

# **Projects 10 : Alison Wilding : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 21, 1987-February 2, 1988**

Author

**Wilding, Alison, 1948-**

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**1987**

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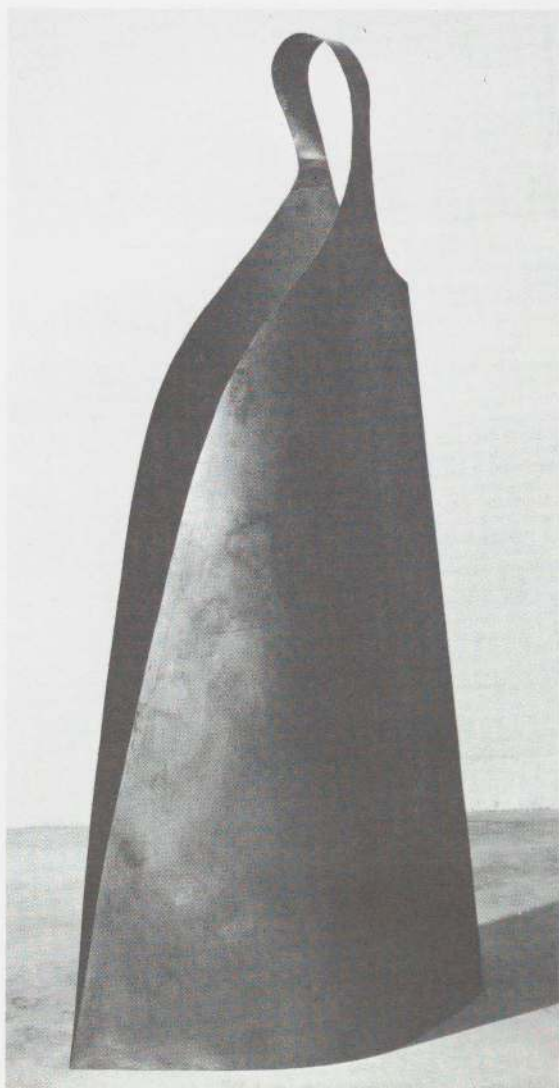
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The Museum of Modern Art  
New York  
November 21, 1987–February 2, 1988

**projects:** alison wilding

10



*Hearth*. 1986. Linseed oil and pigment on leaded steel; brass and copper. 6' 10" x 18" x 38" (208.5 x 40.7 x 96.5 cm). Private collection

**projects**

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Lannan Foundation, and J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated. Additional support for this exhibition has been provided by The British Council.

**alison wilding**

In her spare, mysterious abstractions, the British sculptor Alison Wilding fuses formal precision and poetic intensity to produce works of uncommon beauty and expressive resonance. Working with sheets of cut metal and other humble materials, Wilding makes sculptures that function with an astonishing economy of means, releasing from their simple forms a wealth of ambiguous effect. Their expressive potency resides in their restraint: Like their titles, they refuse to be declarative; they insist, instead, on the slow, protracted revelation of their complex meaning.

Wilding's works do not yield to single interpretation, nor to easy association with objects in the external world. While they often allude to nature, they do so in a general rather than a specific way, evoking rather than representing forms from the organic world. Additionally, the interaction of sculptural elements within each work is metaphoric and suggestive of rich and often paradoxical relationships. The exchange between sculptural components can speak alternately or simultaneously of such states as threat and protection, or alienation and accord.

The sources for Wilding's highly personal sculptural idiom can be found not only in both antiformalist and formalist sculptural practices of the

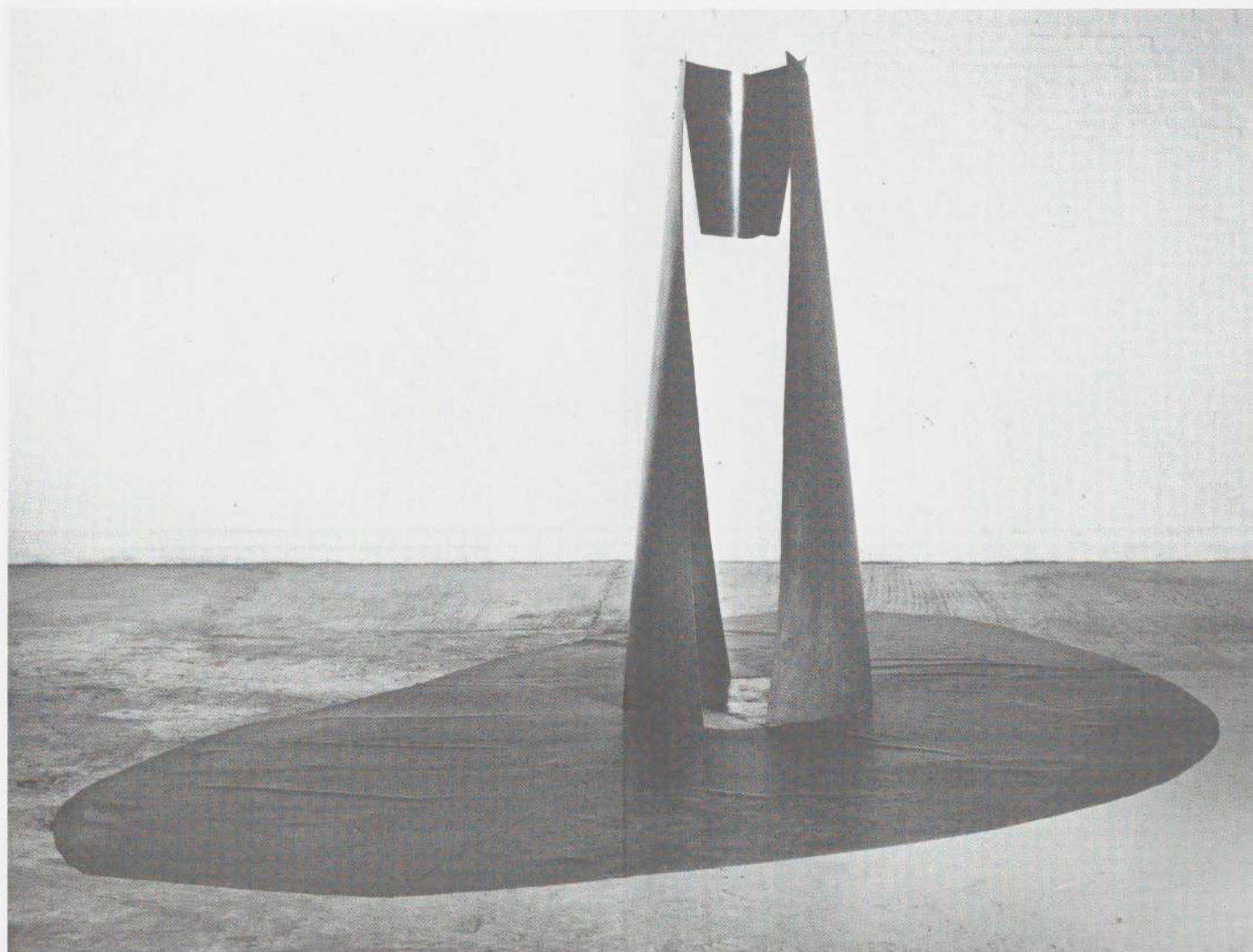
seventies but also in the iconography of abstract Surrealism, in the purism of Constantin Brancusi and in the biomorphism of Hans Arp and Barbara Hepworth. Wilding's own early conceptual and installation work of the seventies may account for the improvisational and environmental character of her mature work. Like many contemporary artists, including the British sculptors Richard Deacon and Anish Kapoor, with whom she is often associated, Wilding blends allusion and abstraction. The elusiveness of her mature sculpture issues from its mysterious self-containment. This self-containment not only multiplies and enriches her content but also directs our attention to her work's plastic actuality, to its modernist identity as an autonomous work of art.

Wilding's *Nature: Blue and Gold* recalls Brancusi in its recumbent ovoid, in the high polish of its brass oval, and in the extraordinarily expansive presence that its compact forms command. Wilding freely elaborates upon the tradition to which she has returned, substituting for a purist "truth to materials" a highly sympathetic transformation of the materials she uses. Brass pierced with an array of rivets is burnished to gold; hewn ash rubbed with pigment is darkened to gleaming blue. Neither absolute nor serene, *Nature: Blue and Gold* is a complex composition that derives its force from contrasts held in precarious equilibrium. Slowly carved is opposed to rapidly cut, organic balanced against manufactured, and light-absorbent contrasted with light-reflective—and these oppositions themselves are countered by the consistency of the two rhyming shapes and by the coherence of their variegated surfaces. Antithetical and ambiguous relationships also govern the composition's allusions: Does the splayed oval clutch its prey or gently grasp its offspring? Is the oval itself prised apart by the egglike form or does it find in this form its support?

Wilding's abiding interest in such dualities finds its clearest articulation in her bipartite sculptures of 1984–86, *Into the Light* among them. These works typically consist of a cut-and-folded metal sheet placed in studied proximity to an organic, volumetric form. In these compositions, the sheet is cut and placed in response to a rounded wood or stone element, and often evokes a shield, a shelter, a shadow, or a carapace.

Wilding's compositions are not prepared for in drawings but evolve through a prolonged and intuitive dialogue with her materials. It was during its making that Wilding recognized the wood carving now at the heart of *Into the Light* as "the dark centre of some unknown thing." She then conceived the surrounding perforated-metal enclosure in response to the newly shaped organic form. Seeking to establish the placement of the perforations in this metal wall, she attached pieces of tape to its exterior. The bird- and fish-like configurations of the apertures derived from the random shapes of the torn tape. The result of Wilding's intuitive, chance-inflected process is, in this case, an immensely provocative tableau in which a swollen, rounded nodule emerges, independent yet vulnerable, rising toward the light yet held within the dappled darkness of its remote universe.

More recently, Wilding has turned to single-form metal works to elaborate upon the linear fluency of a her sheet-cutting technique and to explore the possibility of a rich exchange between containing sheath and internal volume. In *Hearth*, an elegant arabesque of steel curls around the space it defines with the cursive ease of a contour drawing. Solid and void are delicately balanced in this composition,

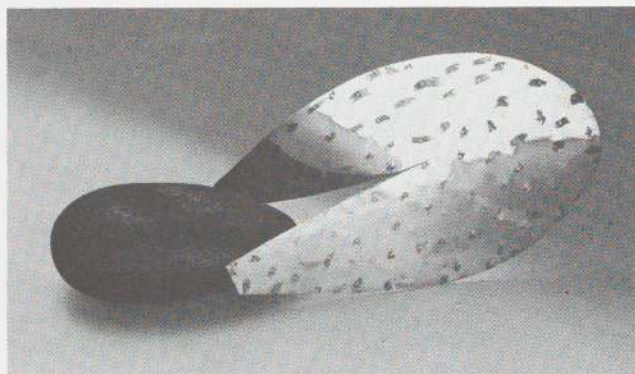


*Slow Core*. 1985–87. Leaded steel, phosphor bronze, and rubber. 6' 3<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 15' 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 8' 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" (192 x 470 x 272 cm). Courtesy Karsten Schubert Ltd., London

which would seem to evoke a priestly figure with gently inclined head or a Madonna protecting the world in the enclosed sanctuary of her mantle.

Light and space are integral elements in Wilding's sculptural conception and play particularly important roles in her recent sculpture *Slow Core*. In this work, the single, totemic form is splayed open to allow complete visual access to its almost palpable spatial core. A dark surrounding sheet of rubber suggests a shadow cast by the highly reflective bronze and its darker leaded-steel supports, or a liquid pool from which the towering configuration emerges. Either way, it acts as a base, underscoring the composition's extensive spatial field and mediating between its world and ours.

Beatrice Kernan, Assistant Curator  
Department of Drawings



*Nature: Blue and Gold*. 1984. Brass; linseed oil and pigment on ash. 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 43 x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (47 x 109 x 22 cm). Collection The British Council



*Into the Light*. 1985. Wax on oak, linseed oil on leaded steel. 37 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (95.2 x 120.6 x 97.7 cm). Courtesy Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York

## biography

Born Blackburn, Lancashire,  
England, July 7, 1948

### education

Royal College of Art,  
London, 1970-73

Ravensbourne College of  
Art and Design, Bromley,  
Kent, 1967-70

### selected individual exhibitions

**1987**

Karsten Schubert Ltd., London\*

**1986, 1983**

Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York

**1985**

Serpentine Gallery, London\*

Salvatore Ala Gallery, Milan

**1982**

Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge

### selected group exhibitions

**1987**

Museum of Modern Art, Oxford;  
Mücsarnok, Budapest; Národní  
Galerie, Prague; Zacheta, Warsaw  
*Current Affairs: British Painting and  
Sculpture in the 1980s\**

**1986**

La Biennale di Venezia, Venice  
*Art and Alchemy\**

Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid; Fun-  
dació Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona;  
Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao  
*Between Object and Image: Contem-  
porary British Sculpture\**

**1985**

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Syd-  
ney; Art Gallery of Western Australia,  
Perth; Queensland Art Gallery, Bris-  
bane; National Gallery, Wellington  
*The British Show\**

**1983**

Hayward and Serpentine Galleries,  
London  
*The Sculpture Show\**

XVII Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo;  
Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Ja-  
niero; Museu de Arte Moderna, Mexico  
City; Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian,  
Lisbon  
*Transformations: New Sculpture from  
Britain\**

### selected bibliography

London, Karsten Schubert Ltd.  
*Alison Wilding: Sculptures*. 1987. Text by  
Gray Watson

London, Serpentine Gallery. *Alison  
Wilding*. 1985. Text by Lynne Cooke

\*The exhibition was accompanied by a  
catalogue.