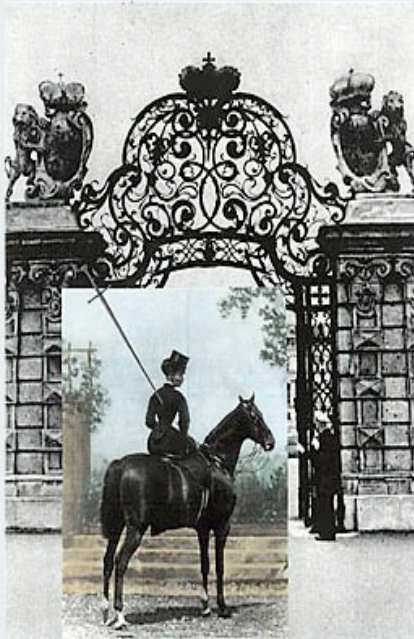


Daniel Schreiber, "The Collector of Sad and Beautiful Stories: An Encounter with T. J. Wilcox in New York," **DBartmag.com**, September 2008

The Collector of Sad and Beautiful Stories An Encounter With T.J. Wilcox in New York

Marie Antoinette, Marlene Dietrich, Jackie Kennedy-the protagonists in the collages and films of T.J. Wilcox are famous figures from history and pop culture. Empress Elisabeth of Austria, the heroine of his works in the Deutsche Bank Collection, also became an icon-as the unhappy Empress Sissi. Wilcox' hyperaesthetic homages to the divas of yesteryear oscillate between historical truth and sheer illusion. Daniel Schreiber met with the artist in New York.



T.J. Wilcox, ohne Titel (Sissi back), 2007,
Deutsche Bank Collection

[Thomas John Wilcox](#), called T.J. for short, is a dandy. Not in the affected sense of an [Oscar Wilde](#), but rather like his post-modern counterpart. One imagines, à la [Fitzgerald](#), a contemporary [Great Gatsby](#) of the art world. When we met on a sunny Manhattan morning at the end of August in the [Metro Pictures](#) gallery in Chelsea, he spoke unpretentiously and pleasurably of his fascinating career and his summer home on the Atlantic coast in Orient Point, a sleepy town on the northeast tip of Long Island. He's tanned and sports a smart three-day beard and open shirt in brilliant [Ralph Lauren white](#).



T.J. Wilcox
The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich , 1999
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures



T.J. Wilcox
Photograph of the film "The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich", 1999
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures



T.J. Wilcox,
Photograph of the film "The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)", 1996
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

The 42-year-old film and collage artist was still in short pants in Seattle when the gang around [Jasper Johns](#) began exploring the sparsely populated Montauk on the opposite, southeast tip of the peninsula for the New York bohemia. Today, Wilcox' adopted summer home is well on its way towards becoming every bit as legendary. "By now, Orient Point is sort of an artists' colony," he says. "My friend [Elizabeth Peyton](#) lives there. [Jorge Pardo](#), [Laura Owens](#), [Kelley Walker](#). You see [Cindy Sherman](#) riding her bicycle. All these people that we know and love are there often in the summer".



T. J. Wilcox, Escape of Marie Antoinette, 2006
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Anyone who has seen a work by Wilcox, for instance *The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)* from 1996 or *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich* (1999), has a hard time shaking off a lingering sense of longing, a quiet sadness. His handmade films and collages are charged with a nostalgic charm that reveals the structures underlying our fantasy. With their deep sense of the idiosyncratic, they unite an aesthetic of the handmade with Hollywood glamour. In his 12-minute film about the French queen who was so brutally executed by the [Jacobins](#), Wilcox works over drawings of [en.wikipedia.org/wiki=marie_antoinette](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/marie_antoinette), historical footage of a procession around Notre Dame from the turn of the century, short scenes from American melodramas of the 1950s, and not least images of the catwalk performance of a [Galliano model](#) from the early 1990s. United through the subtitles in which Wilcox reinvents the history of the early-day French icon of luxury, these disparate images suddenly convey meaning: Marie Antoinette lives on, the film seems to say-in every injured diva, in every one of our weaknesses for haute couture. This is why the artist chooses to save her life. The queen, whose flight failed because her horse-drawn carriage was so pompous that she was immediately spotted by the revolutionary reconnaissance patrols, arrives in safety in Wilcox' work.

Wilcox performed a similar service for [Marlene Dietrich](#), the German glamour icon. Once again throwing together film images of state burials, photographs of Marlene, and city images of Paris, the artist gives the diva the glorious burial she'd always dreamed of. To the sound of tolling church bells, a procession of reporters, photographers, and gay fans follow her casket through the French capital, where there isn't a single hotel room to be found. The icon is then buried humbly in "a simple black dress by [Balenciaga](#)."

"Characters like Marie Antoinette or Dietrich never die," explains Wilcox with a grin, "they become part of a collective mythology. They have consciously transcended the quotidian. That is something we all need to live our lives. (...) They represent great parallels to art-making. These women were almost performance artists." Objects of Wilcox' earlier cinematic obsessions with tragic diva figures were [Sissi](#), the Austrian Empress; [Comtesse de Castiglione](#), known as the most beautiful Italian woman of the 19th century; [Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis](#); and [Mick Jagger's](#) ex-wife, the model [Jerry Hall](#).



T.J. Wilcox, *Rapture (Jerry, Chermes in the Snow)*, 2007
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Wilcox developed his passion for European history, grand divas, and realistic novels early on in his hometown on the rainy west coast of America. "People speak about Seattle often as the edge of the earth. It was one of the last places settled by the Europeans. While reading history books and novels I started thinking about different places. I was treating the reading of every book as a treasure hunt, to fill the gaps in my world," as the artist recalls. This is why it comes as no surprise that he was an exchange student to France at the age of 14 and then again at 17, to learn French in Dijon, to satisfy his Europhilia, and to party undisturbed. In 1988 Wilcox moved to New York to study at the [School of Visual Arts](#). In the East Village, which was run down at the time and brimming with junkies and homeless people, he shared an apartment with Elizabeth Peyton, who later became a portrait painter. After finishing school, he took an assistant job with the French collector family [Wildenstein](#) and bought himself a cheap apartment on Union Square. After three years in exile at the [Arts Center](#) in Pasadena, California, where he also studied with video artist [Mike Kelly](#), he moved back to New York, where he produced *The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)* and exhibited in the [Gavin Brown Gallery](#). "Then, everything happened so quickly," he says. The film was accepted to the New York [Whitney Biennial](#) in 1998 and quickly made him a brand name in the art world.



T.J. Wilcox,
The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich, 1999
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

Wilcox' film technique is unique, both in its complexity and its effects. He shoots a wide variety of material on Super-8, such as TV images, old advertising photographs, his own drawings, archival material, and architectural photographs. Then he digitizes the collected material and arranges and manipulates his collages according to the stories he tells in the subtitles. The last step is the conversion of the digital images onto 16-mm film. The effect of this elaborate procedure is a gradual departure from the original image that emphasizes-and even distills-the fantasy world residing in each picture. Wilcox' films are grainy; they have a historical patina, even though they seem to glow from within. His preferred palette consists of beige and brown hues as well as gradations of grey, black, and white. His recent interest in paper collage, in which he uses materials such as gouache, watercolor, ink, parts of photographs, acetate, and graphite, arose from his work designing scenes for his films. Hence the collages, such as the intertwined works from the Sissi series in the [Deutsche Bank Collection](#), radiate a similar power of attraction. These, too, are marked by a glazed-over glamour that evokes romantic feelings of nostalgia mixed with an amused admiration.



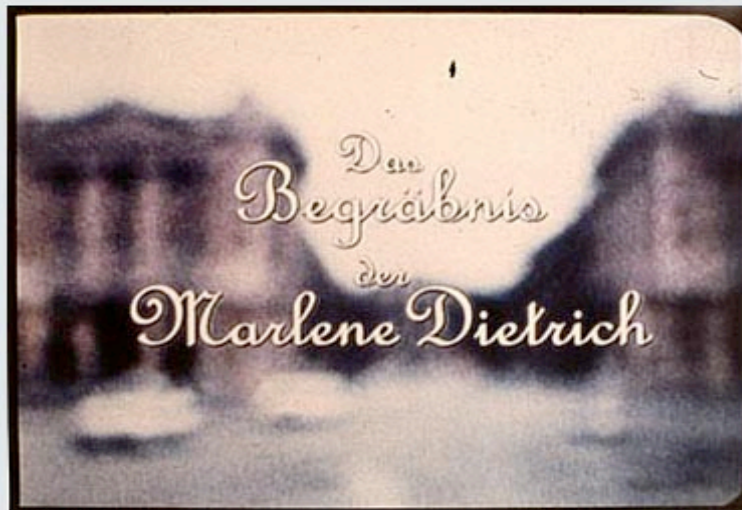
T.J. Wilcox, ohne Titel (Sissi from the front), 2007,
Deutsche Bank Collection

Like every dandy, T.J. Wilcox is a collector. A collector of historical attitudes, bizarre stories, and literary fantasies. And like every dandy, Wilcox is also an intellectual who is too elegant for an intellectual's life. Seemingly playful details and funny eccentricities acquire unexpected gravity in his work. In his film montage *Garland Six* (2005), melancholy swans announce the end of the world for December 16, 2012, following a sequence on the origin of angora cats—the last survivors of a long lost civilization of Arab antiquity. *Garland Five* (2005) brings together three short films about the tragic lives of [Chopin](#), the Comtesse de Castiglione, and the American grande dame, [Pamela Digby Churchill](#). All three lived on the Place Vendôme in Paris, which today looks almost exactly as it did during the fleeting lives of its famous residents. In *Garland One* (2003), a video on the death of the French bulldog Ortino, who was murdered and buried in a mass Siberian grave together with his owners, the Russian Czar and his family, underscores the randomness of the early death of Wilcox' stepmother Ann.



T.J. Wilcox
Photograph of the film "The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich", 1999
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

More than anything else, however, Wilcox, like every dandy, is the grateful victim of his own obsession for sad and beautiful stories. "I approach something from a text and make it into an artwork, with my own conceptions, prejudices and misunderstandings. They are the foundation of my work," the artist explains as we look on while workers begin installing for the autumn opening at Metro Pictures. "All of these stories have become part of the fabric of my mind. It seems that through my work I want to give my obsessions a longer life." The results are works from a clever fantasy world that can spread to the viewer like a virus. Wilcox' films and collages are small flights from reality that demonstrate to us our own need to flee reality—for anyone with a heart, with the intensity of an almost physical sensation.



T.J. Wilcox,
Photograph of the film "The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich", 1999
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

