



2 and 1, Robot Teaching Calendar, 2009, 32 ins. x 54 ins.; mixed media on paper.

Very few people have the mental skill to quickly and efficiently carry out such precise calculations. The artist George Widener is a rare exception, however, and in part he has made such detailed and complex calculations and the relationships of quantitative data to which they allude the very subject matter of his unusual, mixed-media works on paper.

His partly representational, partly abstract works give visible, if obliquely meaningful, form to those relationships. They also make for some of the most elegant and enigmatic works to be found anywhere in the international contemporary-art world today.

Partly the visual records of the date-time relationships or historical events that have long intrigued—and obsessed—him and partly the deeply personal expressions of a kind of creativity that is at once artistic and keenly intellectual, Widener's drawings share some formal, thematic and technical affinities with certain kinds of modernist and contemporary art.

Their passages of knotty, random patterns bring to mind the ambiguously expressive brushwork of abstract art's paint-dripping pioneers, while their preoccupation with time as their central theme recalls the efforts of such emblematic modernists as Barnett Newman, Cy Twombly or, in more recent decades, Anselm Kiefer to evoke the historic, the heroic or the classical, if not through color, form or scale, then sometimes through the choices of their eloquent works' titles.

Widener's mixed-media drawings, which sometimes refer simultaneously to the past and to the future, also frequently hint at the kind of apocalyptic visions that have found increasing expression in the work of contemporary artists from who are concerned about environmental pollution, global warming and the fate of the Earth.

By the numbers

Filled with puzzling dates and figures, and rich random patterns, the art of **GEORGE WIDENER** offers a personal meditation on the passage of time

By Edward M. Gómez

Pick a date—any date, like, say, a favorite friend's birthday. Now, without any pencil, paper, calculator or reference materials, figure out precisely on which days of the week that special day will fall for the next fifty years. Or to make the exercise more challenging, try to figure out quickly and correctly on which days of the week that day will fall every four years for the next 50 years. Or take any date on the calendar and quickly and correctly figure out on which days of the week that date fell from 1920 through 1960.

"Sometimes I go backward or forward several centuries in my date calculations," Widener observes. He adds: "But for many people, it's hard and it isn't normal to think in terms of centuries."

Recognized as a high-functioning autistic savant, Widener is a self-taught, American artist who is now in his late forties; he lives in Asheville, North Carolina, where he enjoys hiking the nearby Appalachian Trail and scouring local sources for antique books and maps.

The artist says: "I like the colors of old books and

maps. In my own works, I sometimes use tea to give the papers I use, including ordinary paper napkins, that same kind of aged look."

Widener has Asperger syndrome, an autistic disorder that causes those afflicted with it to experience certain difficulties with normal social interaction. They also tend to demonstrate restrictive or repetitive patterns of behavior and to have intense interests in certain subjects.

In Widener's case, even as a child he demonstrated an unusual aptitude for spelling and arithmetic. He was also able to memorize large amounts

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of data and, to this day, he is avidly interested in such subjects as calendars and certain dates (like those on which various well-reported disasters have occurred), alphabets, telephone numbers and automobile license plates. Widener recalls: "As a child, I did my calendar calculations in school but I used to hide them. I'd make lists of dates and play around with them instead of doing my schoolwork. My teachers told me not to do this, that I wasn't paying attention."

*Gott und Brot, 2009,
23 ins. x 72 ins.; mixed
media on paper.*



Widener also remembers one time later in his life when he stopped by a public library to work on one of his “magic squares,” or grid-based drawings in which the numbers that appear bear certain mathematical relationships between them.

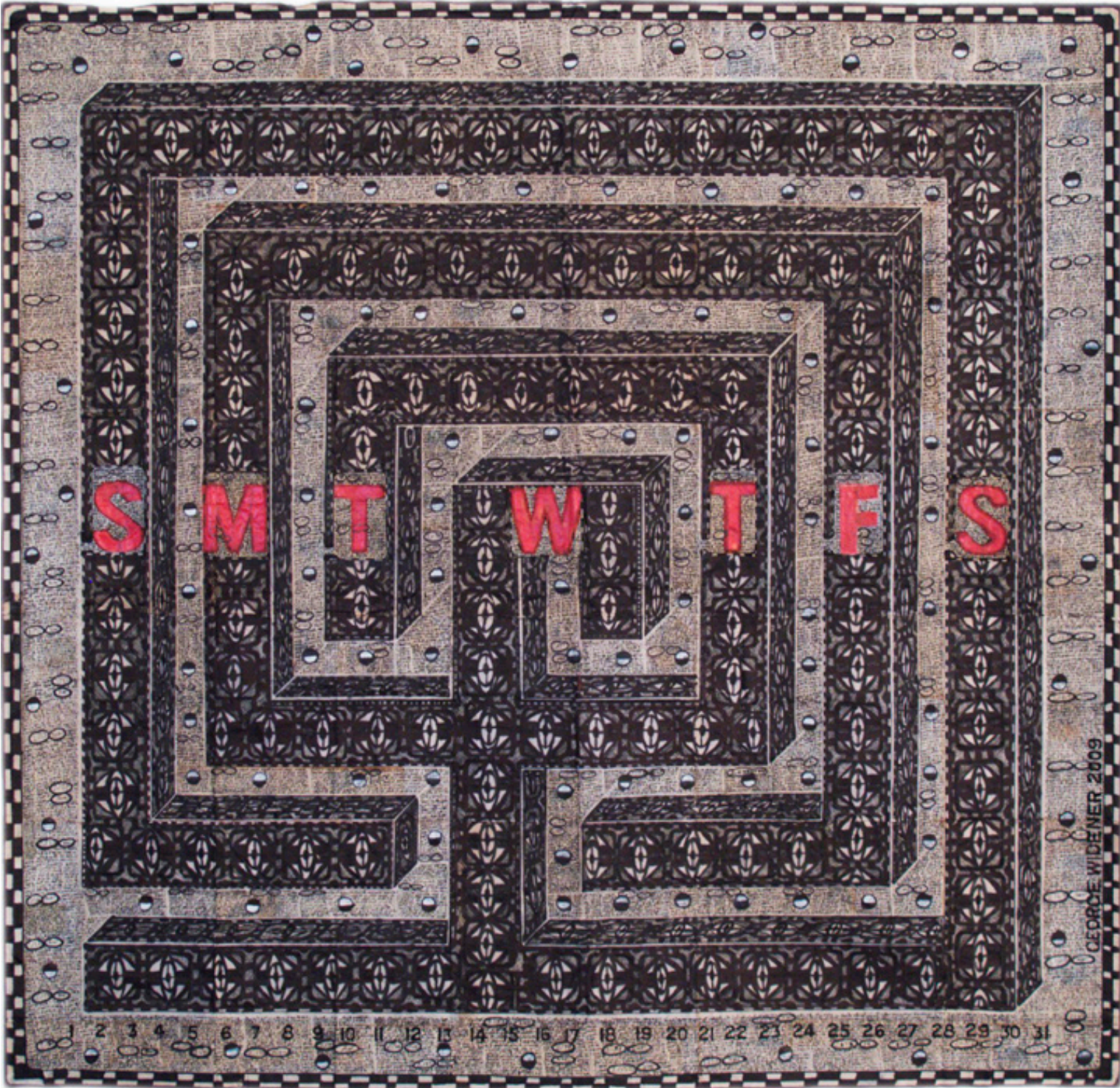
“Some people in the library who were watching me actually accused me of practicing witchcraft,” Widener says. By contrast, he adds, “It’s always nice when people say, ‘Oh, that’s a nice picture.’ The fact is, I like counting in my head. Because of my condition, I’m not good at multi-tasking. If I have a lot of different, new things to do in a day, I get confused. When I feel stressed-out, I step aside and count a bit. It’s relaxing.”

Sometimes, in the past, Widener was asked to publicly demonstrate his rapid-calculation ability. He recalls: “People would ask me, ‘How do you do that?’ I had to stop and think about it. When I do stop and think about it, though, that slows me down. But if I’m stepping onto a bus, for example, it just pops into my head.” (“It” is Widener’s date-calculating or numbers-processing activity—his “dates” or “calendars” or “counting,” as he variously and simply refers to his routine but complex and sophisticated mental exercises.)

Ever since he discovered that a passenger with his same name had perished in the sinking of the legendary ocean liner the *Titanic* in 1912, Widener also has been fascinated by that headline-making disaster. “That discovery was incredible!” he says, adding: “It made me think of my own mortality. The more I read about the sinking of the *Titanic*, the more I realized it was an amazing event for its time.”

Widener has returned to the *Titanic* theme in numerous works. He once made a group of drawings in which he exhaustively listed exactly how many furnaces, propellers and life vests the

SMTWTFS, 2009, 31.25 ins. x 32.25 ins.; mixed media on paper.





Above: *Robot Teaching Calendar*, 2009, 14.25 ins. x 86.5 ins.; mixed media on paper. Below: A detail of the same work.



Widener says the
complex calculations
he seems to do with ease
“just pop into my head.”

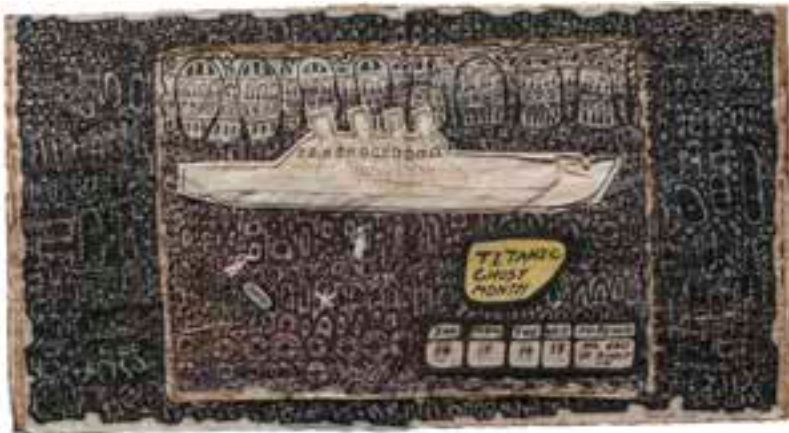
giant ship was equipped with, and the quantities of different foods with which its galleys had been stocked. Among his other obsessive concerns, Widener has also focused considerable attention on the data of the 2000 U.S. Census.

Widener draws many of his pictures—like his *Machine Parts*, since he is also interested in mechanical devices—on tea-stained paper napkins. That kind of material, as a surface for detailed drawings, is both delicate and unusual. Many of his large drawings, which are filled with dates and numbers, look like strange artifacts from some unknown civilization. In fact, all of these drawings

boast well-organized compositions. They evolve out of the ways in which Widener gives visible order to the data that are his subject matter.

About a decade ago, Widener earned a liberal arts degree in a special-education program for learning-disabled students at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Today, as a highly functioning autistic person, he continues to develop his unusual body of work. Using simple inks on paper, Widener brings a high level of craftsmanship to his handling of humble materials.

When considered from the point of view of



Above: *Titanic Ghost Month*, 2009, 13 ins. x 24 ins.; mixed media on paper. Right: Another detail from the large work *Robot Teaching Calendar*, 2009, 14.25 ins. x 86.5 ins.; mixed media on paper (see preceding pages).



contemporary art themes and aesthetics, his work suggests some strong affinities with both minimalist and systems-based conceptual art. It is at once very personal and impulsive, and sophisticated in its form and content.

Writing in 1945, the British critic Herbert Read noted that, for all their complexity (and their faults), in their own ways, the metaphysical systems of the great German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel could also “be admired as abstract works of art” in their own right. So, too, can Widener’s artistic creations, no matter how mysterious or intricate the underlying mathematical relationships on which they are based may appear. Like the best art created by self-taught artists, Widener’s is one-of-a-kind. **f**