

## William T. Wiley and Ara Peterson

It's an interesting coincidence that the graphics of retro pinball machines have inspired the production of recent limited editions by two different artists. Most likely unaware of one another's projects, William T. Wiley and Ara Peterson each made silkscreen prints of pinball playfields on wood panels, utilizing materials and printing processes similar to those used in the creation of pinball machines in the 1960s and 1970s.

Wiley is a member of the Bay Area Funk movement of the 1970s and has been incorporating nontraditional materials into his art since that time—his many print-based works have been made on a variety of surfaces, from chalkboard to cowhide to paper.

*Punball: Only One Earth* (2007) is a freestanding kinetic sculpture/fully functional pinball machine, a re-creation of North Star, a Cold War-era game made by Gottlieb, a longstanding pinball manufacturer. To create the piece, the artist acquired five original North Star pinball machines, replaced their playfields and backboard panels with his own silkscreen panels, and reassembled them.

Whereas the original 1964 game celebrated the undersea crossing of the North Pole by the USS *Nautilus* submarine, Wiley's version offers a consciousness-raising narrative on climate change peppered with political commentary. Recurrent symbols from Wiley's past work—an hourglass, a globe, the man in the moon, a dunce cap—reappear, rendered in his signature cartoon-inspired style and blended

with various textual puns that play off the original game. Bumpers originally labeled "ice caps" in the North Star game, for example, become "eye scabs" (and yes, they do appear to be melting). North Star's buxom Eskimo babes, drawn wearing fur-lined miniskirts, have been replaced with a self-portrait of the artist standing against a backdrop of the Pacific Ocean—with Pinocchio nose and dunce cap in hand—lecturing to a youngster as an hourglass counts the passage of time and sea levels rise all around.

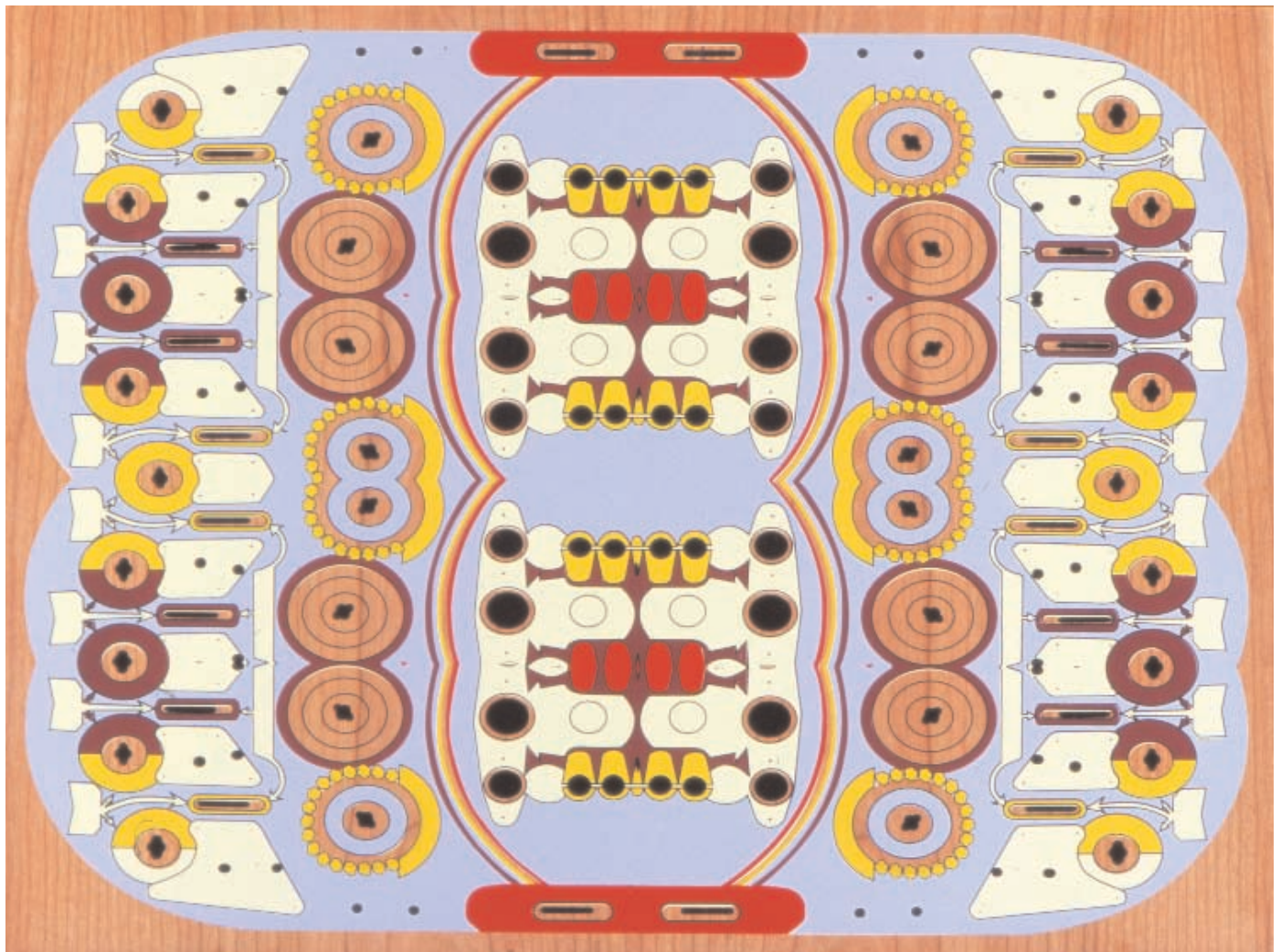
The game's playfield features an artist's palette as its centerpiece, accompanied by the statement "only art can save us now," followed by the words "special when lit." Characteristically, Wiley pokes fun while also delivering a serious message, and the piece begs the question: Should one really take the advice of an artist who has pictured himself in a dunce cap and Pinocchio nose?

When the machine was first displayed at Electric Works in San

Francisco, viewers were able to play the original game as well as Wiley's new version.

Ara Peterson's study of the pinball machine is just as playful, although his interpretation of the game is decidedly more abstract. Of a younger generation than Wiley, he was a child of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when pinball parlors were rapidly being replaced by video arcades. Not surprisingly, his three silkscreens marry the static graphics of pinball playfields from the sixties and seventies with the energetic movement of early video games. Take the





**Opposite:** William T. Wiley, *Punball: Only One Earth* (detail), rebuilt and restored pinball machine with original artwork (70 x 26 x 56 in.), 2008, edition of 5

**Above:** Ara Peterson, *Four Way Split*, screen-print on cherry plywood from a suite of 3 (18 x 24 in. each), 2007, edition of 10 + 3 APs. Courtesy Ratio 3, San Francisco

print *Flat Angel* (2007) which sports various visual symbols that echo the shapes of bumpers and flippers. Look at the print long enough, however, and these images tend to morph into the pixelated characters and aliens of the videogame classic *Space Invaders*.

Much of Peterson's work employs similar visual tricks to induce a doubletake. While the intensity of his aesthetic may be influenced by his early years with Forcefield—the Providence-based arts collective and band whose immersive installations fused technology and craft into a synesthetic environment of color, shape, and sound—his more recent projects display a commitment to achieving the same levels of intensity through a simplicity of method. His recent video animations, for example, pair hypersaturated colors

with geometric, repetitive patterns, which, when brought together in motion, elevate op art to eye-boggling extremes. Videos Peterson created expressly for projection during the performances of the experimental noise band Black Dice make the graphics on your iTunes Visualizer look tame, and their optical overload is potent enough to hold its own against the band's ear-piercing, high-volume barrage.

Even as static compositions, Peterson's recent silkscreens, dressed in retro color palettes, racy arrows, and stripes, are eye-popping, and it is not hard to imagine these compositions making their way in the future into the artist's videos as animated forms.

—*Berin Golonu*