

A child genius in profile



Fluid style: One of Stephen Wiltshire's early works

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 28 September 2003



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ART REVIEW: Stephen Wiltshire: Not a Camera
Orleans House Gallery, Twickenham

"Possibly the best child artist in Britain," was how Sir Hugh Casson, the late ex-President of the Royal Academy, once, quite accurately, described Stephen Wiltshire. An autistic child with a remarkable drawing ability, he first came to attention in the 1987 BBC documentary *The Foolish Wise Ones* and was spotted by Casson and the celebrated neurologist, Dr Oliver Sacks.

His drawings, almost always of buildings, were fluid, accomplished and demonstrated his perfect visual memory. Without any reference, he could draw buildings such as St Pancras station with exactly the right number of windows, or a panoramic urban view with complete topographical accuracy.

Wiltshire then became the subject of other TV documentaries and some academic study and became commercially successful, with several published books of drawings to his name.

Writing 15 years ago, Dr Sacks asked whether Wiltshire's works were in "a deeper sense, creations" and whether he "might go on to a real creative expansion and development?" Now, as Wiltshire approaches the age of 30, this retrospective, his first, provides an answer to those questions.

The show includes everything from his earliest drawings, mostly done in Biro on scraps of paper, to his oil paintings, begun in the mid-Nineties, to drawings of sites local to Orleans House, made specifically for this show.

Its range demonstrates a clear development in Wiltshire's work. In both subject and medium, there is welcome expansion. Car-focused street scenes and a few entirely imaginary images join the depictions of buildings. Meanwhile, Wiltshire's oil paintings, executed in a flat, slightly blurry figurative style indebted to Edward Hopper, are reasonably pleasing.

Overall, however, he has lost much of the engaging fluidity of his juvenile efforts. The rhythmic quality of his lines in early drawings, such as Royal Albert Hall (1986) and Ely Cathedral (1992) are entirely absent from his most recent and far more formal and academic efforts. The result of both maturity and an art-school course Wiltshire recently took, this new tone, though decent, renders his work unremarkable.

The startling visual memory remains but that has no bearing on artistic quality. So there has been the development that Dr Sacks thought "might happen".

Furthermore, Wiltshire's works deserve to be seen as real "creations" though, like a lot of art, they are the result of no complex artistic agenda. But somewhere along the line, that sparkiness that came from within got lost.