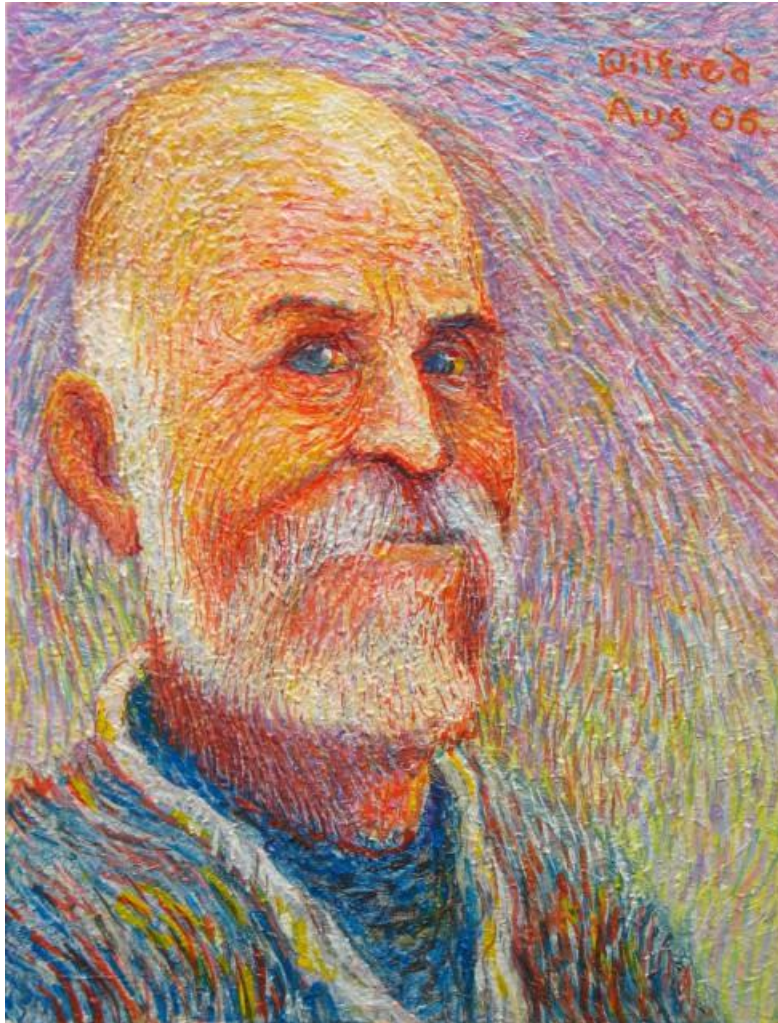


Easy Reader on Wilfrid Sarr

Fifty years and a day

By [Mark McDermott](#) | September 29th, 2010 |



Self portrait by Wilfred Sarr

Wilfred Sarr's life in art

In September of 1960, a very unlikely GI went on leave.

Wilfred Sarr was 24. He'd been drafted the previous year, unceremoniously yanked from Compton College, where he studied psychology for one very good reason.

“Well, I knew that I was crazy, no doubt about that,” Sarr said. “I looked at the way my mind worked and played tricks on me – I had so many automobile accidents, just little things to let me know there was a mechanism in me somewhere that was at odds with my progress.”

Army life was surprisingly pleasant. Even basic training was no problem. Sarr had been working in a clown diving act, so he was plenty fit. He was then trained as a medic and sent to Germany.

“Of all the things I could have gotten into, to be a medic was wonderful,” Sarr said. “If I had been in a light outfit, I would have cracked up and gotten killed by my own men.”

He was stationed in a beautiful German village called Birkenfeld, a pristine little farm community that had somehow avoided the destruction of WWII and still had cottages made out of mud and wattle. Sarr would frequently wander the fields and admire the old farm implements, which reminded him of his own upbringing working on farms in California.

Then the rain came. For seven weeks and one day, it poured. Sarr went in search of the sun. He and a buddy drove south, towards Barcelona. But as they passed through the villages of Germany and then France, something was happening.

“When you don’t see the sun for 50 days, they say screw it and go inside the cellars and bring out the wine and everybody gets shitfaced,” Sarr recalled. “It was funny. Every little town we came to, we’d stop and somebody would hand a bottle in one side and you’d take a long slug and then pass it along and out the other side, over and over. After going through about 30 little villages, by about 5 o’clock, we were really drunk.”

Finally they made it to Barcelona. It was 105 degrees and sunny and there seemed to be art everywhere – drawings, painting, sculptures – and Sarr remembers thinking, “I could do that.”

The thought percolated as he began to drive back north a few days later. The forests, the villages, the skies: everything seemed aglow. As he crossed into France he had an epiphany.

“The vineyards, the blue sky, the puffy clouds, it was just this special beauty,” Sarr said. “I was driving through, and I thought, ‘Yeah. This is what I want to do.’ I had been thinking medicine and psychology and that kind of thing. It was the last day in September of 1960, and I said, ‘Goddamn it, I am going to be an artist.’”

He returned to Germany and began painting and drawing and within a few months had a show at the local service club that was well attended by the doctors and medical staff at the general hospital where he worked. One of his first drawings shows a cave man looking somewhat quizzically at his hands.



Caveman. by Wilfred Sarr

“He is looking... ‘These are pretty cool. Wonder what they are for?’ Little cave man,” Sarr said. “That is where the questions started.”

Sarr knew exactly what his hands were for. Fifty years and one day later, Sarr returns this Friday to Cannery Row Studios in Redondo Beach to show the fruits of a prodigiously productive lifetime in art. The show is a retrospective titled *50+1 (what was the question?)*.

He has produced more than 5,000 works of art and become — over the course of four decades, before leaving for Santa Cruz in 2001 — the man who more than any other painted this town. His work has ranged exuberantly, from pointillist portraits to impressionist landscapes to dancers to mandalas, from Picasso-like abstractions to Matisse-like exercises in simplicity, grace and color. But over and over again, he has drawn perhaps the most daunting comparison in all of art.

As longtime art collector and Hermosa Beach resident Maggie Moir said, “Wilfred is truly our Van Gogh.”

Sarr has certainly shared this much with Van Gogh: he has not painted with the current market in mind. His ambitions have been less material and more spiritual. He has made very little money.

“He is determined to do it his way, and I think that was the same with Van Gogh,” said Richard Stephens, a painter and curator at Cannery Row Studios. “He saw things differently, and just did it because that is all he knew how to do. Wilfred is the same way — he sees things differently, and he paints it the way he sees it. He never tries to fit in with anything. That is how you become an independent artist, and a leader.”

“I think Wilfred will be one of those people, in a hundred years, they will know who he is,” Stephens said.

Sarr suggests perhaps another reason why Van Gogh keeps coming up.

“Maybe because I’m apeshit crazy,” he said. “Over the last 50 years I bet 30 people have come up to me and asked, ‘What’s up? Why do you still have both ears?’ It’s amazing. People in my racket are supposed to be crazy.”

Nebraska to Hermosa

Sarr never received a day of formal artistic training in his life. But his whole life he was an artist.

He was born in Iowa and moved to Nebraska as a very young child. His memories are spare but intensely visual.

“I remember it was flat, and in winter, black and white and flat,” he said. “I remember we lived on a pig farm, way out of town, and there was a windmill, and if you got up on the windmill, man, it was just flat as far as you could see. That was Nebraska.”

A kindergarten teacher named Miss Coolin noticed a few unusual things about young Wilfred. First of all, every piece of paper that got within his grasp would be filled with drawings. It was a habit that would persist all his childhood.

“I was always drawing on every piece of paper I’d turn in to any teacher,” Sarr recalled. “She would have to look around to find the writing, because there was always drawing.”

Miss Coolin quickly realized that these weren’t like other kids’ drawings. Wilfred had an intuitive understanding of perspective, for one thing – the faraway man would be small, the nearby cow, big – and his buildings were solidly two-dimensional.

“In kindergarten, everyone else was drawing houses with three sides,” Sarr said. “I knew damn well you couldn’t see any more than two at any one time.”

His family moved to Arizona when he was eight and then to the Sierra foothills town of Lindsay, California a year later. Sarr felt like he’d been plunked down in the Garden of Eden.

“I realized I had arrived,” he said. “It was spectacular – all flowers, rocky hills, big boulders the size of semi-trucks. It was just fantastic.”

In grade school in California, the other students started to notice Wilfred’s unusual abilities. Kids would gather around his desk for an hour at a time and watch him draw. But back home, his parents, Charles and Opal, didn’t see much use in his burgeoning talents.

“To be an artist was like, what are you talking about?” he said. “You think you are going to be an artist, great. One in a million, playing the lottery, that was the message I got...Of course, you learn to pick cotton, pick beans, pick tomatoes, pick squash, do dishes. That is real.”

By high school, he'd largely put away any artistic notions, although one time, as a sophomore, a teacher named Mr. Shipman noticed a portrait Wilfred had just idly drawn of him. He asked for it, and Wilfred gave it to him.

"That was my first portrait," he said.

He would barely think about such things again until his epiphany in the military. After the military, he would barely think about anything else.

When Sarr arrived in Hermosa Beach in February of 1962, by his count, he was one of three bearded men in town. One was former mayor Mike Bigo (also the founder of the Pitcher House). The other was artist Willie Maloney, who did the original Tim Kelly surf sculpture and eventually left in a drugged haze with Sarr's first wife, Sandra.

"I've had a respectable number of failed marriages, collapsing under the weight of art and drugs...enough to be respectable in any art market in the world. Forget the fucking formal education," Sarr said.

Hermosa Beach in the 1960s was arguably one of the most vibrant artistic communities anywhere. The Lighthouse Café was blowing hot with some of the finest jazz musicians of the era; poets and philosophers wafted in and out of the Either/Or Bookstore just up the street; and the short-lived but long-remembered Insomniac Café was home to every assortment of artist.

Insomniac owner Bob Hare – who also operated an avant-garde gallery called the Argo – argues that Hermosa at that point was the epicenter of the LA art scene.

"There were a lot of artists in the South Bay," Hare said. "So many of them, in fact, that what really ought to be explored is how the LA art style was really generated in many ways from Hermosa Beach....And it was something Hermosa ate with a spoon, baby. It was truly an artist's colony, and all those wonderful people came out and supported it. And it grew like a wildfire."

Sarr had moved into a little house on the corner of Manhattan Avenue and Eighth Street in Hermosa. He had ambitions.

"I had envisioned really taking over the town," he said. "I was going to be the artist laureate of Hermosa Beach. It didn't happen."

Painting the town

He was known as Bart Sarr back then. Other artists recognized the unruly talent that arrived in their midst.

Painter Sari Staggs had seen these striking ballpoint pen drawings of male nudes that were done with no models. They were unlike anything she'd seen.

“They were from his imagination,” she said. “He didn’t have models, so the anatomy was kind of strange, but they were so good...I just went, ‘Who is this guy?’”

Pretty much all she knew about Sarr is that he wore a long beard, he had a high-ceilinged studio along the old Redondo waterfront, and there was something utterly compelling about his art. A little while later, Staggs was visiting a friend when a statuesque, disheveled blonde woman came striding towards them.

“She came barreling across the street, this gorgeous, big blonde woman, the most beautiful woman you could ever meet,” Staggs said.

They talked. The woman’s name was Sandra Sarr. Staggs asked if she was related to the painter.

“He’s my husband,” she said, not particularly pleased with the notion.

Finally one day Staggs was teaching a class at a studio in downtown Hermosa – the Way Up Gallery, on the corner of Pier on Hermosa, above where Rok Sushi is now – when she noticed a man intensely hunched over a canvas. It was Sarr.

“He turned around,” she remembered. “I had never seen him before but I’d seen his art for four or five years. ‘Oh my God,’ I said. ‘Are you the guy?’”

Sarr was a fury of artistic creation. At one point he had a house on Guadalupe Street in Redondo Beach that was infamous for its revelry. “My house was where everybody went and did all the shit they wouldn’t do in their own neighborhood,” Sarr said.

He was a big, muscular man, and he caroused with an even bigger, more muscular guy named Robi Hutas, a Hungarian painter and photographer known as Bull who had Popeye arms and a voice that could be heard a town away. They shared an utter commitment to art. But even Hutas was occasionally stunned by the intensity of his friend’s focus.

Hutas remembers one time when Sarr was away for three days on an industrial paint job at an airplane hangar and everybody decided to throw him a surprise party when he returned. Of course, Sarr hadn’t slept in three days.

“We are all waiting for him at his home, all hiding, he walks in and we are all yelling,” Hutas said. “I look at his eyes and they are completely covered with little tiny specks of paint. I said, ‘Bart, how can you look out of those eyes?’ He goes into the kitchen, gets a bowl of soup, goes to the back yard to this little shack he had with broken down steps. He had this tall three legged stool and he’s sitting there balancing it eating soup...And he starts painting! I said, ‘Jesus Christ, Bart, aren’t you tired?’” He was just laughing at me. I will never forget that. It was unbelievable. It was past being human.”

The women and the parties came and went – he drank heavily and was eventually married and divorced three times – but no matter what, he kept painting. He doesn’t remember the 1960s as a happy time. He’d become an artist, but he wasn’t yet free.

“I had little unctious, little bubbles of light, but it was pretty dismal,” Sarr recalled. “What we are dealing with is fear. Oh gosh, until 1968, my life was dominated by fear. Everybody was so ugly, and I wanted to prove it. Then I began to have these really wonderful experiences that were so overwhelming I just gave myself over to them. I can’t imagine how I could have gotten out of this cast iron jail of my intellect. It was really badly constructed. It was horrible.”

Something shifted inside Sarr that year. The world came fully alive. He was living at the Way Up with a perfect perch on Pier Avenue. He sometimes stayed awake 24 hours at a time, staring out the window and marveling at the unfolding cycle of life: the pre-dawn “hide and seek” between cops and speed freaks, the surfers heading to the ocean at first light, the mid-morning bikini parade, the bustling arrival of the lunch crowd, the human market of the Strand, the first pangs of the night people at dusk, the midnight limousines disembarking jazz musicians outside the Lighthouse, and the beginning of the hide and seek game all over again.

He was beginning to see more than fleeting glimpses of beauty. His work was beginning.



non-titled dancers. by Wilfred Sarr

Laughing Van Gogh

In 1969, Sarr's quest for beauty became clearer after meeting the man who would become his spiritual teacher. He was originally just called Old Man George. Eventually, he would journey to India and return as a monk. Then he would be known as The Monk.

The Monk knew that Sarr was drawn to Van Gogh, but he didn't think he understood him. Van Gogh, The Monk said, was fundamentally a religious person – he'd walked away from the material things of the world to live more honestly. Picasso, The Monk said, served himself; Van Gogh served the people. And beauty.

“He was totally overwhelmed with some crazy malady, but no question, he somehow saw beauty beyond the conventional experience of beauty,” Sarr said. “And he was honest to that. He did his best to portray the beauty he saw in what he painted.”

“The Monk told me, ‘Never forget you are a servant of the people.’ An artist is a servant. You have to drag yourself beyond conventional experience and somehow have to skill to take someone else there. That's where Van Gogh goes way beyond Picasso. Picasso got involved in self-promotion. Van Gogh realized he was not important at all. He was a nobody, a servant of the people.”

Sarr's own ambition became more spiritual in nature. He did not drink for the next 31 years. He spent two years in Santa Cruz, then returned and lived on a box on a roof of the old Beach Cities Newspapers building (where the Beach House Hotel is now) and painted in an old printing press room down below. He paid \$50 a month and lived there the next 11 years. He became Hermosa's artist laureate in a way he himself may not even have recognized.

Maggie Moir hired him to teach her children to paint.

“I wanted them to have the experience of truly knowing him, because of the spirituality and the interesting way he looked at the world,” she said. “Wilfred is like Van Gogh, but he was never crazy. He is as grounded as anyone I know. His beliefs are just very different than most of us – this is an aerospace area, and there is that whole mindset, very different from where he was coming from and this wonderful spiritual journey he was on.”

Sarr continued to experiment wildly – from minimalist art to portraits, clouds, landscapes, and abstract masks, whatever way his spirit inclined. It probably wasn't something that endeared him to the art market, but it gave him utter freedom.

“He is consumed by his passion for putting images on whatever surface he's got in front of him,” Staggs said. “I don't think he spends any time being judgmental, second-guessing himself if it may not be the best thing to do. He just plunges ahead. And he just never seems to quit, through whatever adversity he has had to go through. He just never quits.”

Staggs has always admired Sarr's independence and outright artistic brilliance. But she has admired watching his kindness grow over the years perhaps even more.

“He had to fight serious demons – alcohol, drugs, huge problems with drugs, everything you can name,” she said. “It would have killed most people, or they would have killed themselves, but he has somehow survived and he has never as far as I have known him not been a nice human being. Ten other men going through what he went through would have become killers or criminals, and Wilfred just keeps getting kinder and more compassionate the longer you know him.”

Staggs, who has had a very successful career and has raised four children making her living in art, credits Sarr for much of the good fortune she has enjoyed. She said back in 1967, Sarr and another painter were visiting a prominent art collector in West LA. They knew she couldn't get away because of her children, so they offered to take some of her paintings for her. When they returned, the collector hadn't bought either of the two men's work. But he'd bought Staggs' work, a prominent purchase that launched her career.

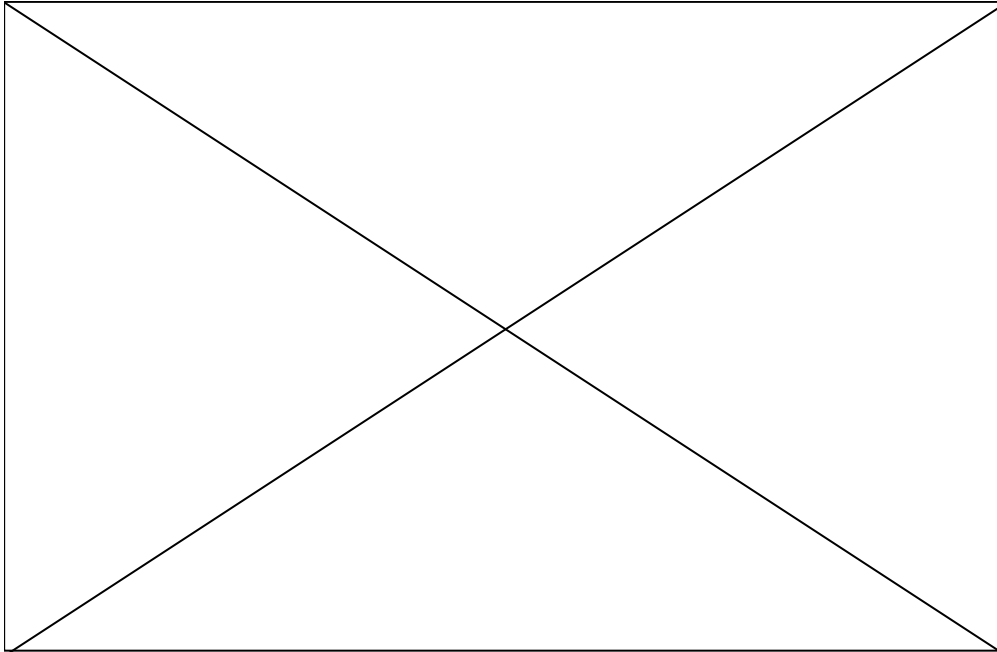
“I owe my career to Wilfred,” she said. “That is where my serious money-making, big-time go-out-and-meet-the-world started, and it was Wilfred who did it.... It would have been ego-crushing for any guy wanting to get ahead in the arts. And Wilfred gave it to me on a plate.”

Sarr moved to Santa Cruz for good in 2001. He spent 17 months living back country – finally living that plein air dream he had in France in 1960 – and has continued to range wildly in his work. Last year, he began a series of single dancers – called “The Dancer is the Answer” – brash, colorful, flowing figures that seemed ready to jump off the canvas.

“I've been thinking why people dance,” Sarr told the *Easy Reader* last year. “You remember Zorba the Greek? When everything just totally came unraveled, he danced. That was his reaction. I said, wow, there's some sanity in that.”

This year, he may have pulled off his most unlikely trick yet. Fifty years in, at the age of 74, he is producing paintings that many longtime observers – including himself – think is his best work yet. His new series – “What was the question?” – features pairs of dancers and is a meditation on the great mystery of male-female relations.

“When you are feeling totally self controlled and doing your work and involved, on balance, things are easy,” Sarr said. “But then you get involved with a woman and crazy things start to happen. You find yourself doing things you can't believe. You start playing roles. We get so lost in the man-woman thing, but that is how we all got here. To me, that is fucking amazing.”



He is painting at a prodigious clip – since April, he has completed 100 paintings in the series. His painting is more spiritually afire now than ever before. “This is as far as I’ve ever gotten,” Sarr said. “Oh yeah... Listen, I don’t have any family ties, I don’t have any plants, I don’t have any cats. I don’t have any distractions. If I don’t paint now, I should be shot. Boom!”

John Cantu, another resident Cannery Row painter and sometime curator, thinks that Sarr has reached a high point. “It is a playful melody splashed about on canvas, board, and paper,” he said. “I think he has decided that intricate detail lacks the genuine soul/spirit which art is meant to convey. Loose playful free strokes, unconfined freedom mixed with genuine emotion.”

Cantu also believes on some level Sarr may be playing for different stakes now, later in his career.

“I think he is looking to be remembered,” he said.

Sarr does have a wish in this regard.

“I kind of wonder what Van Gogh would have painted if he had had a sense of humor,” he said. “See, I would like to be Van Gogh with a sense of humor. That is what I’d like to be. That would be the height of aspiration for me – I’d like for people, when they come in and see a painting, just to laugh and fall down, just fall down on the floor. I might have to get them really drunk before they come in.”

*Cannery Row Studios presents Wilfred Sarr 50+1 What is the question? Beginning Oct. 1 at 6:30 p.m. and running daily 4:30 to 9 p.m. through Oct. 10 at 601 N. Francisca Ave. See www.canneryrowstudios.com or www.wilfredsarr.com for more info. **ER***