

# Andrew Edlin GALLERY

## **George Widener: Tip of the Iceberg**

May 20 – June 30, 2023

Andrew Edlin Gallery is excited to present *Tip of the Iceberg*, its first solo exhibition for George Widener since announcing its representation of the artist earlier this year. The show offers a twenty-two-year overview of Widener's oeuvre, which made a remarkable entry into the art world around the turn of the millennium, seemingly from out of nowhere.

An awkward social outsider during his troubled youth, Widener (b. 1962) demonstrated exceptional memory skills and prodigious abilities in the fields of mathematics and temporal calculation. After graduating from high school with honors, he spent four years as an Air Force intelligence technician, specializing in aerial surveillance. An unhoused nomad for most of his twenties, he worked sporadically as a day-laborer before going to Europe without a plan, traveling from one city to another. During these seemingly aimless years he filled countless notebooks with numbers, calendrical sequences, architectural drawings, and statistics. After he suffered an extended spell of withdrawal and anxiety in the early 1990s, he was diagnosed with high-functioning Asperger's Syndrome, which removed the stigma of mental illness that he carried from previous misdiagnoses.

Buoyed by a newfound self-confidence, Widener started making larger, more ambitious drawings, in which he combined his architecturally related images with his obsessive lists of dates, numbers, and statistical information—material previously confined to his notebooks. These were his first works to attract the attention of the art world. Widener's compositions are often executed on patched-together napkins and scrolls stained with tea to affect the look of parchment. Seemingly torn from ancient manuscripts, his works are layered with accident, palimpsests, and esoteric knowledge, incorporating elaborate numerical puzzles and games, complex puns, palindromes, and prophecies informed by historical events. Visually arresting and

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mysteriously compelling, the work is numerically dense and can be difficult to decode. Widener explains that complex pattern relationships among some of the numerically rendered dates can only be appreciated by super-computers that haven't yet been built. For him the processes of calculating and rendering the numbers constitute "an effort akin to meditation," and mathematical analysis is not required to appreciate the work.

Widener has long been intrigued by historical catastrophes and traumas—their circumstances, the dates on which they occurred, and all the related details. He has made many drawings about such events, especially on the sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic* on April 15, 1912. The disaster, along with and cross-sectional views of the ship, figures in several drawings here, and the exhibition's title alludes to it.

Widener's "Megalopolis" series represents his vision of a humane approach to urban design. His ideas about sociological balance are visually expressed in the bilateral symmetry of these urban plans and their street systems. Other drawings incorporate his renditions of magic squares (or magic circles)—a numerical grid in which the rows, columns, and diagonals add up to identical sums. Appropriating the form for his own purposes, he assigns calendar dates to each section.

A more recent category of Widener's art is represented by a large-scale self-portrait from 2020, a selective autobiographical overview consisting of block-lettered texts and miniature-scale imagery in a narrative format. In the concluding passage he obliquely references the COVID-19 pandemic through a depiction of beak-masked plague doctors from the fourteenth century—the era of the Black Death.

Widener's engagement with current events is reflected in a relatively new series, "Krakow to Ukraine," and specifically with his direct, on-the-ground involvement in the war as a volunteer with a Polish group transporting non-military supplies into Ukraine. Some of his experiences in that endeavor are mapped in these drawings.

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The thread that links all of these personal, social, and historical themes is numerical—lines, columns, and blocks of meditatively rendered, calendar-referenced numbers. With rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and the continued articulation of his individual experiences and thought processes, Widener holds out hope that his work might one day yield a new understanding of time and the unfolding of human events.

George Widener's art has appeared in numerous exhibitions at museums in the U.S. and Europe. In addition to a solo exhibition, *Secret Universe*, at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2013), group exhibitions have included *World Transformers: The Art of the Outsiders*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2011); *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, Hayward Gallery, London (2013); *Great and Might Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, (2013); *Memory Palaces: Inside the Collection of Audrey B. Heckler*, the American Folk Art Museum, New York (2019); and *Outsider Art: The Collection of Victor F. Keen*, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago (2019). His work has been presented at numerous galleries including Henry Boxer (London), Carl Hammer (Chicago), Ricco Maresca (New York), Susanne Zander (Cologne) and was featured in the group exhibition *System and Vision* at David Zwirner Gallery (New York) in 2015.

The artist's work can be found in many notable public and private collections, including, among others, the American Folk Art Museum (New York), the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, D.C.), the Collection de l'Art Brut (Lausanne, Switzerland), the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the abcd/art brut Collection Bruno Decharme (Paris), the Museum of Everything (London), museum gugging (Klosterneuburg, Austria), Museum of the Mind | Outsider Art, Amsterdam, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art (Chicago), the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), and the Asheville Art Museum (Asheville, NC).