From the moment they met him, the founders of October Gallery considered Gerald Wilde to be an unusually important artist, and, whilst endeavoring to sustain him in his efforts, whole-heartedly championed his vision. We hope that this exhibition will touch both those who knew him and those who are yet to discover his work.

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Chili Hawes
Director
Elisabeth Lalouschek
Artistic Director

Gouache on paper, 55 x 77 cm.

Afterword
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Gouache on paper, 55 x 77 cm.

*Gerald Wilde from the Abyss*
I am not very good at collecting together thoughts as such, just dreams.
Gerald Wilde (1984)

October Gallery first opened its doors, in February 1979, with an exhibition of work by the talented yet nearly forgotten artist, Gerald Wilde (1905-1986). *From the Abyss*, marking the tri-decennial anniversary of Wilde's death, provides a poignant opportunity to commemorate the extraordinary life and work of this remarkable man.

Wilde's standing has always suffered from a degree of neglect. This can be attributed to the fact that, as an original artist, he never fell neatly into the conventional templates of style and periodisation by which post-war art is defined. Ongoing damage to Wilde's reputation continues in the form of routinely recycled stories and half-truths that cling obstinately to his perceived ‘persona’. It seems appropriate, therefore, to reverse the usual process of definition by first stating what Gerald Wilde was not.

- Wilde was not related to the legendary Irish writer, Oscar Wilde.
- Wilde did not lose an eye in the war. In 1911 an accident with a knitting needle left the six-year old boy able to see only the faintest of light through his damaged left eye.
- Nor was Wilde the original model for the drunken, disreputable, bohemian artist, Gulley Jimson, of Joyce Cary's *The Horse’s Mouth*. Although he sometimes lent credence to the myth himself, that fictional link continues to haunt Wilde’s memory today.

Born with a huge gift, yet incapable of organising his life to accommodate it, Gerald seemed always to be striving against the odds. Though certainly plagued by the demon of drink, most of the tragi-comic stories recounted about him are exterior views that belie the underlying truth; Gerald was an intensely sensitive and private individual. He had an exceptionally tight grasp on the material world: clothes, money, living conditions, food – none of these held any interest for him whilst walking the tightrope over the abyss, in thrall to his vision.

Being unable to support himself through the sale of his paintings, Gerald often had to rely on his closest friends to see him straight. He gave away many fine works as an impulsive response to simple acts of kindness received, thereby leaving himself the poorer and still more dependent upon the charity of others.

For the last twenty years of his life, Gerald led a protected and semi-reclusive existence residing in elective communities (established by the mathematician and philosopher John G. Bennett), firstly at Coombe Springs and then Sherborne. Bennett thought highly of Gerald as a creative spirit, making a studio and materials available to him whilst giving him free reign as artist-in-residence to the evolving in-house groups. The sanctuary provided by this generous arrangement gave rise to a new phase of creativity, mirrored in the returning confidence and serenity of the later works.

It was John Bennett who, in the mid ’70s, introduced Wilde to John Allen, one of October Gallery’s founders. Recognising a master artist hidden away in rural Gloucestershire, John Allen chose to launch October Gallery with an exhibition that returned Wilde to the centre of London. Of the warm welcome he received at that first show Gerald later wrote ‘It is the only time I have felt inside the situation and not outside of it all.’

In 1986, on Gerald’s 81st birthday, Mary Evans (the Gallery’s then Artistic Director) and myself, all dressed up with champagne at the ready, were setting off to celebrate with him. We were almost out of the door when we heard that Gerald had just died. Ironically, this seemed in keeping with the quirky trajectory of his life.

Wilde’s few surviving letters disclose both his quick mind and scrupulous *politesse*. However, it is only through these enigmatic paintings, assiduously collected together again for this exhibition, that Wilde’s challenging yet ultimately resolved passage through life is fully revealed.
Pompeii, 1975. Blue line traced and oil on paper, 40 x 51 cm.
NO ONE EXAMINING THE LIVES OF THE BOHEMIANS who frequented London’s Soho and Fitzrovia in the late 1940s and 50s could be blamed for regarding them as debauchees, drunkards and deviants - though many were excused by their prodigious talents and would indulge in intellectually vigorous debates. One of the more conspicuous members of this wide-ranging group was the artist Gerald Wilde, later described by the photographer and writer, Daniel Farson, as ‘the incarnation of Bohemian excess’.1

In spite of being regarded by many other artists and by critics as an original and talented painter and printmaker, Wilde’s adult life was a rather sad, penurious existence, even though he had six one-man shows during his lifetime and was included in twelve group exhibitions including ones at the Leicester, Redfern, Hayward, Serpentine, and Tate galleries. As well as being desperately poor, he voluntarily entered a mental hospital in Epsom in 1954 where he was given electroconvulsive therapy. He later underwent two years of Jungian psychoanalysis, commencing in 1961.

Gerald Wilde easily fitted into London’s wayward artistic society. Born into a middle class family in 1905 – his mother was an actress and his father an architect – he originally worked in a solicitor’s office and did not attend art school until his father was persuaded by his mother and titled friends to allow him to develop his noticeable talent. He subsequently attended Chelsea School of Art from 1926 until 1931 and again from 1934 until 1935, where his work was admired by two of its eminent lecturers, Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore, who both became life-long friends.

Although he had lost the sight in his left eye in a childhood accident, Wilde applied to and joined the Pioneer Corps in 1940, working mostly on demolition sites in London until he was medically discharged in 1941. It is widely believed that a great deal of his early work was destroyed in the Blitz.

Wilde was originally included in a group exhibition at the Bloomsbury Gallery in 1935, but was not given a one-man show until after the war. This was at the prestigious Hanover Gallery, in 1948. Although his work was admired and collected by people such as the eminent art historian, Kenneth Clark and the wealthy collector and art patron, Peter Watson, it seems that the general public found his work too avant-garde; nothing sold. After leaving art school, where his work had been representational, Wilde’s style now developed into a generally non-figurative approach. This caused it to be described as ‘Abstract Expressionism’ even before the work of American Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and, more particularly, the Dutch-born Willem de Kooning became known in Britain. Like de Kooning, Wilde often based his works on the abstracted female form. (Although he never married, Wilde nevertheless had a reputation as a flirt.) His work in the late 1940s and ’50s also had similarities with that of the Scottish painter, Alan Davie. The multi-talented writer, critic and artist, John Berger, described Wilde’s paintings as having ‘conviction’ with ‘their amazing strength of line, devouring colour and interlocking shapes’ and referred to Wilde as a ‘genius’.2 The art critic and widely respected curator, David Sylvester, also spoke of Wilde as an ‘unsung genius’.3 Other artists and critics who would write respectfully about Wilde included Patrick Heron, Edward Lucie-Smith, David Mellor, William Packer and Frances Spalding. Francis Bacon also admired his work but, as the art curator, David Mellor, stated, whereas ‘Bacon placed . . . one or two figures in his work, Wilde packed crowds of paranoid beings into similar enclosed spaces: the Existentialist, Sartre-ian, Orwellian ... spaces of the cell-like-room and torture chamber’.4 The art critic, Martin Harrison, described one of Wilde’s paintings, Beast in Landscape (1949), as an image seemingly ‘poised on the threshold of an act of bestial violence’.5 He was also supported by the often acerbic critic Lawrence Alloway.

It was a widely held belief that Wilde was the inspiration for Gulley Jimson, the leading character in The Horse’s Mouth, the novel by the Anglo-Irish writer Joyce Cary, originally published in 1944, about an eccentric London-based artist who had no regrets about exploiting his small circle of friends for money. In fact it was stated by Dan Davin, in his book Closing Time that Wilde ‘had long been known as the Gulley Jimson of Soho’.6 This mistaken impression was not based on fact. Cary did not meet Wilde until six years after the book was published but, having openly admitted the similarities between the two, he became a friend and collector of Wilde’s work. Cary himself would later write of his first encounter with Wilde in Oxford:
I have often thought how true to the fact was that first apparition to me of Gerald Wilde in the Davins’ sittingroom; he seemed like a revenant from another world of spirits, and so he was. He came to us out of a dream that he could not even describe or explain, he could only paint it. For such a world, that realm where the original visual artist lives as naturally as we in our familiar conventions, is so alien to that of the judgment, of the critical reason, that judgment and reason themselves are barriers about it. A painter like Wilde is born to his own visionary dimensions, and it is one necessarily so alien to his contemporaries, that it is equally hard for them to conceive it, or for him to describe it...

The belief in Wilde being the inspiration for Jimson was revived in 1958 when a film version of The Horse’s Mouth was released, starring Alec Guinness in the leading role. Guinness’s facial similarity to Wilde, with his lugubrious features and prominent cheekbones, further reinforced the myth.

For some time Wilde was looked after and housed by the Sri Lankan writer J. M. Tambimuttu (1915–83), who had founded the literary magazine Poetry London in 1939, and was himself a respected poet. Tambimuttu would regularly include reproductions of Wilde’s work in his magazine and often commissioned him to provide book covers for his imprint, Editions Poetry London. The friendship between Wilde and Tambimuttu endured, and there is a photograph of a grey-haired Tambi sitting at a table with Wilde when he was living in a rural outhouse in Gloucestershire, having been given a permanent place as a household member of the philosopher J. G. Bennett’s Academy, towards the end of his life.

Wilde would often sell his work for a pittance - usually in order to pay for his drinks in a pub. There was even a story that in order to display his contempt for money he produced some pound notes from his wallet while standing in a bar and set them alight. During the 1960s, it seems that he gave up painting altogether - certainly there is very little, if any, evidence of work dating from this period. But, in 1977, the Arts Council mounted a one-man exhibition of Wilde’s work at London’s prestigious Serpentine Gallery. This was curated by the critic, Timothy Hilton, another professional with a high opinion of Wilde’s work, who wrote in the exhibition’s catalogue, “He has no attachment to the English scene, none to previous English painters. He is unatmospheric: his flaring, unnatural colour comes from a preference for working by electric light with the curtains drawn.” This exhibition was followed two years later, in 1979, by a one-man show at the newly opened October Gallery, which followed up with two more exhibitions devoted to Wilde in 1981 and 1984. Following Wilde’s death, in 1986, October Gallery presented retrospective shows in 1988, 1991 and 2002. The current exhibition, Gerald Wilde: From the Abyss is the seventh occasion on which October Gallery has sought to bring this unique artist’s work to the attention of a much broader audience.

Although Wilde’s mature work is generally described as Abstract Expressionist there are often references to people or places such as Piccadilly Circus (1946), a whirling aerial view with forceful black and brightly coloured lines converging on a central oval, or Woman and Fox (1947-50) where, in a mostly abstract composition, the shape of both can be recognised. Some titles of his works have metaphysical connotations such as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1971-72) or Phantasmagoria (1978), although it was widely believed that, given Wilde’s occasional reluctance to name his works, the galleries themselves would often suggest a title.

In 1986 Wilde entered Northleach Hospital, a former workhouse in Gloucestershire. He died there on October 2nd, his 81st birthday.

2. The New Statesman and Nation, John Berger, September, 1955
3. Ark 16, Royal College of Art magazine, David Sylvester, 1956
Pastel and gouache on paper, 76 x 164 cm.