

gallery space. A life-sized, three-dimensional vanitas, *Ironist's Interior* consists of 68 cast iron objects of varying sizes displayed within a steel and cast iron architectural half-interior of walls, partial floor, windows, and door. "Vanitas" refers to a category of subject matter used since the Middle Ages to express the folly of vanity, symbolically demonstrating the inevitability of death and the impermanence of healthy existence, beauty, and earthly pleasures. Wilson's inclusion of a human skull, a mirror, and broken pottery places him in the company of the unknown sculptors of 13th-century cathedrals. But the huge

altar three decades before—wedding dress and cake, clocks stopped at the hour of her abandonment—covered with dust and spider webs.

*The Ironist's Interior* assembles such ordinary objects in a bricolage, which can be defined as a kind of shamanic, spontaneous creativity accompanied by a willingness to make do with whatever is at hand. Bricolage is unlike collage in that the parts are never absorbed into the composition, as they are in collage. Instead, they lend themselves to the composition of the work and its meaning but also retain their original self-contained functions and purposes

mirror of the whitened, ash-filled apartments in the vicinity of the World Trade Center. Beauty is, of course, in the eye of the beholder and less definable than it ever was; but, if not beautiful, *The Ironist's Interior* creates a remarkably moving and deeply psychological space. A casual glance sees the familiar. The work is like a completely designed room inside a furniture store, something for the traditional family right off the showroom floor. Perhaps because of the monochromatic

**Ed Wilson, *Ironist's Interior*, 2003. Steel and cast iron, 10 x 20 x 4 ft.**



steel door that dominates the left side of *Ironist's Interior* is also a deliberate reference to Ghiberti's "Gate of Paradise" for the baptistry of Florence Cathedral.

Dickensian in its obsessive attention to particular details, the tableau is not unlike the scene of Miss Havesham's room in *Great Expectations*. There, the abandoned woman displayed all the useless memorabilia of her jilting at the

outside of the whole. They are meant to have both a reality effect and an art effect, to call attention to conditions in the world and also be transformational.

Wilson, whose work is generally derived from social and political issues, made this piece as a response to 9/11, but he "also wanted to make something that was purely beautiful." The tableau is a dark, monochromatic

treatment, the whole collection is intimately banal, familiar and cozy, but also dream-like if not nightmarish.

The broom in the corner stands upright, like the magic broom in Disney's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," but the items on the desk are the same as those found on desks everywhere. While a first glance perceives only normalcy, a second glance feels rather than

**Houston  
Ed Wilson**

Redbud Gallery

Ed Wilson's show "From the Inferno" was dominated by a steel and cast iron tableau that occupied about half of Redbud's

sees that everything is slightly askew, as tricky as Cézanne's strange apples. Nothing in this interior is truly horizontal to the vertical of your own observing body. The transformation wrought in these common objects by casting them in iron renders them both threatening and oddly pathetic: it is both obvious and impossible that the rush-bottomed chair would hold your weight. The haphazardly piled cardboard boxes seem light as air, ready to fall over, in denial that each box weighs at least 40 pounds. The boots in the corner, the umbrella on its hook—all seem ordinary but are icy cold to the touch, fossilized. The banality of the scene, its Martha Stewart-esque complacency, is like the sweet frosting on one of the Grimm's brothers' tales—beneath the surface, beneath the overt make-believe fantasy is the hard, moralistic core of the story. Wilson's core is the hard pill, the indigestible and inevitable vanitas message: possessions won't save you, what remains after you is hard, cold, uncaring. The subject matter of the "paintings" and door panels is taken from nature, but the scenes they portray are borderline apocalyptic. The Modernist bust gazing out from under the bookshelf is the only human presence.

Hannah Arendt said that large-scale tragedies cannot bear the weight of iconography without trivializing the event they purport to memorialize. Wilson's contribution to post-9/11 iconography succeeds through its contemplative and restrained nature and the fact that its meaning is not anchored to that event. More important, Wilson makes no overt reference to what happened. Like the skillful artist he is, he allows the viewer imaginative latitude, using meaning to create dialogue rather than dictate and control perception. This is a generous act. Wilson's work is symbolic and metaphorical; it does the kind of thing that art does best—suggest, imply, and infer.

—*Kathleen Whitney*