John Wilson

His Interest in Sculpture

One of the reasons why I got attracted to the sculpture is that when you are standing in front of a life-sized sculpture, you get this thing that confronts you. Whereas when you do an easel painting or a small drawing it finally goes in someone’s house and, theoretically people live with it and there’s a different kind of connection. But when you are doing something that is out on a busy street, it has to compete with other activities. And so it has to have a kind of power. One of the things that I didn’t want to do was, these public things, which after a while become wallpaper. There are all of these large, massive things in any downtown area. These sculptures, people walk right past them, as big as they are. I wanted to do something that would make people stop and look.

John Wilson

Importance of the Title

I didn’t know what to call it! And I was talking to Elma Lewis, who used to be the manager of the National Center of African American Artists, and so she asked me “What are you going to call it?” I was telling her that I wanted this thing to be something that would last, and be something that would become an image for a long time of people. And one of the reasons I did it so big is that I wanted to just have just the sheer presence of this thing made it impossible for you to walk away from it without getting involved with it in one way or another. Another
reason why I wanted it to have this feeling is that you can’t dismiss it. And if you
grow up as a black person, one of the major things that happens to you is you are
dismissed, at least when I was growing up. Obviously things have changed to a
great extent, but there was a sense of being not recorded and not taken seriously.
And I was discussing this with Elma, so Elma said, “Well, why don’t you call it Eternal
Presence?” And so it was that conversation with her that gave us the title for it.

John Wilson
Psychological Impact of the Sculpture
I wanted it to be something that has an inner kind of psychological impact on
people that made them identify with it. So that I am not confronting them or
challenging them, I’m saying, “This is humanity. I am this and you are.” I wanted to
get this kind of universality in it. And the other aspect of this is, I wanted to have a
different impact on each individual. Each individual brings their own life and their
own reality to it. Everyone relates to it with their own personalities and their own
background. I’m trying to find words for it now. But any work of art, any visual art
anyways, if you could put it into words you wouldn’t have to do it visually. And so, for
me to now translate it back to words is difficult.

John Wilson
Olmec Heads
I’d seen these sculptures from Southern Mexico, those Olmec heads, and so
I wanted to do something that would have that kind of dense power. And not
necessarily something that was a kind of rendering, but something that had a sense
of it being part of a larger community. All of these early communities, or civilizations,
or whatever you want to call them, art was a very important, functional part of...
functional in the sense that people couldn’t live without it, and they needed it. It
wasn’t a decoration, it was part of their way of coping with the environment. And so,
I wanted to do something like that in this head.

Nick Capasso, curator
Eternal Presence as a Maquette
John Wilson’s Eternal Presence here at deCordova is a maquette. And what’s meant
by that term is it’s a sculptural study or a sketch for something that’s intended to
be created at a much larger scale. Oftentimes maquettes exist in just ephemeral
materials like plaster, or wax, or some kind of cardboard model, but here John
went through the trouble of actually casting this in bronze so he could work out
some of the casting and patina issues for a much larger piece. And the larger
piece in question is in Boston. It’s also called Eternal Presence and it was created
in 1987 for the National Center for Afro-American Artists, which is on Walnut
Avenue in Roxbury. And it is much larger than the maquette. It’s eight feet tall, and
John intended this sculpture to be, and I’m quoting him here, “A symbolic black
presence infused with a sense of universal humanity.” And the Eternal Presence in
Roxbury was meant to commemorate the 350 year history of African Americans in
Massachusetts.
Mystery Family Tour
You are looking at a sculpture by John Wilson titled *Eternal Presence*. Look and listen carefully to solve the mystery of who the sculpture is of. Could you see this sculpture from far away? Can you tell if the head belongs to a woman or a man? I sure can’t. In fact, the artist, John, didn’t want anyone to know if the head belongs to a man or a woman. Why do you think the artist decided to make this unclear? John wanted the head to represent everyone—men and women. He created this sculpture to represent a whole group of people, rather than just one person. John created this sculpture to show respect for the history of African Americans in Massachusetts. John wanted the sculpture to have a strong black cultural presence that will last over time. Artists often create heads or portraits called busts of important people. Who or what group would you create a bust for?