

HYPERALLERGIC

Eternal Recurrence: George Widener's Time Pieces

Albert Mobilio June 21, 2014



George Widener, "Month of Sundays" (2014), mixed media on paper, 48 x 74 in

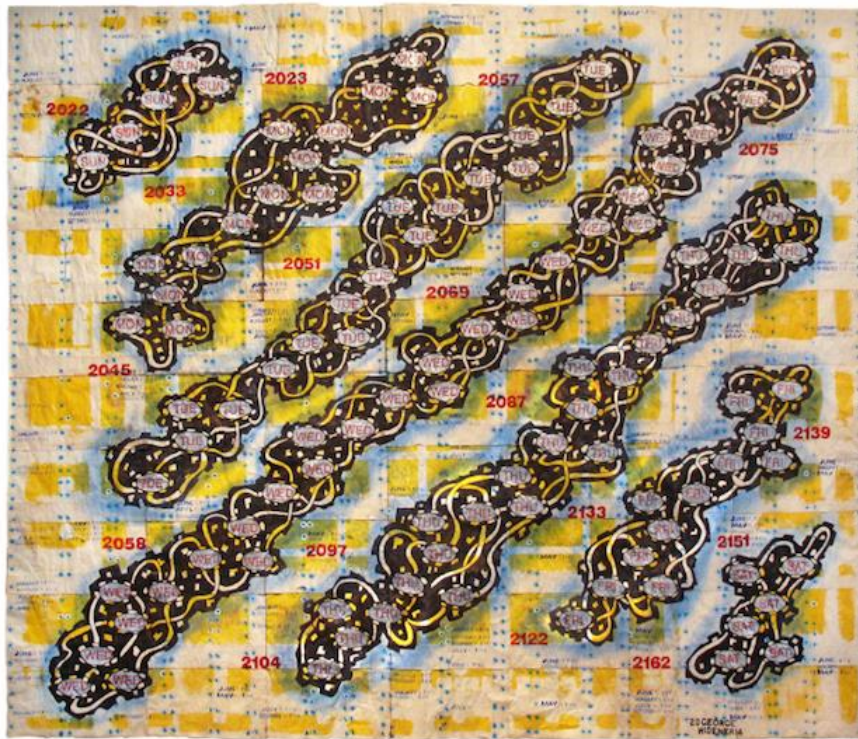
(all images courtesy Ricco/Maresca Gallery)

You will be relaxing on June 30th in 2030: The guess is based on information provided by George Widener's mixed media piece "A Month of Sundays" currently on display at Ricco/Maresca as part of the show *Time Lapse*. At first glance this work on paper looks like an ordinary calendar until you realize that all seven of the days are Sundays and individual dates jump from one year to the next: January 1st in 2001 was a Sunday, as was June 2nd in 2002, August 3rd in 2003, and so on through the decades.

This is the kind of information that anyone with a computer could discover with a few keystrokes, but Widener, who was born in 1962 in Kentucky, doesn't require mechanical assistance — the ability to visualize calendrical imagery and numerical patterns comes

readily to him. After stints abroad in the military that involved the evaluation of espionage photographs, Widener returned to the United States, enrolled in and dropped out of college, travelled to Amsterdam to live as a squatter, and eventually in 2000 received a diagnosis of Aspergers syndrome. Tests and brain scans revealed the neurobiology behind his preternatural facility with the calculation of dates.

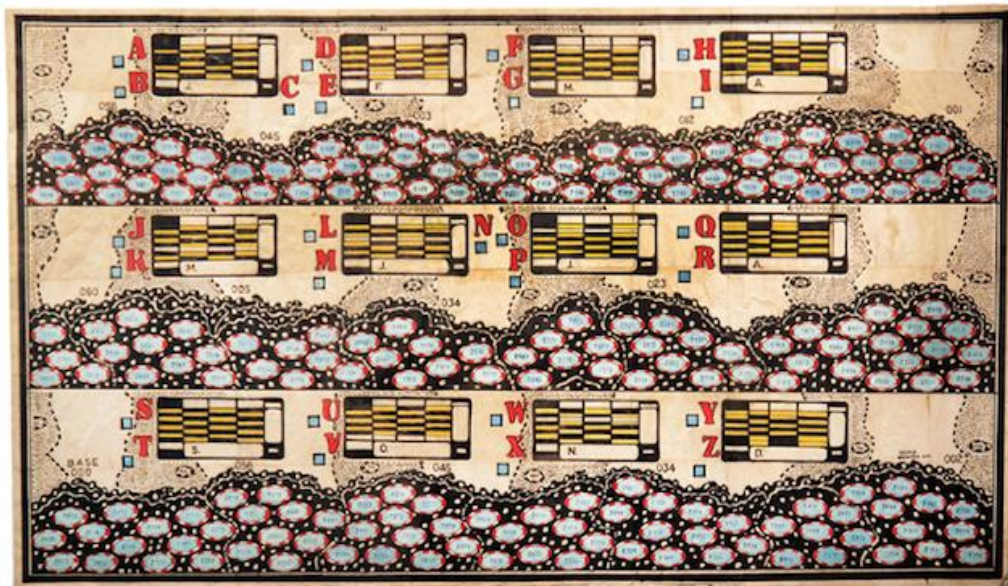
Since then Widener has been producing geometrically structured images of calendars, mazes, and date compilations that approximate his numerical visions. At four feet by six, “Month of Sundays” (2014) dominates the gallery wall, its outsize scale and bright hues making the viewer aware of the incidental quality of our smart-phone and refrigerator door calendars. The super-charged yellow enables this image to boldly pronounce each day as if partaking from the sunrise itself. Only after a moment of study, though, do you realize that this isn’t an ordinary month, that, in fact, it covers a thirty year span; within the space of the viewer’s double take, time expands from a thirty days to three decades. The artist cites his grandmother’s use of the vernacular expression as an influence upon the title and conception of the piece — a “month of Sundays” means to take an awful long time to finish something — and that sense of dilation attends our apprehension of the work.



George Widener, “Robotic Puzzle” (2014), mixed media on pieced paper, 47 x 55 1/2 in

Widener's preoccupation with dates and calendars takes a subversive tack as it engages elements of their conventional presentation. With "Robotic Puzzle" (2014) and "Cipher," (2013) the artist organizes numbers and years in rectilinear and biomorphic shapes. The cellular forms pulse against the grids suggesting both synthesis and conflict. The plans you might make with these complexly arrayed yet indecipherable calendar schemes are not of this world. Indeed, Widener has structured "Robotic Puzzle" according to his own algorithms to intrigue future robot beings and perhaps be read on other planets.

Terrestrial mortals, in the meantime, must content themselves with less precise delights — the floating quality of the black mitochondria-like shapes, the ways in which the length of these shapes corresponds to subjective notions about how time passes on, say, a Sunday, as opposed to Wednesday; the existential implications of the effortful and tangled yellow paths that wind from the same day to the same day, all the while decades move by in the background with computational, a-human logic.



George Widener, "Cipher 1962" (2013), mixed media on paper, 28 1/4 x 48 3/4 in

Somewhat more legible to non-robots is "Stream of Time No. 2," (2013) another mixed media work on paper — where Widener has taken a found-object, a large timeline that extends from ancient Rome through the nineteenth century and spans a few continents of history. The arterial flow of events is charted across the multi-colored bands over which the artist has set a series of circled dates (1 through 7) in which the first day of the month is a Sunday, the second is a Monday, and so forth, and the years in which they will occur (20 through 2000). (Yes, it's a bit heady.) History's macrocosm — the Coliseum forward to Ulysses S. Grant—is pinpointed by Widener's calculations: May

4th in 1620 was a Wednesday, whether you were in the court of Louis XIII or in “Persia and Tartary.”

Notions of linear history are confounded by this artist-imposed calendar, one that suggests more strongly the cyclical nature of time. The ostensible variety of the tiny drawings of “great men,” famous buildings, and notable events that decorate the timeline is undermined by Widener’s superimposed grid. The human panoply, he reminds us, remains constrained within a numerical system that extends back into the past as well as into the our future.

For Widener dates and days override the actual human pageant in almost all cases save one: the sinking of the Titanic. A passenger named Widener went down on the ocean liner and the artist has registered his strong connection to the event in several works. In this show “Do Your Best” (2014) depicts a cross-section of the ship suspended somehow between ocean waves that courses below and above the vessel. The text that appears to ride these waves provides details about the ship’s tonnage, number of boilers, maximum speed, and toll of “lost souls.”

Less factual is the sentence that reads “Alas the great ship sank as the children cried and is this not the story of,” and here the sentence bifurcates into dual possibilities, “1. The great side of us all?” and “2. The great side of us all?” Another line warns the viewer “Do your best —disaster may come at any time—it does not care your person 1.) many centuries before us— 2.) many centuries after us—” This last sentiment is borne out in the listing of the weekdays and years that frame the Titanic; scribbled dates in fact constitute the substance of the sea. In Widener’s vision, the doomed vessel quite literally sails through time.

The obsessional nature of Widener’s images — so evident in the thematic material, as well as their intricately wrought drawing and composition — certainly suggests similarities with other so-called “outsiders” like Martin Ramírez or Adolf Wölfli. In all three of these cases the question of some sort of mental dislocation bears significantly upon the production of work in ways neuroscience is only beginning to illuminate.

Our reception, too, is influenced by, say, the knowledge that Widener has been diagnosed as having Aspergers. And this may be the more pertinent question: How do we understand and evaluate an artist’s intentionality when equipped with what seems like biologically determinative information? (Put most simplistically, what if you knew

little else about Monet other than that he was terribly near-sighted; would that be sufficient explanation for Impressionism?)

The compulsive and fantastical elements (puzzles for future robots!) of Widener's art spark pleasure, curiosity, and, if truth be told, disquiet; if his intensity of focus and the rhythm of his calculations mesmerize, they also intimate claustrophobia. This is part of their power — our habitation, if only for a short while, of a perceptual dimension (a “secret universe,” as a catalog devoted to his work says) very much unlike ours. A realm in which our days are truly numbered.

George Widener: Time Lapse continues at Ricco/Maresca (529 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 5.