

MAY WILSON (1905-1986)

When I met May Wilson, in the early 1970s, she was in her late sixties and living alone in a studio apartment in a building next to the Chelsea Hotel. She had left Maryland and her husband of more than 40 years in 1966 when he told her his plans for the future didn't include her, but, as her son Bill Wilson wrote, "she had left their marriage to follow her art" some years before. Before coming to New York, she had formed an alliance with Ray Johnson, and once here, his New York Correspondence School meetings and mailings became key spokes on the spinning wheel of May's new social life. She entertained in a long, narrow room that was filled with the painted assemblages she'd made from cast-offs and hand-me-downs, including odd pieces brought as offerings by visitors. Ranks of baby dolls wrapped like mummies and painted monochrome gold, black, red, or pink sat alongside found-object constructions built on the pedestals of women's high-heel shoes. Spray-painted store mannequins stood guard. A lot of May's other work--collages, cut-outs, and printed postcards--was ideally suited to the mail. She cut up cheesecake and beefcake photos torn from magazines and turned them into peekaboo doilies or Rorschach snowflakes. She mugged for the camera in photo booths and pasted her head onto the bodies of women in reproductions of famous paintings, statues, or other pop culture ephemera. She turned some of these "Ridiculous Portraits" into postage stamps and made other stamps from photos of herself clowning around or standing on her head. She put them all into envelopes, sent them off to the Correspondence School network, and became an unlikely underground star: a spunky, free-spirited eccentric who liked to laugh at herself and an amused but largely unimpressed art world.

Sometimes May's collages were accompanied by brief scrawled notes or longer typewritten letters. Excerpts from those letters help sketch in a fuller portrait, a brief patchwork autobiography of a woman who was as fragile as she was flinty, and not quite as antic as her self-portraits would have us believe. She starts by reacting to a recent mailing:

"PEACE EYE Bookstore page, reminds me that when I lived in Maryland, and visited New York, I used to read Ed Sanders' was it called FUCK, the poetry magazine? at Ann Wilson's house. I was going to write a letter about little old lady sitting in the country in Maryland reading the magazine, but my son discouraged me. So much for history.[...] You said NOTHING IS AS EXCITING AS IT WAS. You are so right. I have been mailing junk to people for 15 years or so, and am drained of ideas and material, except for my photo-stamp cards.[...] Oh, I am so bored with most of the artsy, craftsy pastimes I spent so many happy hours with, what a price to pay, now, boredom, and no new ideas coming along...a blank, blank.[...] Thanks for thinking I looked FANTASTIC at the Ray Johnson opening, in the middle of a nervous break-down. And this proves you can't tell from the outside what's going on on the inside.[...] I don't remember whether I told you a woman from Baltimore was here taperecording me for 2 1/2 hours, for her masters thesis on Art. This took me back through my old life in Maryland and upset me. It took me 24 hours to begin to feel calmer and BOOM came a letter from my 23 yr. old granddaughter in Maryland [...] that my work, stored in sheds, is getting warped, water and sun-damaged, and what do I want to do about it? I wrote I could do nothing about it, I could not even think of anything in Maryland. [...] I complained all summer about the hot, humid weather, and yesterday and today I am complaining about the cold weather. It is difficult to please me, and it is a bore, as I will not suffer in silence."

Vince Aletti
Photography critic



Ridiculous Portrait, 1967-8
Collage
8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches