

# The Boston Globe

## Faith Wilding, foremother of feminist art, draws on activist history in new shows at Brown, Tufts universities

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 30, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Artist Faith Wilding poses for a photo while working on a new drawing in her home studio in Providence. MATTHEW HEALEY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

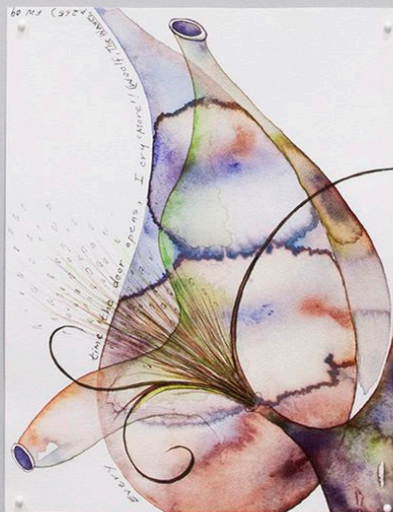
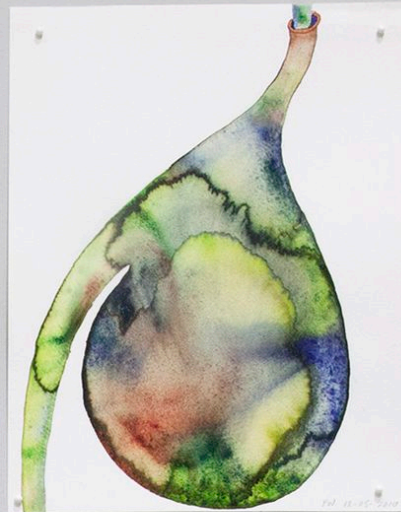
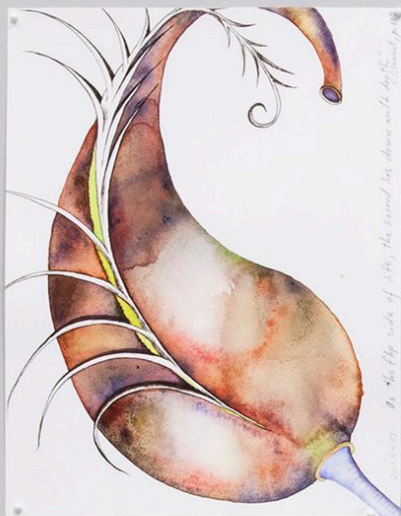
PROVIDENCE — Faith Wilding’s “Tears” drawings fill three walls in “Arrows of Desire,” her two-person show with Harry Gould Harvey IV at Brown University’s David Winton Bell Gallery. The exhibition celebrates the artists’ shared love of English poet William Blake.

“I was thinking about what tears could do,” said Wilding during a visit to the gallery. “Blake says, [‘A Tear is an Intellectual Thing.’](#) Often, we cry for things going on in the world, or for things in our heads we can’t remedy.”

Wilding, a foremother of feminist art, has two area exhibitions this fall: “Arrows of Desire” and “Staying with the Trouble” at Tufts University Art Galleries.

Her “Tears” drawings, in watercolor, ink, and pencil, are inscribed with text from her own diaries and from writers and theorists she admires: Blake, philosopher Julia Kristeva, Virginia Woolf, Emma Goldman, and more.





A detail from Faith Wilding's drawing installation, "Tears," watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper. SCOTT LAPHAM

“Their forms are containers, almost like chemistry vessels,” Wilding said of her drawings of tears. “I was thinking of alchemy.”

Tears can be alchemical. They open into vulnerability; they rupture propriety. Wilding’s work is like that, full of trauma and growth.

The artist, who retired to Providence 10 years ago, grew up in a Christian commune in Paraguay, where her English parents had settled. The family moved to the United States when she was in her late teens. The commune had its gifts and detriments.

“As women in the commune,” she said, “we gave up a lot of things.” They were told how to dress and do their hair, and what to study; they couldn’t just walk wherever they liked.

Now 78, Wilding had her consciousness raised working alongside Judy Chicago and others in the 1970s to start the Feminist Art Program at California State University, Fresno, and California Institute of the Arts.

She pointed to a photo of herself then, in front of a loom.

“This is where I met Judy Chicago,” Wilding said. “She came into my studio, and, very Judy, said, ‘What are you doing there, sitting in front of a loom? You need to be out there in the world doing stuff.’”

Wilding already had been out in the world. An antiwar activist and draft counselor, she’d been arrested and jailed during protests in England in the mid-1960s.

Soon she was creating performances and installations about women’s bodies and roles in society. In “Arrows of Desire,” Harvey blows up and frames slides of Wilding’s performances from that era. “Sacrifice,” in which cow entrails burst from a prone figure outfitted with casts of Wilding’s head and hands, framed women as sacrificial.

“Performance and community were such an important part of the way feminist artists made their way through the world,” said Kate Kraczon, director of exhibitions and chief curator of the Bell Gallery. “Faith’s work — her decades of activism, getting arrested,



doing performances with entrails — it just doesn't make it into the historical record the way objects do."

A video of Wilding's early performance ["Waiting"](#) is in a "Staying with the Trouble" satellite exhibition at SMFA. In it, the artist, rocking in a rocking chair, recites an incantatory poem detailing the stages of a woman's life as a litany of things to wait for: "Waiting to be a pretty girl ... Waiting for my baby to stop crying ... Waiting for the struggle to end."

It struck a chord. Wilding still gets e-mails every week asking for permission to perform it. She seemed bemused by its enduring popularity.

"'Waiting' is kind of a downer," she said. 'I mean, people cathected to it, unbelievably, including very young people. It always surprised me. People were crying.'



Faith Wilding, Biodresses, 1998. Mixed media collage, watercolor, ink and resin on vellum. PETER HARRIS

Her work has come a great distance since then, traversing themes of technology, social justice, and the environment. Her “Bio Dresses” assemblages at Tufts, made in 1998 and featuring skin-like torsos with armored heads and limbs, refer to the bioethics of cloning.

Kate McNamara, guest curator of “Staying with the Trouble,” recalled a conversation she had with Wilding about second-wave feminism.

“Faith said, ‘I hate this idea of waves. I love thinking of a stream.’” McNamara said. “Her work isn’t stagnant. It’s not a wave that breaks over someone and becomes a dominant force.”

Wilding’s recent drawings, sometimes as dense and mystical as [Blake’s drawings](#), feel at once timeless and urgent. At SMFA, “Big Herbal” is part botanical chart, part sacred text, and “After the Fire” writhes with skeins of color.

Both reflect the artist’s childhood in Paraguay.





Faith Wilding's "After the Fire." Watercolor, gouache, ink on paper. PETER HARRIS

“I would ride out with my father, who was farm manager,” Wilding said. “We had to burn the grasslands so new grass would grow. We would drop matches, and then behind us it would be burning like crazy.”

She became a feminist in her 20s. Her passion for the environment goes back farther.

“I grew up in the forest, and even there I was bemoaning when we had to chop down trees, although things grew back so fast,” she said. “I took it for granted because I was born into it.”

And here, perhaps, is where the tears come in again.

“It’s very painful. I try to make [the drawings] as beautiful as possible, because that’s the only thing I can do,” Wilding said. “Look, this is so beautiful, why are you destroying it?”

## **STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE**

At Tufts University Art Galleries, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford and School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts, 230 The Fenway, through Dec. 5.

<https://artgalleries.tufts.edu/blog/news/2020/01/30/staying-with-the-trouble>

## **ARROWS OF DESIRE**

At David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 64 College St., Providence, through Nov. 28. [www.brown.edu/campus-life/arts/bell-gallery](http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/arts/bell-gallery)

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