

ART SCHOOL

At Design Miami, Robert Wilson's New Installation "Starts with Light"

by Kristen Bateman

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Courtesy of Robert Wilson, Cristina Grajales Gallery, Paula Cooper Gallery

It is a late October night, and Robert Wilson—the 78-year-old theater and visual creative who has been working in the arts since the 1960's—is sitting, poised, in his Manhattan studio. He is surrounded by bookcases, which are filled with tomes about Peruvian beadwork or animal sculptures from the world over. Soon, he will head to China and Austria for work, followed by a vacation in Indonesia, all in the span of a few weeks before jetting south to Miami.

Wilson had reason to treat himself to a getaway beforehand: in Florida, he will open his first exhibition ever to coincide with Art Basel Miami Beach. It is called *A Boy From Texas*, and it will be presented by Cristina Grajales Gallery in cooperation with Paula Cooper Gallery at Design Miami from

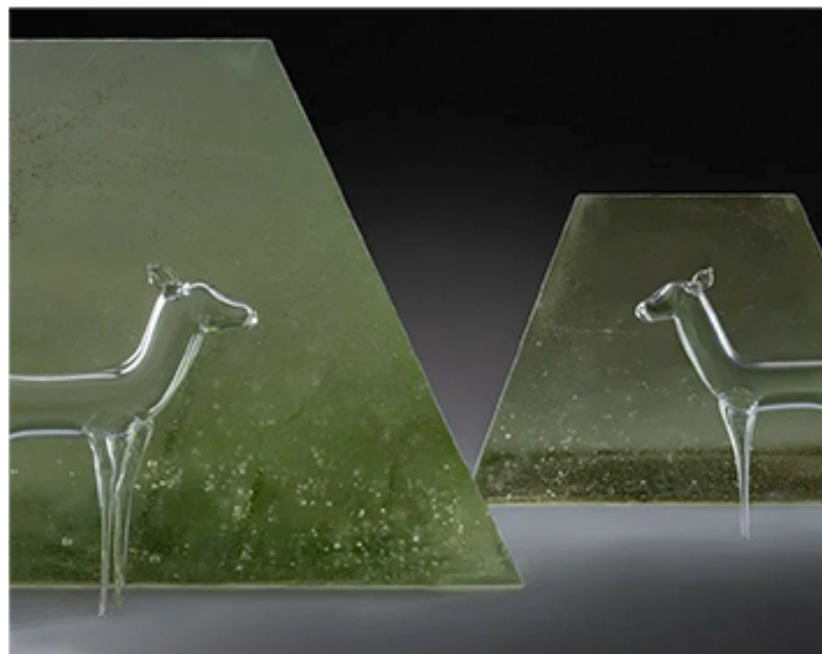
December 3. And, while Wilson has an expansive oeuvre and holds a Pulitzer Prize nomination, two Italian Entertainment awards, the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale, and an Olivier Award, among many other accolades, it is the first time the artist has ever worked with glass as a medium.

Wilson, not a huge fan of crowded art fairs, is the first to admit that glass is not exactly what people are expecting.

“You know, it's hard to put something there and to grab someone's attention because your attention is everywhere. For me, a design fair is usually horrible. The lighting is terrible. One stall after another, all these crowds of people talking,” he says, laughing.

“How do you do something that can be seen in a space that's so aggressive, and with just so many people? I did it because of the challenge.”

It is worth noting that Wilson won the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion—in 1993—for sculpture; the practice is not unfamiliar territory. Wilson has also worked in furniture design. *A Boy from Texas* is a semi-autobiographical work of art that draws a narrative directly from Wilson's own rural roots, however. Created with the Corning Museum of Glass, the softly organic forms of hand-blown glass deer meet sharp geometric lines that come together in truncated pyramids.



Courtesy of Robert Wilson, and Cristina Grajales Gallery in cooperation with Paula Cooper Gallery. Molly Cagwin

"I worked with a kind of narrative, something very personal to me," explains the Waco, Texas native. "Where I grew up, it was a sin to go to the theater. I used to have to go deer hunting with my father. And as a young boy for Christmas, they would give me a shotgun. I didn't want the gun. I didn't want to pull the trigger." Though he didn't enjoy the hunt, Wilson found solace in the act of getting up at the crack of dawn and being alone, and silent, in nature. "Somehow this memory stayed with me. I thought of this as a subtext for the installation."

Beyond that, *A Boy from Texas* also takes influence from some of the artist's most simple principles. "I was very fortunate that when I studied architecture during my first year in school, there was a lecture by the architect Louis Kahn," he says. "The first thing he said was to 'start with light.' It has had a profound influence on all of my thinking."

According to Cristina Grajales herself, the project began in July 2018 at the Watermill Center, the center for arts and culture in New York founded by Wilson in 1992. "We became friends when Beth DeWoody took us both to Havana back in 2003," she says. "From that moment on, there was a lovely connection between us. We always talked about collaborating one day on a project. Finally the time came when he invited me to Watermill and I proposed a glass project produced by the Corning Museum."

For Wilson, however, even if the piece is slightly autobiographical, he has no overt takeaway in mind. "I think that having a message is boring," he says, firmly. "It's what you experience yourself. That's what's important."