck 02, 2013/2016

well recognized as those of her male counterparts. By reworking Sage's images, Wrbican has brought the language of Surrealism to new contemporary concerns of catastrophe. Instead of the Surrealist anxiety for imminent destruction brought about by the world wars, Wrbican is concerned with the devastation of the environment by hurricanes and natural disasters. But, the project remains inherently optimistic; she helps us find the potential in catastrophe. The eventual outcome of her project is an ode to discovery and becoming.



Sail Study (detail), 2016, STUD Residency, Catlett, VA



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Dali Tree, 2013/2015



Direction, 2013



The Eventual Outcome of an Instant, 2015



Maquette for Hyphen (4 Views), 2015

BIOGRAPHY

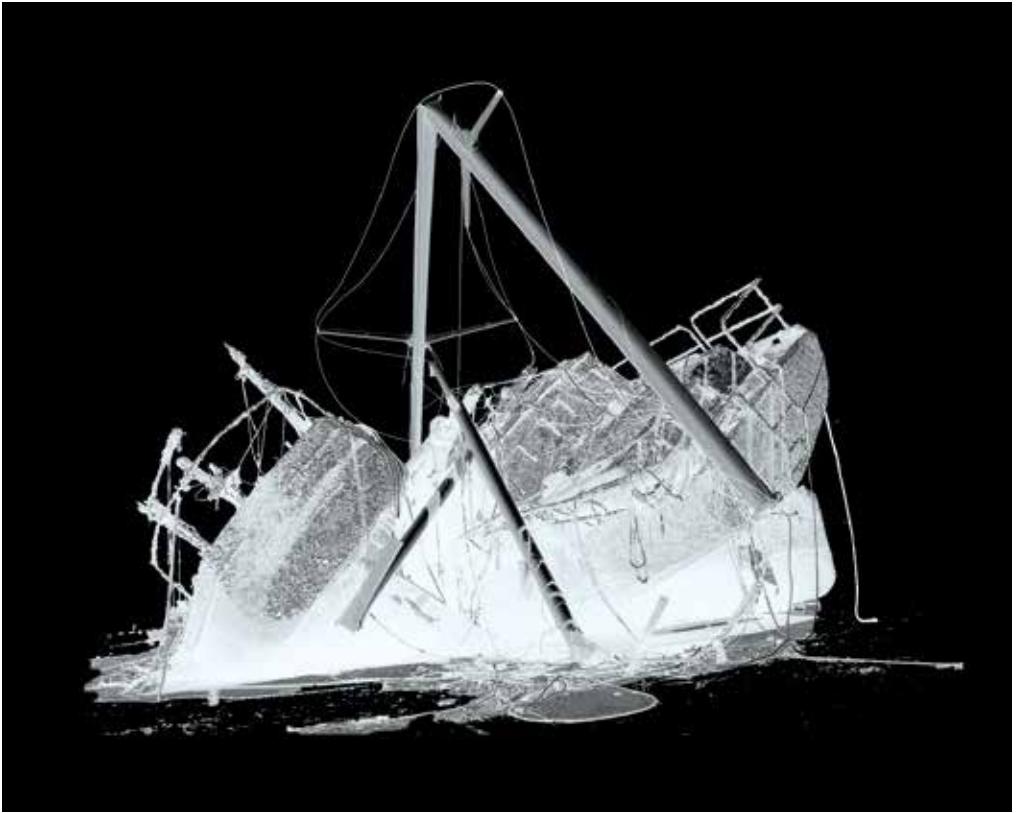
Sue Wrbican is an Associate Professor and Director of Photography at the School of Art at George Mason University. She has an MFA in Photography from the Rhode Island School of Design and a BA in English Writing with a concentration in poetry from the University of Pittsburgh. Her studio is in the Monroe Street ArtsWalk in the Brookland neighborhood of Washington, DC.

Her site-specific sculpture *The Eventual Outcome of an Instant* was constructed at the Seligmann Center in Sugar Loaf, New York, in 2015. In 2014, she presented her installation and lecture "Continue the Temporary and It Becomes Forever" at the Zizek Studies conference at the University of Cincinnati's College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning. Her video *Back Roof* (1998) is included in artist Miranda July's *Joanie 4 Jackie Archive* at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Wrbican has held artist residencies at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva, Florida; Kala Art Institute in Berkeley, California; The Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida; and STUD Residency in Catlett, Virginia. She is a founding member of the Floating Lab Collective whose projects have been exhibited widely in venues such as ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York. In 2008, she worked with Mary Carothers on a project addressing gas consumption and the environment entitled *The Frozen Car*.



Sail Intention (sketch #1), 2009/2012



One Year After Ike, Drained, 2009/2017



Beyond the Echo, 2016



Sail Study 12, 2017
Collaboration with Harry Mayer
Installed at George Mason University

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