

Fig.1 Wiley Saunders, *Ice Station Zebra* detail, 2024, Acrylic on Canvas, 11 x 14”.

Ice Station Zebra:

Memory, Perception, and Repetition

By Wiley Saunders

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

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ABSTRACT

Howard Hughes, the millionaire aviator lived for four years at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, Nevada (Fig. 2). Hughes, who suffered from chronic pain and obsessive compulsive disorder resulting in extreme germaphobia, was living as a recluse who was only seen by his bodyguards and entourage. Hughes would call into the only local channel airing overnight at the time, KLAS-TV and request his favourite film - *Ice Station Zebra* (released in 1968, directed by John Sturges, starring Rock Hudson, Jim Brown, and Ernest Borgnine). When the channel would no longer acquiesce to his requests Hughes simply purchased the television station and ordered them to air the film on loop overnight. For the ten years that Hughes owned the station it would be a common occurrence to be flipping through the channels and see *Ice Station Zebra* on repeat. By creating this media loop, Hughes had perfected his own feedback system to help manage his condition: keeping himself in a suspended state of hyperreality. Through cumulative studio practice I am creating these same conditions of hyperreality to better understand the metaphysical experiences of epilepsy. Researching the impact of its mind altering effects on my art making decisions and process: choosing images in the fugue mode of making.



Fig.2 VintageLasVegas.com,
Desert Inn, Las
Vegas,Nevada, 1969.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, I developed epilepsy and began to regularly experience Focals - minor seizures precipitated by an intense sensation of Deja Vu followed by nausea. My first Tonic Clonic seizure resulted in an injury at work. I had torn my right shoulder and broken my arm in the accident. There was a significant healing period. I only started to be able to get myself sorted out once I had recovered and adjusted to the medication



enough to begin drawing and painting with my left hand. Physiotherapy was the first step but it was only once I could return to image making that I began to sort out the mess in my head. There was a great deal of dusty pictures and cobwebs to clear out, lots of old movie posters, and a missing set of earrings.

Fig.3 Wiley Saunders, *OKC*, 2021, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas over Panel, 18 x 30".

My dad had passed one year earlier, just before the pandemic, on Friday the 13th of

December 2019. He died from complications of Alzheimer's / dementia, leaving me nervous about the new found precarity of my own brain. It wasn't until I painted *OKC* (Fig. 2 previous page) in 2021 that I understood the other half of recovery to have begun in earnest. I had finally become used to the side effects of my medications and was starting to sort out the recurring images and motifs from episodes of *deja vu* that were related to my Focal seizures. The painting included a screenshot from the beginning credits of "*My Neighbor Totoro*" (1988), a childhood favourite. There is an image of fields seen from the sky, the aerial perspective taken from recurring dreams of flight - actually a "found" photographic corollary - and a screenshot from De La Soul's *Breakadawn* (1993) music video that had become embalmed in my psyche midway through a transitional animation.

The cathartic experience of this painting was something more than the usual relief of finally calling a work finished. Working in this state of reverie offered a pause to the cycling loop of images in my mind. It suddenly ascribed a new profound physical effect on my well being. I was able to regain a sense of autonomy over this metaphysical experience – these images were having an adverse effect and through this art making process I was able to create relief through managing the condition. Like Hughes, it was that manic repetition, the act of management itself that provided the most relief: to regain control was essential. The artist aims to be dictator over their images, the director of the play. And after experiencing an attempted coup I was holding the reins once again.

PROJECT

Ice Station Zebra is a series of semi autobiographical paintings and sculptures exploring the "box" format. The semi autobiographical nature of the work is a response to my own diagnosis with epilepsy later in my life. I am interested in the history of the box as an art object and as infrastructure – the thin, porous membrane between functionality and decoration. The rigidity of shape is the same appeal of the rectangle of the canvas, both being excellent vessels for assembling different images. The boxes

are made from materials like wood, metal, plastic, concrete and felt, they will be filled with things like paintings, toys, and interestingly shaped off-cuts. Themes of nostalgia, childhood, and memory are accessible by the baked-in qualities of the ready-made materials. This rigid format is useful for me when tackling the amorphous nature of epilepsy and the ongoing nature of its recovery. As of right now there is no finite conclusion to my condition beyond brain surgery so the best relief (in addition to medication of course) is found through the catharsis of making. Now with these higher physiological stakes I find I am compelled to figure out the reasons why I am interested in images.



Fig.4 Reg Innell, *Withrow Public School Community Mural*, 1980.

“Art-making provides a narrative that transitions frozen memories into meaningful representation and a coherent account of events. This process equips patients with the capacity to reintegrate these memories into a more manageable area of experience,

thereby facilitating positive changes in life-affecting behaviors.” - Epilepsy Society (Anonymous)



Fig.5 Adam Curtis, still from *HyperNormalisation*, 2016.

We are always trying to find the reason we are inclined towards certain things, the same way I can imbue an offcut of wood with enough value to take it home. I can do the same with screenshots, film stills and other internet ephemera. It is a constant instinct in the digital age, saving and hoarding materials waiting for the right chance to use them.

As a result I am working with recurring images from dreams, like a nightmare of being trapped in a suburban cul de sac, or being back in my elementary school yard. Painting beloved childhood places in an attempt to memorialize them, to cryogenically freeze them in our minds, and protect them in stasis.



Fig.6 Wiley Saunders, *The Science Centre*, 2021-23, Oil on Canvas over Board, 23 x 7 ½”.

The first inspiration for the project was Joseph Cornell’s signature modernist shadow boxes. An early favourite, I was interested in the maneuverability of the works, the free associating images and the strong tactile quality of the shadow box. I was first exposed to his work in high school and it remained influential on a series of projects: starting in high school I worked on a cigar box guitar with my Dad, then in undergrad I made my first hardwood box sculptures, filling them with an assortment of coloured objects in direct reference to Cornell. Throughout the project I wanted to make a more explicitly referential box but in following each thread presented by the different materials, I found myself drifting towards more abstracted ideas of the shadow box and further away from Cornell’s collage/ assemblage.

The freedom of a loosely defined “box” – from paintings created with custom built stretchers, frames in unorthodox shapes, to the silhouette of a house for example – allows me great flexibility to work on paintings and sculptures with a wide variety of themes and content. Then I get to see how the images bounce off each other when confined into a structure. Pushing the definition of box, abstracting it beyond the confines of four walls. Some are deconstructed, ie. halved, then halved again. Some are paintings born from this rigid, structured framework.

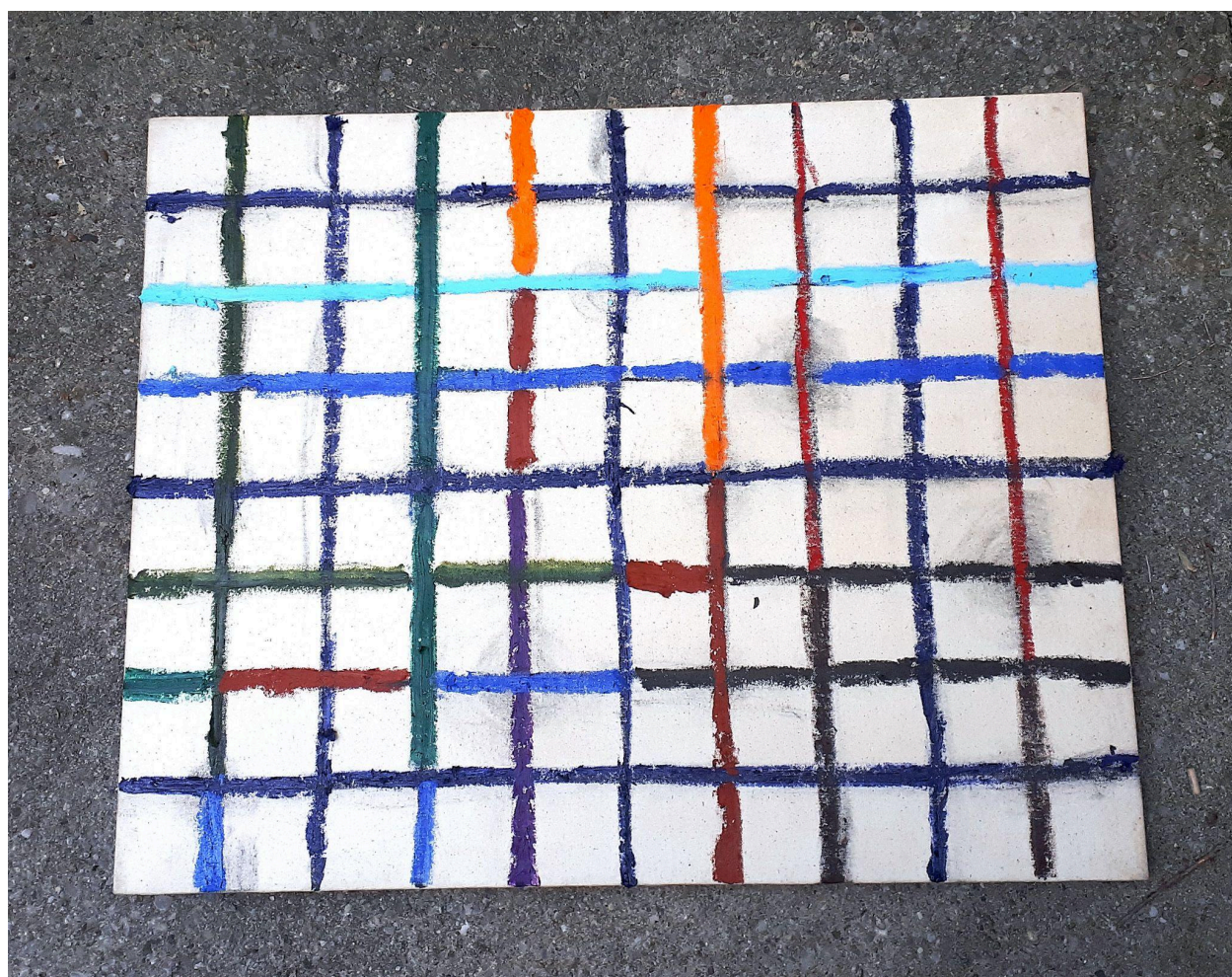


Fig.7 Wiley Saunders, *Grid Landscape*, 2024, Oil Bar on Canvas over Panel, 30 x 24”.

“If everything is available and everything is broken, is the container a necessary device to formally structure all that information? For me it is but for a lot of artists

it is not... It is this unruly thing that doesn't want or need borders. I like the borders. Braque talked about loving the limits of the rectangle and de Chirico wouldn't work without those limits, without the edge of the canvas closing in on a shadow or a column and forcing us to see it in a particular way...That is the motor for the picture in a way. If those elements were just strewn in a more open fashion they wouldn't have the same impact.” - David Elliot interviewed in Border Crossings, 2016. (Enright)

My own experiences with epilepsy have led me to believe there is a subconscious emotional connection with images from my focal seizures (mild seizures precipitated by an intense déjà vu sensation). The content of my dreams then take on an entirely new importance. Logging dreams and tracking repeats has introduced a mystical quality to certain images. I am interested in dream scapes, the idea of constructing these boxes is to attempt to inscribe them with the same ephemeral qualities rendered in the physical form. The free, subconscious association of images is posed. The artist is setting the scene of a drama, with the box acting as a stage, and the canvas as a *metaphysical spatial container*.

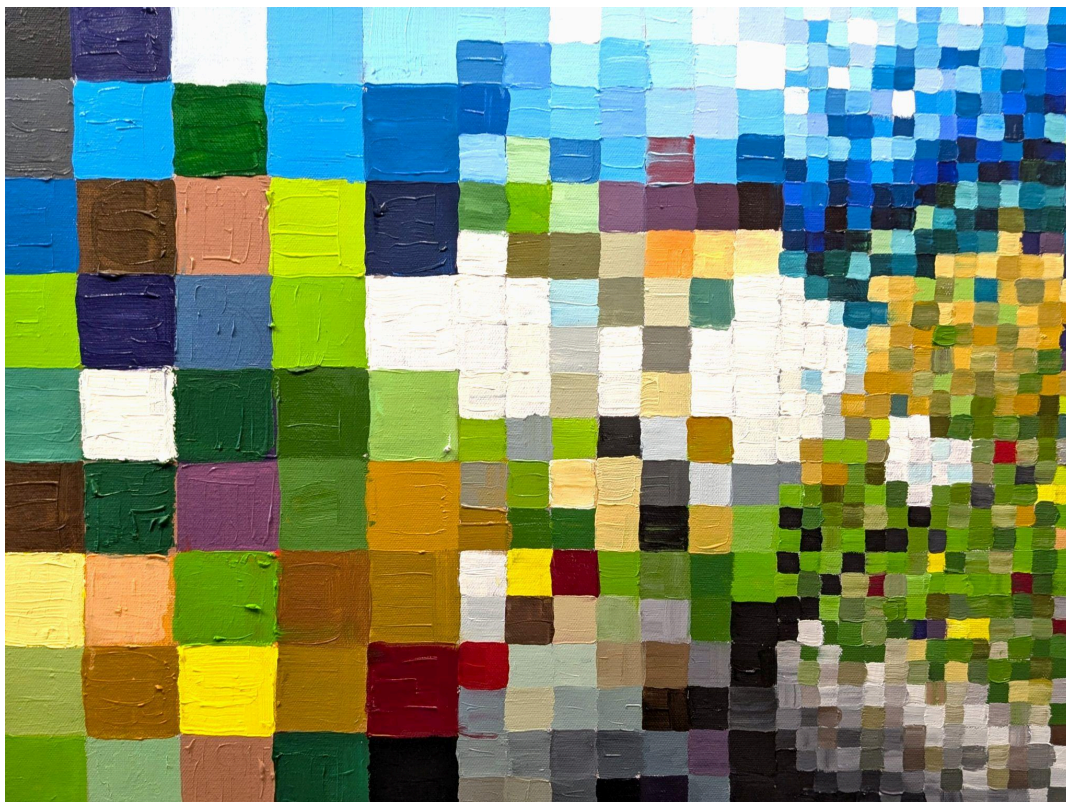


Fig.8
Wiley
Saunders,
Pine Gap
detail,
2025, Oil
on
Canvas,
18 x 24”.

I am interested in grid paintings, whether it be pixelated images or a comic panel-like collage of images on a canvas. I have always been keen on the different applications of the format to “censor”, blur, or obfuscate an image.

As a young boy I had a vivid imagination, I could keep myself entertained for hours just holding my toys and dreaming up scenarios, sometimes to my detriment. It meant that I scared easily. Every Sunday night *The Simpsons* would end and without warning, immediately launch into the bloodcurdling intro for *The X-Files*. I of course would spring up from the couch and sprint out of the room to escape. Without fail I would creep halfway up the stairs to my bedroom, stop, and peer out from the safe vantage to watch the show through its reflection in the glass door. Now that image had been denatured by its mirroring I could safely consume it without fear. This was a powerful process for me, I was able to conquer the metaphysical aversion I felt by controlling the quality of the image itself, reducing it, and its power to a halftone.



Fig.9 Wiley Saunders, *Football Game Hypnosis*, 2023-26, Oil on Muslin over Plywood, Maple, 19 ½ x 8”.

MATERIAL RESEARCH

When I told my Dad I wanted to go to art school he made a deal with me, “Ok sounds great. You have to go into the trades after you graduate.” Only half-joking, he wanted to make sure I had a foundation of skills that I could fall back on. He understood that working as an artist you are subject to the whims of the market without the same protections of other industries. He saw my interest in building processes, my love for materials, and he had a feeling that working as a tradie developing my skill-set would help my practice grow.



Fig.10 Wiley Saunders, *Bricks (Blank)*, 2026, Concrete, 2 x 2 x 3 ½”.

STONE

During the summers after graduating high school I would work as a landscaper for a Stone mason. We did paver stone patios, slate garden details and concrete planters. Despite one day learning a hard lesson with a burst form, still I loved my first experience working with concrete. The medium takes on a solid form in our minds. When we see a specifically shaped piece of concrete our mind races to make up the bit of infrastructure that it's missing from. I loved that strange “official” power this stone slurry had. Whatever personal project I made with the stuff I could pass off as a City installation with the right placement and a bit of mortar.



Fig.11 Found Umbrella Bases, 2026.

Building the forms fills the same mouldmaking nostalgia from my childhood - my parents were both sculptors, so as a boy I got to enjoy many plaster cast hand activities and later on as a teenager watch my dad tinker with epoxy projects. It is a fun visual challenge to be working in the negative. For what ended up being the first work of the thesis project I aimed to build a family ziggurat as a challenge to myself. I had built forms a bunch of times on site but

never for a standalone object, and never a personal project.



Fig.12 Wiley Saunders,
Jewellery Box, 2025,
Concrete.

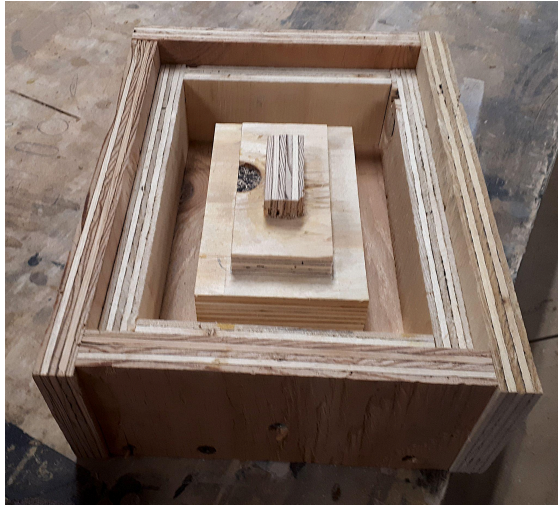


Fig.13 I've always loved the Ziggurat form.



Fig.14 Making sure...



Fig.15 Lid and Box w/ Totoro.



Fig.16 Point of View mixing.



Fig.17 Before putting the lid and smoothing on.

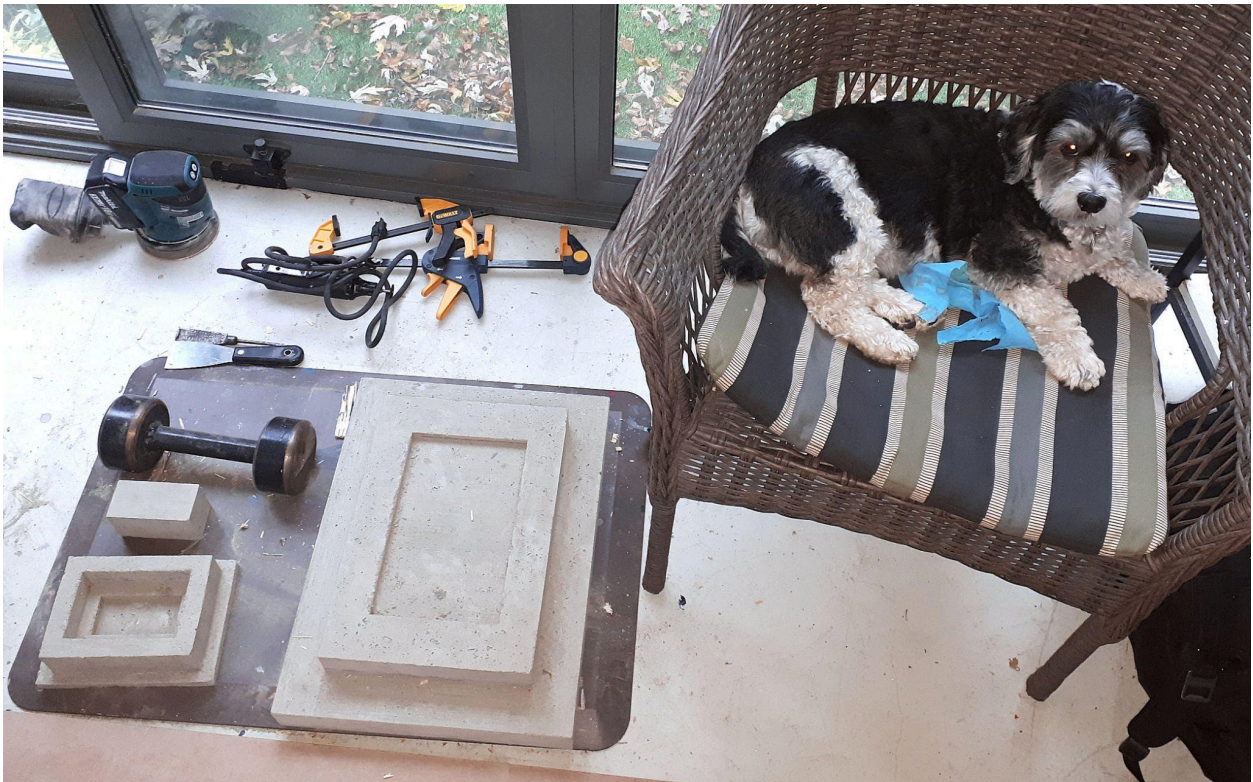
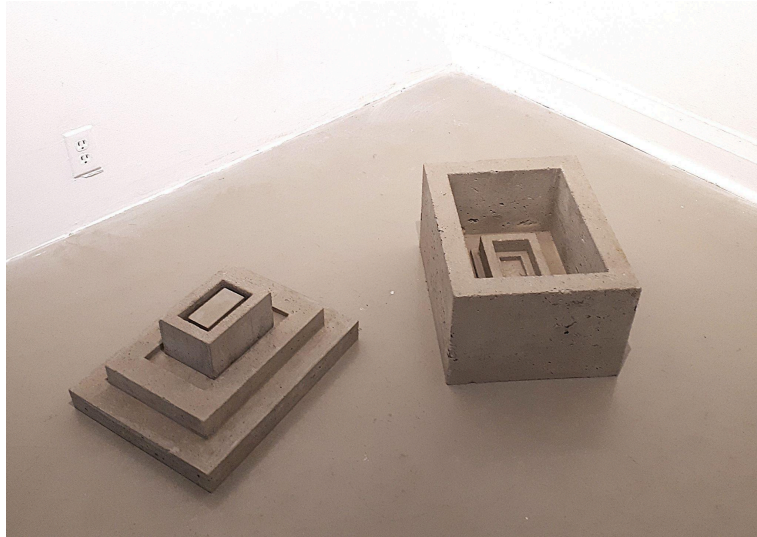


Fig.18 *Jewellery Box* Form building and pouring process photos (featuring Mia).



Wiley Saunders,
Jewellery Box, 2025,
 Concrete, 18 x 12 x 24".

Keisuke Oka has been working on his Arimaston building for the last 15 years. Built by hand with raw concrete on a small plot of land in Tokyo, Japan. It has

survived a new residential development that demolished all the surrounding buildings.

The postman Ferdinand Cheval found a delightfully shaped piece of sandstone one day on his post route in Hautrieves, France. The stone called to him to build a palace that he had seen and experienced in a dream fifteen years earlier. He spent the rest of his life building the Palais Idéal - the Ideal Palace and the mausoleum where he now rests.

This is a box of jewellery that my family will be obliged to keep around after I'm gone. It is a big, heavy fortress and sealed in the concrete is something valuable.

Fig.19 *Jewellery Box* Didactic.



Fig.20 Benoit Prieur,
Ferdinand Cheval's
Ideal Palace,
1879-1924 Concrete,
mortar, sandstone,
limestone, shells, 2014.

**FERDINAND
CHEVAL - The Ideal
Palace**

*"In a small village
called Hauterives,*

south of Lyons in central France.

Built single-handedly over a period of 33 years beginning in 1879, by country postman Ferdinand Cheval, The Ideal Palace is one of the world's most astonishing visionary structures.

Cheval dreamed of a wondrous palace, but was not a builder, so he built nothing. One day out in the real world he noticed a strangely shaped stone, one so provocative that he brought it home with him. Soon his garden was full of unusual rocks and stones gathered on his 32 kilometre postal route, or later gathered on long walks he took with a wheelbarrow. The stones became his basic building material, bound together with cement and wire. In 1879, when he was 43 years old, he began to build.

*'The distance from the dream to the reality is great;
I had never touched a mason's trowel and I was totally ignorant of the rules of
architecture.'*

In spite of local ridicule, he stubbornly toiled at his dream creation, inventing ways to build as he progressed. He shaped his forms by modeling and carving. He worked at night and in his spare time, and was aware that many thought him mad. It's backbreaking work requiring 3500 bags of lime and cement to build a concrete and stone palace of such size, 26 metres by 12 metres with heights varying from 8 to 11 metres.

What did he know? The 1878 Paris World's fair, his military service in Algeria, illustrations from popular magazines, the objects in the world around him and his dream.

So he created this amazing structure, covered with surface decoration, combining aspects of a Khmer temple, a mosque, a Hindu sanctuary, a feudal castle, a Swiss chalet and a manger. It consists of four facades, a 2nd level balcony, winding stairs leading up to a tower, and a hallway with vaults below that contain 2 empty stone coffins and a special shrine for his wheelbarrow.

In 1905 an article in 'Le Matin' newspaper made Facteur Cheval and his work known to the entire French people, and his Ideal Palace became a popular tourist destination.

There are many inscriptions on the Palace including:

*Everything you can see, passer-by
Is the work of one peasant
Who, out of a dream, created
The queen of the world.*

And then, in 1912, he was finished. He stopped. This really amazed Dave. Earlier he had been saying over and over, 'One guy!' Now he was saying, 'And then he stopped!'

1879-1912.

10 thousand days

93 thousand hours

33 years of effort

Cheval's plan to use the Palace Ideal as his own tomb was apparently thwarted by local regulations. At the age of eighty, he began work on his own tomb in the local churchyard. He completed this final work 2 years before he died in 1924.

'should there exist a more determined man than myself, then let him set to work.'

(D.Saunders)

BOOKS

To pair with the Jewellery Box I made a series of stone books. They had all the qualities I was after: they're tricky and a bit silly - the familiar form but a fun weight rendered in stone, they gave me the chance to combine my other favourite, spray paint with concrete.



Fig.21 Wiley Saunders, *Yellow Book*, 2026, Concrete and Spray paint, 10 ½ x 6 x 1 ½”.



Fig.22 Bench, Public School, 2026.



Fig.23 Wiley Saunders (clockwise), *Green Book*, *Blue Book*, *Black Book*, *Red Book*, 2026, Concrete and Spray Paint, 10 ½ x 6 x 1 ½”.

"Outside of a dog, man's best friend is a book,
inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." - Groucho Marx

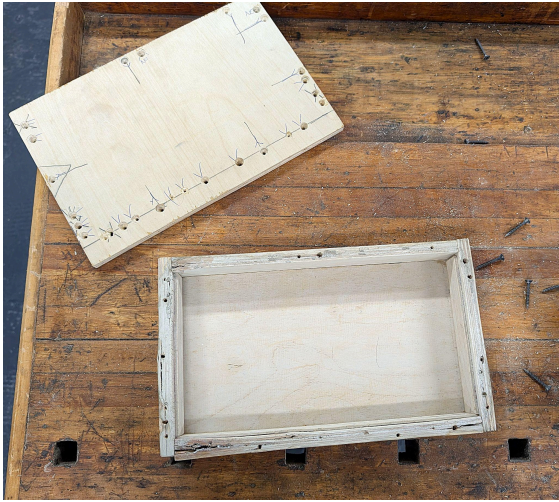


Fig.24 Wiley Saunders, *Book Form*, 2025-6, Plywood, Screws.

I had good luck reusing and modifying the form for the books to exaggerate the cover. All the pours went smoothly, I'd mix out on the street and bring it into the studio. Glad that I had kept my old pill bottles from all my seizure meds as they made for good overflow

containers (you never know why you are holding on to them for so long).



Fig.25 Wiley Saunders, *Stone Pill Bottles*, 2026, Concrete, Toy, Various sizes.

They became lovely irregular monolith forms and serve as a useful reminder of the accumulation of medication over the years. Helps that they match this wonderful cored bit of concrete I took home from the jobsite a couple years ago.



Fig.26 *Stone Pillbottle* in progress, 2026. Fig.27 *Cored Concrete* from Temperance St, 2023.



Fig.28 Wiley Saunders, *Brick Form*, 2026, Ready-made, Concrete.

I had another great overflow container on hand for the last few pours when I was running low on pill bottles. I used this odd readymade mini decor shelf I found to produce some proper square bricks, only some as most of the ends of the pours were too dried out.

SPIT STONES

Having grown up in the east end, my favourite spot in the city is the Leslie Street Spit (Tommy Thompson Park). It has great rocks: old bits of tile and concrete smoothed over by the lake. I was thrilled to be able to assemble them into colourful stonehenges. Making use of my contracting background by zapping the ends square with an angle grinder before gluing them up.



Fig.29 Wiley Saunders, *Monkey Island (Pride Rock)*, 2026, Stone, Walnut, White Oak, 4 ½ x 5 ½ x 5 ½”.



Fig.30 Wiley Saunders, *Ice Merchant*, 2026, Concrete, Tile, Glass and Toy, 4 x 5 x 2 ½”.

“The bird does not sing because it has answers. The bird sings because it has a song.” - Chinese proverb



Fig.31 Wiley Saunders, *Dancing Figure Box*, 2024, Walnut and Plywood, 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".



Fig.32 Wiley Saunders, *Long House Grey Car*, 2025, Ply, Walnut, White Oak, Roasted Oak, 2017, 4 ¼ x 1 ½ x 2 ¾”.

OFFCUTS / MINIATURES

When I graduated from Concordia and moved back home to Toronto I got a job working for a contractor. My first few

months on the job were nothing but demolition so not much skill development but I did get to start working on my stash of hoarded off-cuts/bits of wood. Later on working as a millworker meant that I had access to different hardwoods. It is easy to imbue something with value - maybe its silhouette reminds you of something, maybe it's made from a valuable material. Whatever the reason, you find yourself unable to simply bin it and instead decide to squirrel it away for later.



Fig.33 Wiley Saunders, *Big Roof Wedge House*, 2025, White Oak, Walnut, Fir, 4 ½ x 2 ½ x 2”.

“They’re something that represents a strange world. They’re more narrative. I also see them as social, in the way that model-railroading

represents some area of nostalgia.” - Kim Adams in *Border Crossings*, 1999. (Enright)



Fig.34 Wiley Saunders, *The Hatchery*, 2026, White Oak, Walnut, Pine, Fir, 5 ¾ x 9 x 6”.

“Thank god for the Hatchery. We’d all be lost without it” - Norm MacDonald



Fig.35 Wiley Saunders, *Cantilever House*, 2025, White Oak, Walnut, Fir, 3 x 2 x 4”.

“I’m always the director and the actor in the work. I don’t really have a boss. The fictional world

that I’m making is borrowed from imagery in newspapers or whatever I see or

have heard about. I can throw it in and say now we've got a little stamp of the world." - Kim Adams (Enright)

The hardwood offcuts lend themselves well to miniatures. The irregular shapes and previous industrial functions let them pass themselves off as a house or a roof. They make quick narrative sketches, transitioning seamlessly from bits of scrap into vibrant communities simply with the addition of some figuration, or even just an allusion to figuration. You plop a H0 scale car next to one and it suddenly reads as a diorama or architectural model, something with a proposed intent other than that of "art object". It's that tension, the silliness of convincing, the act of mimicry that I find myself coming back to. They are easy to produce and they are accessible, there's a familiarity there that people seem to resonate with.

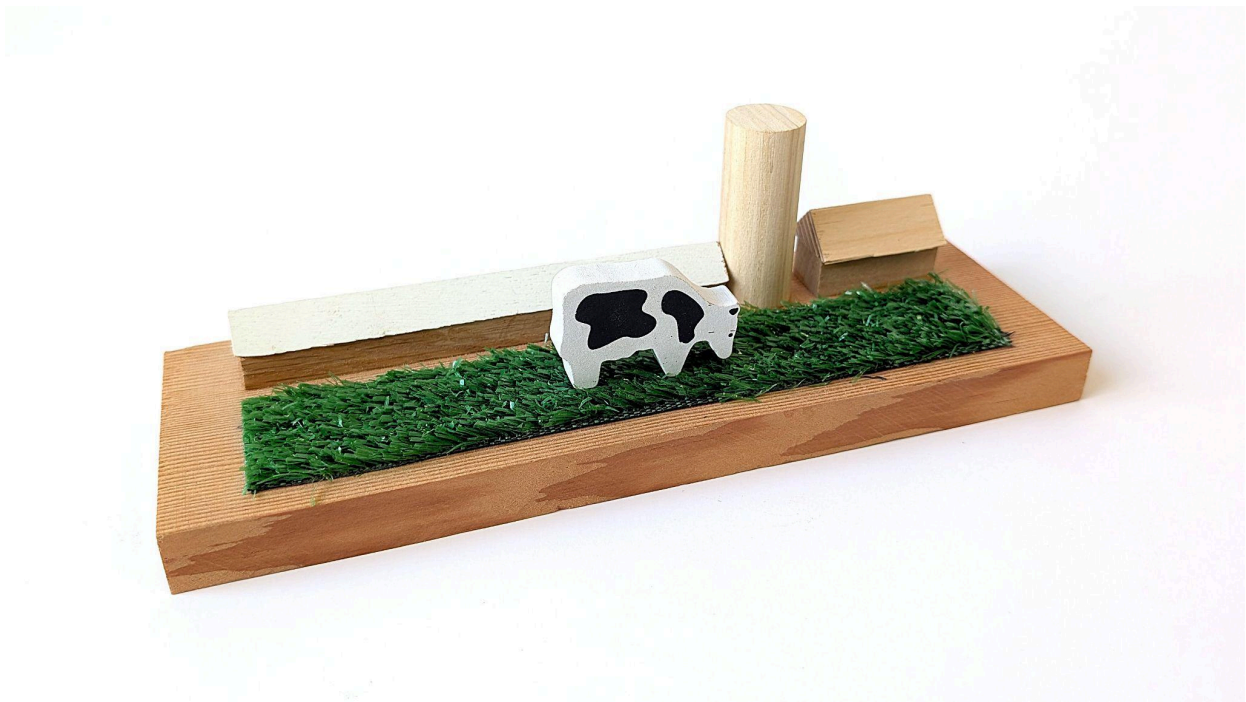


Fig.36 Wiley Saunders, *Big Cow*, 2025, Fir, Plywood, Maple, Turf, Toy, 12 ¼ x 7 ¼ x 5 ¼".



*"BC: I notice
you've never had
much regard for
the accuracies of
scale*

*KA: I have to
play. There's no
limit to what I
can pick and
choose. It's a
world. Like a
theme park that
would take over
Niagara Falls." -
Kim Adams
(Enright)*

Fig.37 Wiley Saunders, *Farmhouse by the River*, 2022, White Oak and Oil Paint, 6 ¼ x 4 x 4".

DUGOUTS

I had these lovely big boards of hardwood leftover from my old job as a millworker. They were still rough from the sawmill and I thought they would be perfect for the muted, minimal, more formal works. They were strong enough on their own that all I had to do was carve them out and figure out what to put in them.



Fig.38 Wiley Saunders, *Dugout Box*, 2026, White Oak, 7 x 5 x 2".

"Fingernails grow faster on the dominant hand."- My Mum



Fig.39 *Dugout Boxes* in progress.



Fig.40 Wiley Saunders, *Stuffed Box*, 2025-6, White Oak, Concrete, 6 x 2 x 7 ½”.

“We buried the forest. We sawed the trees into metre and a half pieces and packed them in cellophane, and threw them into graves.” - Voices from Chernobyl (Aleksievich and Gessen)

CARVED VORTEX

I have been working with the recurring vortex image since I first developed my Epilepsy six years ago. The image itself was loaded with whiplashing content, it had the innocent connotations of transformations found in kids media (shrinking, teleporting, etc.), coupled with the historic catastrophic religious associations (Hell, etc.). So it fit my thematic interests. It was appropriately positive and nostalgic, but not realizing it at the time I was painting this colourful downward spiraling vortex to serve as a comfortable metaphor for the loss of control I was experiencing.



Fig.41 Wiley Saunders, *Flowerfield Vortex*, 2023, Oil on Panel, 12 x 12”



Fig.42 Wiley Saunders, *Sinking Amphitheatre*, 2021, Oil on Muslin over Panel, 18 x 24” .

“You slip into some other world. Your body’s flapping around and you’re biting your tongue and batting your head on the ground but your mind is off somewhere else. The only scary thing about it is not going or being there, it’s realizing you’re totally comfortable in this . . . void.”

Neil Young on his epilepsy in interview with Rolling Stone, 1975 (Crowe)



Fig.43 Wiley Saunders, *Vortex (Green)*, 2026, Carved MDF and Spray Paint, 12 ½ x 10 ¾”.

“She’s Lost Control’ saw Ian Curtis abjecting his own disease, the ‘holy sickness’ of epilepsy, onto a female Other. Freud includes epileptic fits – along, incidentally, with a body in the grip of sexual passion – as examples of the unheimlich, the unhomely, the strangely familiar. Here the organic is slaved to the mechanical rhythms of the inorganic; the inanimate calls the tune, as it always does with Joy Division. ‘She’s Lost Control’ is one of rock’s most explicit encounters with the mineral lure of the inanimate.” - Mark Fisher “Ghosts of My Life” (Fisher)

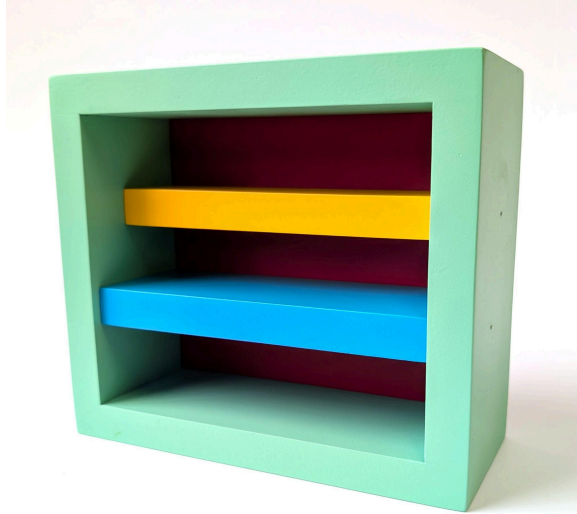
There are comforts of control that come when you can create and diagnose an other, an external actor also troubled with the same issues you face. It is easier on the mind to have an avatar for the experience than to relive it as one's own self. As an artist it is a reflexive instinct to create a “sin eater” out of your projects.



Fig.44 Wiley Saunders, *Vortex (Dry)* Detail, 2023-6, Carved MDF and Spray Paint, 13 ½ x 12 ½”.

I loved the loose drawing quality of the drywall cutter tracing my marks, it reminded me of one of those pens you get as a child that would shake as you

tried to use them. I was thinking of the same ridgeline plot from the *Unknown Pleasures* album art, like inadvertent landscape lines. The cut ridges of each shape in the relief would catch the paint as it pooled and prevented it from dripping into one another. This let me spray loose the way I wanted to without worrying, it also resulted in some lovely moments of overspray and two colours meeting.



PAINT

Fig.45 Wiley Saunders, *Shelves*, 2026, Spray paint, MDF, 8 x 3 ½ x 7”.

Fig.46 Wiley Saunders, *Compound*, 2025-26, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24”.



I love both paints for fine arts and paints for industrial use. One offers a softer, tactile quality while the other is robust, toxic, and strong. Spraying something clean shares that same “Official” quality that I admire about concrete - it has a strength of form that transcends the art object and mimics pseudo-infrastructure.

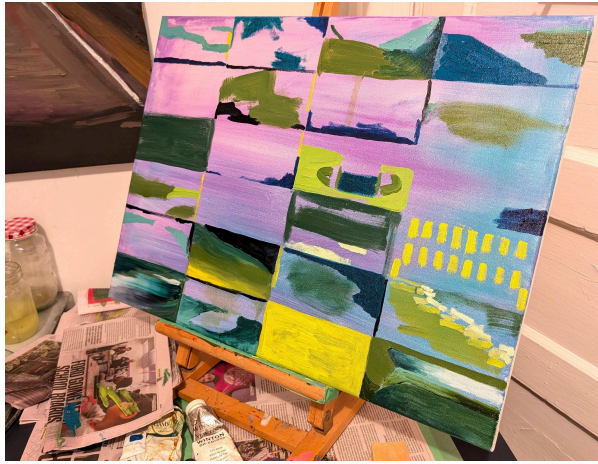


Fig.47 Wiley Saunders, *Screens 2* process photos, 2026, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24”.

Repeating panels makes for easy compositions. One can add a variety of scenes to see how they interact with each other. This elasticity gives me the freedom to bring disparate images together, same action as the boxes.

The works are landscape oriented, intentionally devoid of figuration save for a few highlighted moments. Using the enormous scale of an expanse of land to push forward the smaller more intimate vignettes.

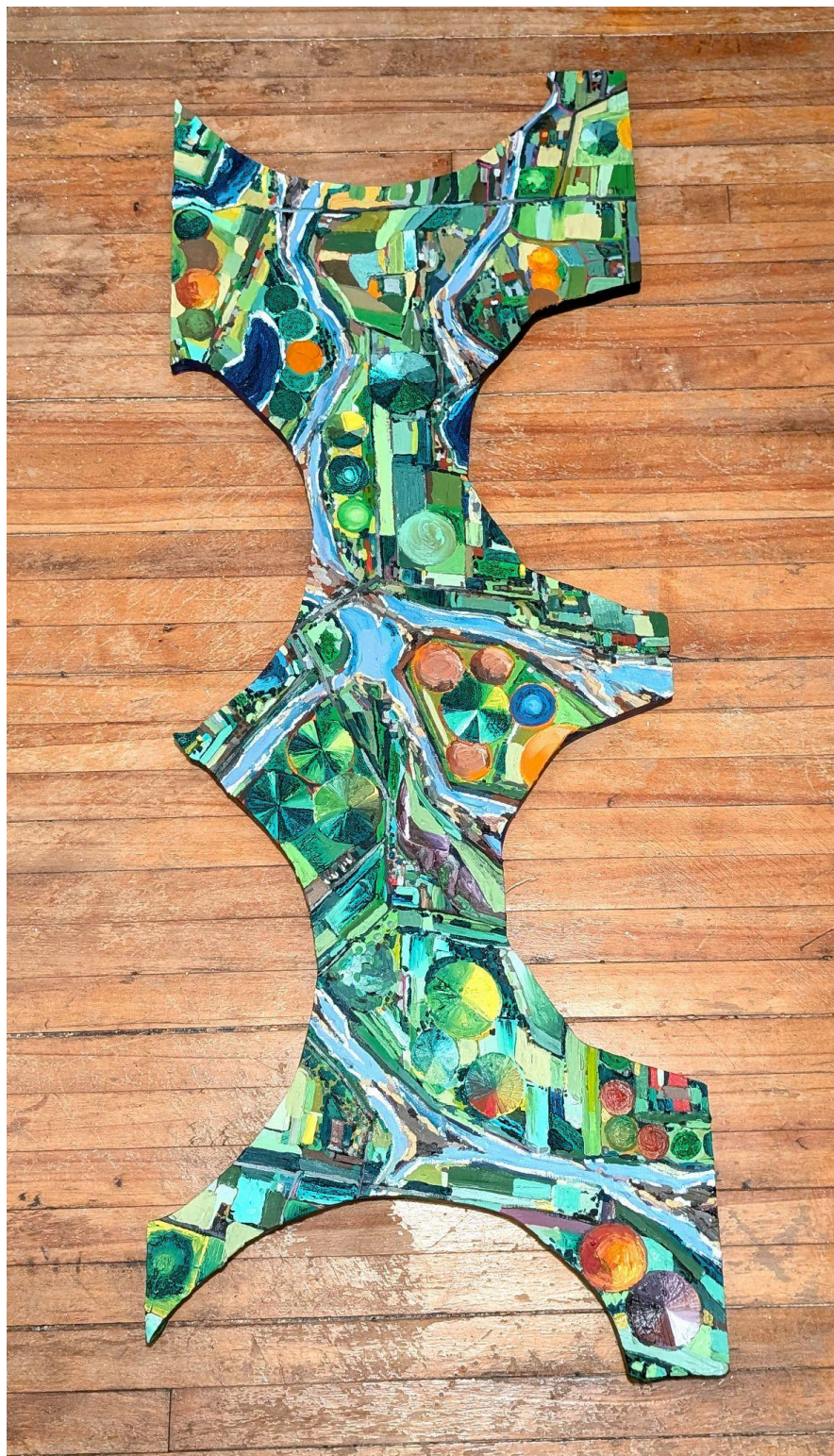


Fig.48 Wiley Saunders, *Knife*, 2025, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas Over Ply, 17 x 46".



Fig.49 Wiley Saunders, *Screens*, 2025, Oil on Canvas, 24 x 30".

“Essentially, I want the paintings to be rich enough that people will hang around and look at them for a while. Part of me thinks that there is this positive vibe about some of them and I want to share it. When I think about art, I sometimes use the word love. Is there any love in this picture? I think an element of love was what I saw in the Chambers. That's part of what I hope for in a picture. It sounds sentimental and it is. I'm wondering, does it always have to be ironic; can a painting be sincere; can you involve sentimentality?” - David Elliott (Enright)

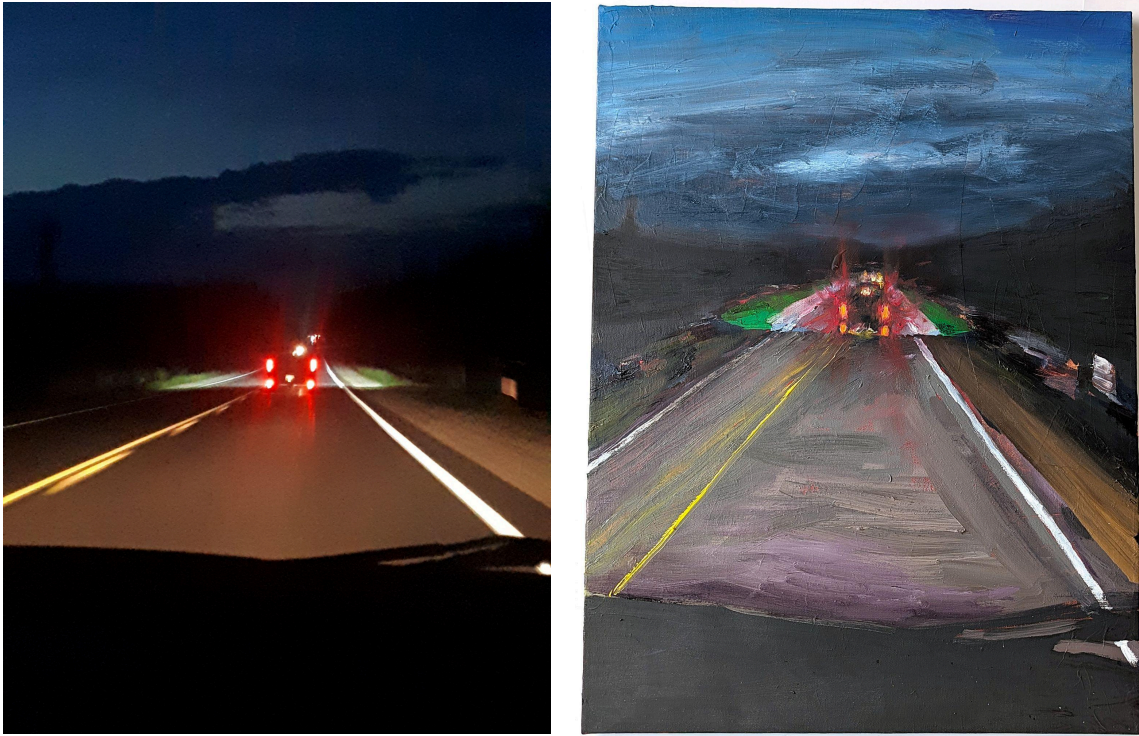


Fig.50 Wiley Saunders, *Night Drive*
Tobermory, 2025, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24", with photo reference.

The works are predominantly devoid of figuration save for a few animals and rough suggestions of people. It is easier to create this sense of “dreaminess” in an empty space.

Painting gives me the chance to illustrate the loose qualities of dreams, trying my best to pin down a real image for something amorphous. Building big frames and box sculptures gives me the chance to grasp it with something solid and lock it down. I try my best to tell stories with the work, taking turns sharing my experiences, describing altered states, or perpetuating family myths.



Fig.51 Wiley Saunders, *Soldier*, 2025-26, Oil on Pine, Toy, 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 1".

BONES

I never got the chance to go on a trip with my dad, just the two of us - something that my mum and I have done plenty of times. My dad didn't like travelling much, he had his solo adventures as a young man and has coasted on his "worldly" reputation ever since. He had described his trip to Japan in the late 1960's to me a couple of times, but after talking with my mum and family friends it seems to me that he had left some of the best parts of the story out. Also seems that his 48 hour micro Japan trip and his considerably more lengthy Euro trip were essentially the only bits of travelling he ever did in his life before having kids. I've always wondered what could be the reason he became such a homebody.

* * *

1968

Dave only went to Japan because of the discount through work, how else could he have afforded to leg it to the other side of the planet. He worked for American Airlines at Pearson Airport. He chose Okinawa for the climate: his juvenile politics leaving him woefully unaware of the growing American delegation taking root in the area. His meager funds also meant that the trip was three days, one of them being the full day spent in the sky. Such a quick turn around. Why would someone make this journey?

He arrived in Naha in April, shuffling into the hotel bar after checking in just in time for some spirited conversation around a table, it was a game of dice. He ordered a whiskey, he didn't drink, he had no clue what to order and had seen it in a movie, maybe it was *White Heat*? Being a tired young foreigner, he immediately glommed on the first group of lads speaking English he saw. Dave approached carefully, he had no prior experience with dice and had very little cash. He was weary of making a fool of himself or an enemy of someone else.

The table had delicately carved ornamental legs, with flowing fins and spindles as if a prize caught marlin was treading to keep it afloat. Dave, being a beginner wood worker was caught admiring the craftsmanship when someone barked at him from across the table. "Are ya in?"

A large man in a raw linen shirt had his eyes trained on Dave. He had a cigar in the ashtray in front of him with an idle drift of smoke trailing up into the merciless ceiling fan. His forearms showed a sinewy strength as he reached over and plucked up the cigar between his knuckles. His face, held in high relief against the overhead light, looked rough hewn from granite.

"Well?"

Dave stammered, "Uh, yea sure....well, truth be told, I'm not sure what you are playing." He felt foolish admitting that to such a hard crew and they didn't relent.

"He doesn't know? What are ya, you American? You sound American. How can an American not know? "

"No, not American, I'm Canadian," he responded.

“Ah well you know close enough, out here on Okinawa you might as well be American.”

He was invited to take a seat at the table and accepted a cigarette from the man next to him. The man seemed to be dressed for a tiki bar, with a Hawaiian patterned shirt, the first three buttons undone, producing a shock of white chest hair on his tanned, leathery skin. The men at the table chain smoked and drank Old Fashions, Dave was a skinny lightweight so he had to pace himself carefully. He had recovered from an emergency appendectomy just two years prior and had finally regained the lost weight. He had never had much interest in alcohol anyways, it made him loose and erratic.

Mr. Tommy Bahama next to him called a waiter over and ordered two drinks, he leaned over, opening his pits to let his musk hit Dave's nostrils. Dave put the cigarette between his teeth and patted his pockets for matches. Finding none he turned to his new compatriot for a fire—Mr Bahama took out a bronze plated zippo lighter and swung it open.

Dave took a deep drag and pushed the smoke out through his nostrils—he wasn't very good at drinking but he knew how to smoke. The bar was getting tighter and he needed a release. He leaned back and let the nicotine dance over his cortexes, finally relaxing he was able to take stock of what was in front of him.

The room was wide and dim, the ceiling bisected by gorgeous hardwood joists with all of the paneling notched around it, typical of Japanese woodworking. There was a ceiling fan with a light providing the top down atmosphere, pushing everyone's smoke around the room. There was a set of stairs at the far side of the room, cordoned off with shadows of figures cast on the paper door at the top.

The game being played was farkle, or dice ten thousand, or five thousand as his son would later learn it. He never had the chance to teach the game to his kids, they never did much family gambling and maybe he didn't want to have to recount where he learned the game himself. They were using these grubby little dice, cut from cow bone and yellowing. When he first picked them up they felt oddly heavy in his hand. The table was covered in a forest green felt and the dice made a pleasant thump against it.

Dave was a lousy gambler but had someone looking out for him that night. Maybe beginner's luck runs in the family, as his son would find out years later playing

the same game. It started with a couple of runs, catching a five here and there steadily building up towards ten thousand. It was later in the game when he caught fire and rattled off a couple of runs that he took control of the game and drew the notice of the boys lurking in the background. Everyone likes to watch a hot streak. Dollars were being thrown on the table as part of cryptic side-bets. The pot was growing. He felt the bone dice warming in his hand and threw knowing he had the cosmos behind him.

The game was over and Dave miraculously made a small bundle of American dollars meaning that he could join the fellas for dinner. Didn't much feel like he had a choice anyways.

"Come along Dave. The new champion can treat us to a round."

Tommy Bahama knocked back the remainder of his glass and stood up, everyone else did the same. They left the hotel bar and started down the street. Dave, drunk on luck and a bit wobbly from boozing on an empty stomach, stumbled behind the pack. Mercifully, the restaurant they were after wasn't far, as they entered there was a pleasant roar from behind the counter. Clearly he was with regulars. As soon as they had sat down Mr. Bahama was beckoned over to the far side of the room to join some men huddled quietly around a table. Dave noticed the man at the head of the table was missing a bit of his pinky. Must've been in the war, he thought dimly to himself.

Dave was too busy ravenously eating and getting wasted off Sake to notice any shifting demeanors in the men at the table as they each slowly got up, going over to that table to be briefed by the hard men missing digits. It was Tommy who broke the silence of eating, "Okay Davey we have someone we'd like you to meet." he said, "Might as well finish up your plate don't think we will be back here."

Dave flinched at the end of the sentence, *what does that mean?* He thought to himself. He finished eating and got up to join Bahama, everyone else remained in their seats. Dave was already striding over to the other table when he noticed he was alone. Tommy had sat back down and watched quietly. It was too late, he was standing at the table and had locked eyes with the man at the head of the table. The man had a square jaw and a buzz cut. He leaned back in his chair and scanned Dave up and down. The restaurant grew quiet as if in collaboration, they dared not interrupt what was about to happen. After a few eye-watering moments they stood up and grabbed Dave by the

arm. Pulling him forward, they shuffled him behind the counter and through the kitchen into the back. Dave caught a glimpse of his American pals on the way out and could've sworn he saw Tommy Bahama smile as he sparked his cigar again. He was pushed into a chair in the laneway behind the restaurant and into an interrogation position, flanked on all sides by this man and his goons.

"Your name is David?" a man dressed in a suit with a skinny black tie was acting as interpreter.

He nodded.

"You fought in the war?"

A chill crept down his spine. The war? What the fuck was he on about, can't he tell I'm only twenty?

Dave shook his head back and forth emphatically, who ever these men were after and for what reasons he hoped to never find out.

"No?"

He swallowed, and spoke hoarsely,

"No."

The interpreter looked puzzled at the buzzed man, and then back to Dave.

"Lift up your sleeve and show your right arm."

It was then that Dave finally understood the extent of his own naivety. He knew he was scuppered and that his only way out was an appeal to reason.

He obliged and showed them a naked arm, free from markings. This seemed sufficient enough evidence. They relaxed their grips but didn't let go. The buzzed man approached to inspect Dave up close; his breath stunk. He put his hand on Dave's shoulder. Their eyes met, Dave mustering the strength to maintain his gaze. He knew he was out of his depth and needed to project confidence if he wanted to make it home.

Their stare lingered a moment and with his passing of the final test Mr. Buzz sparked a cigarette and let out a belly laugh full of smoke. He turned and beckoned everyone back to the bar. The goons that flanked Dave gently scooped him up and pushed from behind, relieved they wouldn't have to perform any violence on anyone.

They came back into the bar through the kitchen, across the room Dave's new American friends barely concealed their shock, shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

Bahama, seemingly the most savvy, was the first to put on a face and welcome him back,

“Davey my boy you look thirsty!” He forced a smile.

Dave was now very reasonably terrified by everyone around him, his seemingly suburban dad crew of Americans were certainly aware of the violence around them, their cold steely-eyed smiles like sharks (sorry Sharks) operating amongst Dave’s guppies. He felt small, knowing the men around him at the table trying to buy him drinks were capable of these things. His mind slowly eased out of his hands and upwards through his eyes. He watched himself from above as he took a seat, dazed with a dry throat. *It’s true Mr. Bahama... I am parched*, he thought idly to himself. He was witness to himself accepting drinks from these guilty men. Paying their indulgences for just a half hour earlier condemning a young man to his fate.

Looking back it was wild Dave chose to stick around the bar. He must’ve figured it would do less psychic (and physical) damage to just get hammered with these people rather than fight the current of his situation and face their true wrath.

Dave stumbled out of the bar and onto the street, left blind for a moment from the clear sky’s sun.

“Shit”

It’s much later into the morning than he realized and he only has a limited amount of time left in the city. He must’ve dozed off on a bench. He could taste the alcohol at the back of his throat, he was profoundly hungover. Still rattled from the dice and dinner Dave was drawing a blank on what he had planned next. Was there ever any plan? As if faced with a sudden bout of transient global amnesia he was left interrogating his psyche for any information on his past. What did he come here to see? Such an arduous experience had left him a blank slate. He began walking back towards his hotel, afraid of running into any more Americans.

Waiting for the bus to the airport Dave was weary of having to recount the trip to his family and friends. He hadn’t seen any of the sights he had planned and his only interesting story from the trip was not a pleasant one. All this mulling over left him standing there with a dour look on his face as his bus was pulling up. The doors opened

and a group of GIs piled out. They took notice of Dave grilling them with his idle thoughts and one approached him.

“Say, is your name David?” a man with blonde hair of a similar age looked him up and down.

Dave was activated, he lied right away,

“No sir, it's John.” He was freaking out. *How did he know my name? Why did I address him as sir? What the fuck is going on?!*

“Oh okay. You just look an awful lot like someone I know.” The man looked a bit disappointed.

“I get that a lot, who's this David?” He needed to know who this phantom doppelganger was and why all these yanks knew him.

“Don't worry about him.” The man left it oddly curt and Dave was too tired to pursue. He got on the bus without a second glance.

* * *

1976

One evening Dave was sitting at his kitchen table doodling on the margins of his friend's copy of the New York Times. As he turned the page he noticed a familiar image, rendered in the same high contrast as the hotel's overhead light the night he met, Mr. Tommy Bahama. Apparently he's “*ex-CIA*”, whatever that means. Dave was too distracted by the jumpscare down the page. It was a photo of Mr. Buzzcut, the hard man in charge at that bar. Finally he had a name: Yoshio Kodama. He was a fixer, connected to organized crime and far-right ultranationalism. The article alleged that the two men were helping an American defense company called “*Lockheed*” secure contracts for planes through a series of bribes with Japanese government officials and heads of industry. It was all coming to light because of a Senate subcommittee led by Frank Church. *Good name*, he thought. Seems like they were grifting in a number of countries. Dave didn't ever have much of an interest in the army or planes or anything like that but his personal proximity to this news story excited him. He had a lot of research to do. He never did get any results, he never saw any news stories about any other Dave's in the

army, or in Japan, nor did he find any images of his long lost doppelganger. He wasn't any closer to the answer but felt a bit of relief and an occasional pang of fear now that he better understood the stakes.

Dave's brush with the clandestine left him not wanting to tell the story to anybody, and he wouldn't for 40 years*. Prescient today, it is a story of coming into close contact with the underworld, the threatening misidentification of someone capable of violence, and the deliberate misremembering that follows in order to preserve the psyche.

*His later recounting of these experiences helped me as a young man understand my dad's zero tolerance policy regarding tattoos, "Not until you're thirty five."

TABLE

A $\frac{3}{4}$ plywood tank – Matt was insistent that we keep the whole thing, not just the hardwood swing top lid. He had some great reverence for the object. He didn't realize how much of it was veneered material. If he lived in the city he'd have more say but this is really for the best. I don't think most people realize how much of their surroundings is veneered material. Tables are built with weights in the legs to simulate the physical qualities of something more luxurious. Mimicry in the wild and in the home. You can clad anything and claim anew. Now MDF has made its way into the zeitgeist on seemingly right wing health nut channels for its toxic off gassing qualities. People are worried about their built-in furniture and kitchen cabinets slowly killing them. What were once previously innocuous bits of infrastructure! There's already plenty of risk around us. Why make more to stress over? Anyways these aren't things the builders like to dwell on. After all, they are the ones doing the cutting and sanding.

Dad built his drafting table - way too strong - way too heavy, Mum thinks he was around 28 when he made it. I understand it, if you buy a full sheet of ply you are going to make use of the whole thing, storage is a premium, there is no sheet rack to forget about things in.

We emptied the contents out into different boxes, wrapped the smaller sculptures with bubbles and the larger ones with plastic fabric. Once everything is packed it will live in the tiny loft space in my mum's studio, documented and cataloged for consumption online. Artists leave legacies behind, having kids makes it a sure thing but even without a family you still leave a trail of good to shitty artwork behind for someone else to either have to archive or destroy. Makes for fun myth making, you can fib to your kids about grand projects that had to be left abandoned, massive paintings hanging on someone else's wall or in their storage. If you are prolific and live long enough you even get to forget about some of the work you have made. What a luxury that must be.

Now the drawers' vast depth made it easy for someone to forget something in. Of course there is a book's worth of projects I had heard about but never actually seen. The work at the back of the drawer was one, something I had just heard described by

my mum one time and then I forgot to follow up when catching him in a more lucid moment.

It was a scale model of a DaVinci flying machine, made from balsa wood: light and delicate. Not to his usual H0 trail model or dollarama baby doll scale. The work was crank operated but so fragile I dared not try it, that would have to wait. I was more worried about getting the dust off without harming the wings' thin fabric. I got a can of computer air, brought the work outside onto the balcony and delicately sprayed it clean. I sat it down on the table and angled it in the sunlight for a photograph. The brass pin that affixed the end of the crank handle glinted in the sunlight. A gust of wind lifted its wings and for a moment it appeared as if it was its own creature, priming for its first flight. I tested the strength of the balsa, worried that it was just tricking the viewer with the implication that it worked and was not really designed for actual use. I slowly turned the crank, careful of any resistance and watched as the mechanism clicked into action. With one full rotation of the crank the wings flapped up and down again. The action was surprisingly smooth. Operating with a satisfying continuity, its momentum was carrying one rotation into the next. I stood by and watched in awe as it slowly spent this impossible reserve of energy. *What DaVinci sketch did he base this off of?* I wondered how he built it, *was it really just balsa wood?* I wished I could consult him on it. Now that he's gone his works take on a new air of mystique around them without the author to explicitly describe his methods. Further research was required: I took the work back inside the safe containment of the studio to test it.

Placing the work on a stool in the middle of the room I began turning the crank, curious as to how much charge it could contain. This time it had a curious response: the crank retained the same delightful action but the wings didn't move. Instead a low revving began emitting in response. It was after the fourth or fifth turn of the handle when the sense of euphoria began to flood over me. It was a joy to turn, to hear the low callback of this invisible engine. To operate the carefully constructed wooden mechanism of the machine filled me with the same sense of childlike wonder I felt touching the bits of burnished brass sculptures at Science North. Surging with a renewed sense of priority, I had to help this object with what I had to offer: my energy. I charged the object, entering the pleasant dissociation of the flow state, meditating on

my Dad and his work, idly admiring his craftsmanship. After hitting a loose milestone of roughly one hundred rotations I knew it had enough juice and stopped.

The revving stopped and the wings began to slowly flap up and down, a whirring could be heard as the wings continued to pick up pace. The flying machine's wings were buzzing with an impossible speed, blurring to the eye. It lifted itself off of the stool's landing pad with a tentative lurch, immediately finding its comfort in the air. It rose to my eye level, as if to let some driver tip their hat, thanking me for the jump. I watched it zoom around the room like it was piloted by George Shrinks (2000). His spirit was revisiting his old studio and taking stock of personal effects. After a thorough examination it swooped out of the room up the stairs and back out of the balcony door. The flying contraption rose high into the open sky, higher and higher still until it was gone.

I wasn't worried, I knew I would see it again. My dad had given me a wonderful gift: he left me with a hand held wind-up ghost. Hidden among the many beautiful drawings and important pieces of paper he had tucked away little slivers of his spirit.



Fig.52 Dave Saunders, *Flying Machine*, 1998, Balsa Wood, Plexiglass, Paper, 10 x 12 x

Fig.53 Dave Saunders, *Ant Birds*, 2004, Graphite on Paper, 10 x 14".

ANTS

David (aka Dave) Saunders was born March 16th, 1946 to an austere family in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. His mother was harsh and his father avoidant, he had an older sister named Judy and a younger one named Lynne. He grew up in the west end of the city, near the Humber river in Bloor

West Village. He had a very active imagination, something that would turn out to be hereditary. His fond memories growing up were those of escape, getting away from his domineering mother to wander the river bank and watch the salmon run. Or escaping into novels at school. One day's escape proved to be more consequential.

It was hot, stinking hot in the middle of July, before the ubiquity of AC, Dave was sweating in the back yard shade after giving up on his little fan in his room. The light dappled through a willow's leaning shade, highlighting a small ant hill poking up underneath a crooked root's elbow. Dave was around 7 maybe, so he gleefully dropped into an army crawl and got right up close to watch the comings and goings. Close enough to have a couple of errant worker ants cross his hands, resting in the sand, and



provoking a response from a guard poking up and coming over. In a moment, Dave was small, saddled up next to the workers and terrified by their suddenly enormous scale. They were curious of their new onlooker but they had a job to do. The guard was now activated and scuttled over to greet the newly mini-Dave. The ant was chattering as it approached him. His newfound size didn't extend to language unfortunately. He had no idea if the critter was friendly and wasn't taking any chances so he ran towards it and dove between its legs and made that same army crawl underneath it towards the opening of the anthill. The guard turned quickly and snapped its mandibles at him, leaving Dave no other choice than to slide over the edge and plunge into the unknown.



Fig.54 Wiley Saunders, *Army Grass Formation*, 2024, Plastic Grass, Army Men, 4 x 9”.

Tumbling down into the colony Dave bashed against soccer ball sized grains of sand, disorienting him. His new scale seemed to offer the same protections as an ant albeit without the armor. He finally landed, stood up dazed and blind in the dark of the cavernous colony. Relying on his ears and hands he made his way to an opening of another corridor and with no other way to go, started into the unknown. As his eyes slowly adjusted he reached an opening, it was a large room full of bulbous, writhing white and brown shapes. He recognized them as ant eggs, larvae, and pupae from Science with Mr. Mandel earlier that week. He also recognized that if this room was packed with pupae, that meant that the Queen was close. He made his way between the juvenile ants, some darker, closer to life, others newly minted in their sacs. Sensing

some commotion on the other side of the room, he hid behind the closest pupa. The bleached bones of a worker ant slowly tanning in preparation for a life of labour. Across the cave a group of ants chattered in, they focused on a few pupae who seemed to be ready to go, their flesh matching tones. They split up and went to each newborn to offer assistance, they grabbed the legs in their mandibles and began the work of creaking them out from their budding position. It was incredible to witness the beginning of life taking the form of a nascar pit stop, or profound physio therapy. After helping them operate their appendages, the workers move quickly to operate on the next one until all blossoming workers are born. The miracle of life was unemotional, but Dave was transfixed in horror and awe with tears in his eyes. The slender dark bone limbs being cracked open for first use would go on to leave an indelible impression.

The new staff of workers got to work instinctually, leaving him alone in the hatchery; he had to escape before the next guard trained its mandibles on him again. He scurried through the only other opening in the room and made his way down the passage. It was longer and wider than the one previous, at the end Dave saw why. Looming larger than the others, with wings on her back and a large abdomen was the magnificent Queen in all of her splendor. She appeared to be resting, or at least wasn't reacting to Dave's presence. Peeking out from behind her hulking mass was what appeared to be a shimmering ray of daylight. At last! He would be free. He tiptoed up to the matriarch as quietly as he could. She stirred from her rest, her eyes peacefully drawing his into focus as he squeezed past. He froze. Her antennae worked up and down, taking in his pheromones. She was not bothered by him, merely curious, as if she understood how innocent and unintentional his presence was. His terror subsided as he realized she was more interested than hostile. She shifted slightly, giving Dave a bit more room to maneuver around her. As he passed her she reached one leg out and gently patted him on the butt as if to say, *"great job champ!"* as he exited the dug out. Dave was startled but proud he had somehow earned the Queen's respect. He turned and shot her a thumbs up as he wasn't sure how else to react. He walked towards the opening and up a soft incline out into a burst of sunlight. He was on the other side of the willow tree's roots from where he had entered. Now bathed in the Queen's admiration,

none of the other ants bothered Dave as he ambled over the crook of a root and settled himself into the comfort of a clover leaf. He had a quiet confidence now that he was an ant.

He awoke in his bed the following morning, confused with his surroundings and size. Back to normal! He was relieved to be able to eat hamburgers again but somehow there was this gnawing feeling, one that he would not understand for many years. “They always seemed to know where they were going, and if they didn’t they sure put on a good, convincing face.”

Their might impressed him too no doubt, years later as a young gymnast beginning to grow into his body he admired their lifting ability. Later still, as a sick gymnast taken down by a “*profound*” case of appendicitis, Dave again admired ants on the window sill of his bedroom for the orderly society that they manage to create.

He yearned to return to his hill.



Fig.55 Dave Saunders, *Garden Ants*, 1991, Sand, Plexiglass, 12" diameter, 7" height.

"Was he an animal if music could captivate him so?"

Franz Kafka, Metamorphosis

(Kafka)



Fig.56 Dave Saunders, *Death Is Homeless*, 2005, Oil Pastel and Charcoal on Canvas, 36 x 36".

"Remember

death is hidden with love,

and death is homeless"

(D.Saunders)

SKULL CABINET

1992

Dave had wonderful luck one day and discovered a dead raccoon's head cleanly severed from its roadkill corpse. "What a score!" he thought. He scooped the head up and plopped it in a bag, his son Matt was watching disgustedly from the sidewalk. Now back at home he had to get to it quickly before his wife Kat got home from work and saw what was happening. He filled their biggest pot with water, added a little salt for flavour and set the burner on high. Dave made sure to keep Matt occupied in the backyard by burying some of his toys in the sand and pointing at an ant hill.

"What is that smell?!?!?"

It was too late, she was home from work already.

The freshly boiled skull was a bleached paper white, the prize after an arduous journey of the senses. Kat didn't share this same reverence.

"What the fuck Dave?!"

She never swore, this was a rare reaction befitting a major transgression.

The room was filled with the potent stench of boiled death. Matt was in the backyard blissfully unaware of just how stinky things had gotten inside, to him this was all a bit of zany fun. Dave's kids weren't to be afraid of the stereotypically macabre, he was a bit liberal renting at Blockbuster, traumatizing me with *Beetlejuice* (1988) in the process. Most important of all, he had been amassing a collection of skulls, skeletons and skeleton paraphernalia that he kept in the "Skull Cabinet", placed centrestage in the living room.



Fig.57 Dave Saunders, *The Skull Cabinet*, 1990-Ongoing, Found Objects, 30 x 38 x 10".

Early exposure to this coupled with my mum's recent Relic projects are responsible for the early iterations of art box or vessel making. My dad's penchant for skull merch made for easy gift giving: every christmas or birthday you could count on him getting a couple bones, a sugar skull, and a carving tool from Lee Valley.

The skull cabinet was thrilling to me as a kid. Equal parts fascinating, equal parts terrifying, I was captivated. When it moved to the second floor hallway I could see a sliver of it from my bedroom while my dad putzed about in the studio every night. There was this partially degraded rubber hand puppet of a red devil, not a skull but its face had

been eaten away enough that I guess it made the cut. It hung from a bit of fishing line and would wobble in the wind like he was laughing. When it wobbled in my direction sometimes I would catch its eye and get startled. Trial by fire for a young boy with an overactive imagination. It reached a point that when it was my bedtime I'd sneak over and turn the devil's face inwards towards the rest of the skulls so that I didn't have to interact with it. My dad would smile to himself when he noticed.

* * *

Dave had made a habit of collecting skulls and so had researched bone preservation to find the methods best suited for a DIYer living in a small apartment with a toddler. He knew boiling to be a fine technique for bleaching the bones brighter and had always wanted to try it for himself but seldom had the opportunity to do so. So he pounced and now was paying for his mistakes.

"Why can't you just bury it like the others?" Katherine could not understand her husband. Dave had been burying different bones and carcasses in their backyard to clean the remains. You leave them buried for roughly six months then dig them up for a final cleaning process of soaking, scrubbing, and bleaching.

"Sorry honey I thought you weren't going to be home for a while! I opened the windows to air out the house before you returned and Matt's just playing in the backyard." Dave pleaded his case but didn't make much headway. "Is he going to end up digging up any bones in the backyard?" She was halfway kidding. She began to crack a smile, the absurdity of it was not hard to find funny, though she was still frustrated by her bewildering partner.

2016

It was my first week in Montreal living with A-Stew and Scout, we had already begun the ambitious project of starting a garden in the backyard. After clearing brush and moving paver stones finally we were able to start turning up the soil. I dug my

trowel into a firm patch of dark, wet soil and flipped up a clump of dirt. As always I was scanning, hoping to find a spot of treasure. I shifted focus to the next patch and noticed a little flash of red peeking out from the freshly overturned earth. I turned the pile over and was given the same startle from childhood bedtime: face to face with this devil. *It must've been a popular toy*, I thought dimly to myself. This one still had all of its face though, *can't be the same one, can it?* I was in denial, *How could this toy make its way here? It's at my parents' house in Toronto pinned to the front of the Skull Cabinet.* It couldn't be possible, I knew it was the same object but this time unaltered. I too understood that I had a part to play next.

To help a fish along its journey means moving it from one pond to a bigger one (don't move fish between peoples' ponds, you will get a fine). I had to move this creature to a bigger pond. I wrapped the Devil in an old shirt and took him up the block to the train tracks. The earth along the tracks was packed down hard and dry. Finding a good spot would mean a bit of rooting around. I settled on a nice open patch between vines and a pile of spare railway spikes. The tracks are an appropriate spot for a gestation period. I figured that when the face degraded just the right amount, the devil could hop his train back home.



Fig.58 Devilman, Toy, 3
½ x 4”.

Fig.59 Temporary Passport,
Issuing Authority: BERLIN.

Good friends get mad at each other.

September 11th, maybe it was
the 12th.

My friend Dave and I had our
passports stolen earlier in the
week for being trusting
dumbass anglos.

Lost the hand-bound leather

carrying case that my father made: holding my passport and maybe a little cash. I still haven't forgiven myself for that, my dad took that thing all over in 1968 when he toured Europe and Asia. Dave lost his brand new camera, we scoured garbage cans all around Mitte for the bags. *Maybe he chucked my dads leather after taking the passport,* I hoped. Nightmarishly stressful. Now heading to the embassy that is inexplicably only open until noon. We managed to charm Nina, our contact who begrudgingly fast tracked our snazzy white temporary passports only because she was about to go on vacation. She made a point to stress that, then gave us one last loving reprimand for being dumbasses on our way out the door. It was perfect timing to be legal once again for a rave that night.

Dry overcast air loomed - it was the fall of 2017. We walked over to Berlinische Galerie, licking our wounds. The exterior shares a similar municipal sensibility with a



hospital or a public school. Going in blind, we were woefully ignorant of Ed and Nancy Keinholz's *The Art Show*. We got there on a random weekday and to our surprise the gallery was full of people having a party! Such luck getting an invite to the eternal party, and with Dave as my hot date to boot. The guests were a lovely hang, completely preoccupied with themselves but friendly nonetheless. Like a pleasant undead. We got some great photos together:



Fig.60 Ed and Nancy Keinholz, *The Art Show*, 1963-1977 at Berlinische Galerie, 2017.



Fig.61 My friend Dave's not pleased with this one.



Fig.62 We got on really well.

They're dressed to the nines, Dave is more partial to their style than myself. He purchased a lot of Zappa yesterday at the flea market. Obviously these groovy attendees of the art show are more his speed.

"They talk!" I exclaimed. Thrilling to press the button embedded in their chests like a display at the science centre.

"I can't make out a fucking thing they are saying though." Dave laughed. We made sure to go round and press every single button.

Suddenly we became the soberer friend trying to parse what these party animals were trying to tell us. Everyone told ambient tales from the same party, or the same group of parties from 1963-1977 when the Kienholz's were making it. There was a warmth to the sound, like listening to an old flick trying to explain what works we were looking at or what the latest gossip could be. One of them was an asshole even, he and Dave almost came to blows. The simulated socializing was unnerving. I was feeling pensive, the party goers were characters of a scene in my mind, a nostalgia for something I hadn't experienced. It reminded me of my parents, who in turn reminded me of a passage from a Philip Larkin poem,

*"Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,"*
(Larkin)

My mum and dad love Larkin, they would always quote the first stanza of This Be The Verse (Larkin, *High Windows*, 1974) growing up, I found it comforting to know they were just as bewildered as I was. There is a bewilderment in Berlin, maybe I'm reeling because I just got robbed but there is a sense of stasis in the city. The unresolved fusion of two states, let alone the profound lingering guilt, leads to this uniquely German neurosis. The neurosis manifests itself in a robust art scene though so who am I to judge?

“They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.”

(Larkin)

The city remains famously two-faced, buildings on the east side are maybe more my speed with their repeating rows of Khrushchevki. Taking after my dad I have always liked to draw big blocks of buildings with many little repeating windows. They make good panels, neatly arranged for a group show. We love the sprayers in the city, its scene thrives on their avant garde crews and out of towners who know to make time for the pilgrimage if nearby. Everyone gets loose here. We had hoped to paint but were wary after dealing with austere Berlin police so we settled for just a few nights.

The streets are filled with these enamel platings, over the windows of the grocery store an apple is emblazoned in bespoke letters by street master SPAIR. Written next to his nice new silver straight-letter outlined in navy blue is the phrase,

“BODYLESS MASHINE MENTAL FIGHTING”.

I adored this fluid painted language; most sprayers are far too self-conscious to write helpful little didactics next to their work. Walking around Kreuzberg for more SPAIR writings I was lucky to find one more piece across the canal under the metro station,

“STILL HERE MANIAC” and “Radical Fantazy Realizer 2014”.

I could’ve sworn a faint smell was emanating from these things, or maybe I was just hungover and thinking about them melting too much. Where the Kienholz’s smelled nostalgic, these made me uneasy, they were like supersized cuts of butter. They had such an enormous presence it started to make me feel ill. But I really loved them. Beuys has mythical status at my alma mater NSCAD and he did not disappoint. One of the largest was buckled together with a black steel bracket keeping it from collapsing on its own weight. Zombies lurking one after another. Being in the room with the slabs of

tallow or the Kienholz's party, you feel they are all bad actors. Just waiting for the audience to slip up so they can silently mock then descend and tear them limb from limb. The works made me nervous, the fat somehow being rendered sentient when in that gang of its own. They are menacing, with the buckled Frankenstein as the de facto leader. We left the museum checking our pockets worried we had just been mugged.

Outside the Hamburger Bahnhof by the canal the Polizei boat that seemed to be eyeing us suddenly decided to spin around, spit a cloud of smoke and be off. After experiencing the show it felt like the city was full of faceless observers: Stasi officers around the corner, prepping to whisk us away and wrap us in fat and felt. That didn't deter us from exploring, not much use looking these sort of places up on the internet we had to go out and climb fences. We wanted to find these SAEIO paintings we had seen online. A hot ticket, they were sacrilegiously sprayed inside of a graveyard: it looked abandoned:



Fig.63 Unknown, *Saeio's Sacrilege*, 2017.

The moss-covered gravestones, leaning at odd angles, gave the impression of something barely clinging to life, as if even death had begun to rot away.

Dave and I wandered aimlessly through the rows of weathered stones, our footsteps muffled by the overgrown grass. We didn't speak much, our friendship having settled into a comfortable silence over the trip. We had been close – we had taken this vacation to rekindle things: but there was something necessary about these moments where we shared long, aimless walks, discussions of art and planning street installation. Maybe it was a recognition of something within each other, something vague and ineffable, that had endured despite everything. "Do you ever think about... what comes next?" Dave asked suddenly, his voice distant, like someone who had just pulled himself out of a long trance. I looked at him, his face tired. "Honestly, since my seizure, no," I replied, "Not really."

We kept walking, the day was growing dim, the sky turning a washed-out grey, as if the world itself were losing interest. The cemetery was silent, save for the occasional creak of branches and the soft rustling of leaves. We passed a particularly old gravestone, its inscription worn away by time, and something caught my eye—a dark, wet patch behind the stone. At first, I thought it was just the dampness of the earth, but as we drew closer, I saw it—a giant toad, the size of a man, its bulging eyes fixed on us with an almost unnatural calm. Beside it, a small cluster of tadpoles wriggled in the wet ground, their tiny bodies flickering in the dim light.

Dave and I stood frozen for a moment, our gazes locked on the toad, which did not flinch.

"I suppose this is it," Dave murmured after a long pause, his voice barely audible.

"We're just waiting." I nodded. My heart felt strangely at peace, the weight of everything leaving. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, my body began to relax. I closed my eyes, and for a moment, there was only the sound of the wind, the soft fluttering of leaves, and the quiet croak of the toad. And then, like an exhalation, I was gone.

Dave stood there for a long time, staring at the gravestone.



Fig.64 Wiley Saunders, *Felt Canyon*, 2024, Felt on Plywood, 12 x 8 x 3 ½”.



Fig.65 Wiley Saunders, *You!*, 2021, Fabric over Plywood, 6 x 6”.

RESEARCH DEBRIS

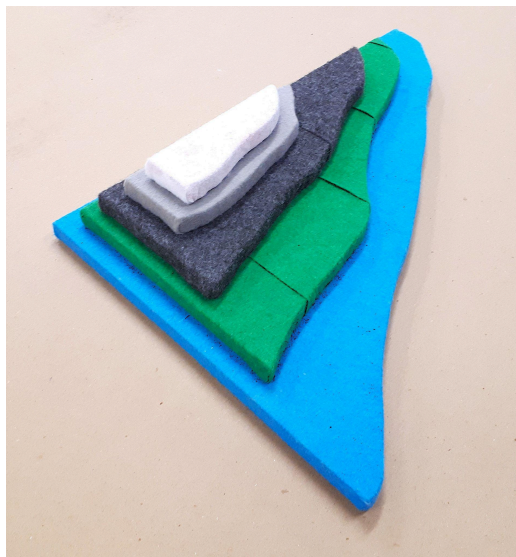


Fig.66 Wiley Saunders, *Topography*, 2025, Felt on Plywood, 20 x 15 x 4”.

I made some soft, lighter works to balance out the weight of the project. I like working with felt, a nostalgic reminder of childhood making in kindergarten and daycare activities.



Fig.67 Wiley Saunders, *Waiting...for you!*, 2026, Fabric over Plywood, 12 x 14 x 4”.

I have been holding on to this fabric for years waiting for the chance to include it in a work. Its bizarre, ominous text makes me chuckle so I've wanted to share it with people.



Fig.68 Section of fence that inspired *Lil Fence*, 2025.

Always love these odd bits of architecture that are left over post-renovation and somehow stick around over the years.

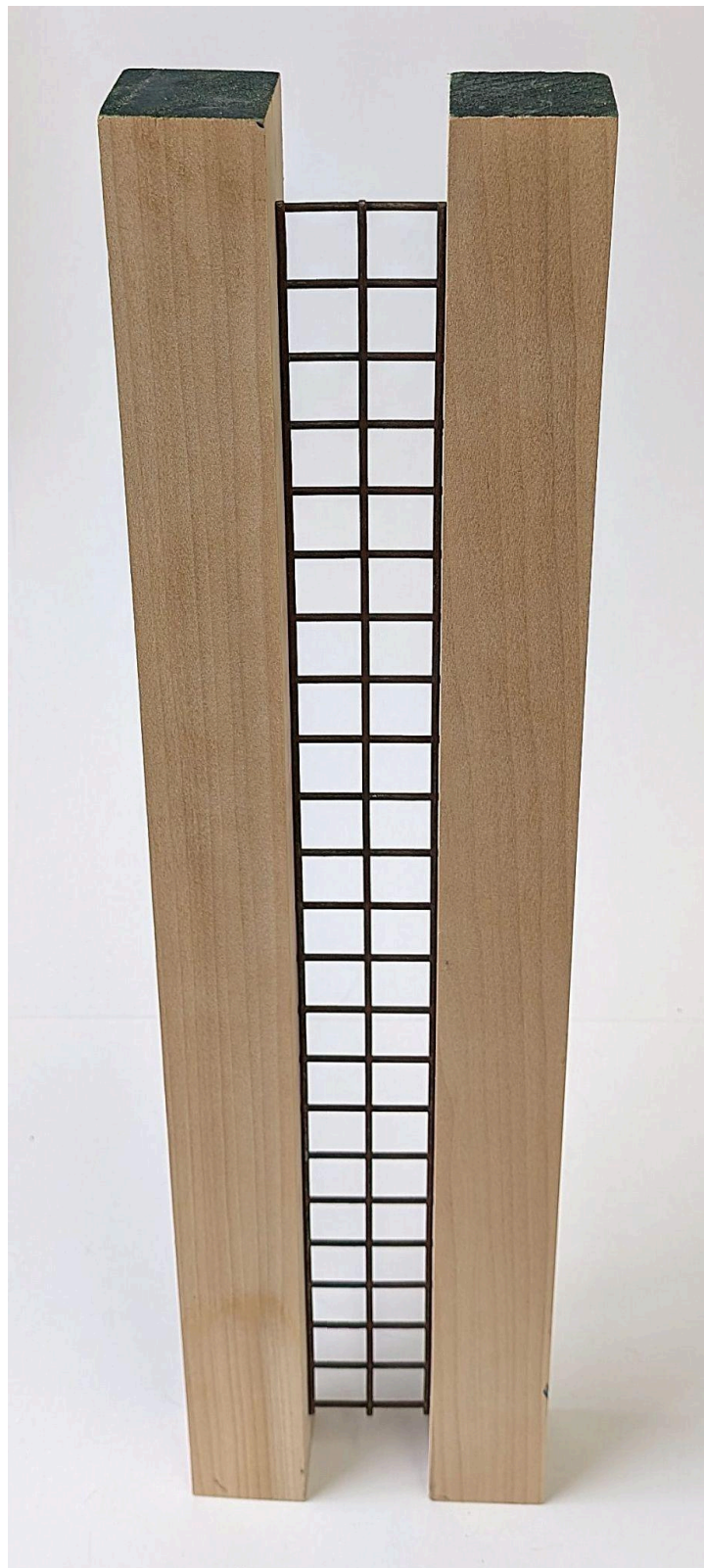


Fig.69 Wiley Saunders, *Lil Fence*, 2025, Poplar and Metal Grid, 6 x 2 x 25".

Guard post that does nothing.



Fig.70 Wiley Saunders, *San Fresco Canyon*, 2025, Fresco on Plywood, 10 ½ x 6 x 3 ¾”.

This was an attempt to work with Fresco after seeing every church in Florence and Rome with my Mum last spring hunting relics. I wanted to make a “stagey” backdrop kind of landscape, with exaggerated features and a bit of kitsch. Like an old scenic painter.

TOYS/MINIATURES



Fig.71 Wiley Saunders, *Nakatomi Air Force Base*, 2025, White Oak, Walnut, Plywood and Toys, $4 \frac{5}{8} \times 10 \frac{3}{8} \times 4 \frac{3}{4}$ ".

Interested in the idiosyncratic progression of scale between the sandbag barrier vs. the jet vs. the building.



Fig.72 Wiley Saunders, *Green Castle*, 2023, Canvas, Wood, Woodblock Toy, 6 X 6 X 2”.

I was thrilled I could combine the materials of painting with a prefabricated painting by serendipitously lining them up. It reminded me of industrial monolithic buildings, mainly the Battersea Power Station in London.



Fig.73 Wiley Saunders, *Facility*, 2025, Plaster, MDF, Spray paint, Toy, Zip Systems Sheathing, 6 X 5 X 4”.

Sprayed MDF has a powerful solid colour. This one was set up with a Silicon Valley corporate campus in mind, hence the cheeky plaster brain.



Fig.74 Wiley Saunders, *Dad House*, 2025, Toys, Fir, Plywood and Zip System Sheathing, 4 ½ x 4 x 3 ½”.

My dad made this lovely plexiglass house years ago. I wanted to build a habitat surrounding and populate it.

Fig.75 Wiley Saunders, *Refinery detail*, 2024, White Oak, Walnut, Plywood, Toys, 2 X 3 X 2 ½”.

Miniatures let you build like architecture in a dream: as you turn your head they are always in flux, with decisions that don't make any sense in the real world.





Fig.76 Wiley Saunders, *Compound*, 2025-26, Assorted Hardwoods, Plywood, Toys, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$.

I want all kinds of emotional responses, the works have no issues being unsettling. Building a box, erecting walls, and populating it makes you Warden, which I find a bit unsettling.



Fig.77 Wiley Saunders, *Log Cabin Rib Cage*, 2025, Fir, 9 ½ x 7 x 15".
Some ideas are more successful than others.



Fig.78 Wiley Saunders, *Frog*, 2025, Oil on Canvas with LSL Frame, 9 x 9"

"Frog gave his head a slight shake. 'I know. It's OK. Don't worry. You were a great help to me in my fight, Mr. Katagiri:' 'I was?'

'Yes, you were. You did a great job in your dreams. That's what made it possible for me to fight Worm to the finish. I have you to thank for my victory:'

'I don't get it,' Katagiri said. 'I was unconscious the whole time. They were feeding me intravenously. I don't remember doing anything in my dreams:'

'That's fine, Mr. Katagiri. It's better that you don't remember. The whole terrible fight occurred in the area of imagination. That is the precise location of our battlefield. It is there that we experience our victories and our defeats. Each and every one of us is a being of limited duration: all of us eventually go down to defeat. But as Ernest Hemingway saw clearly, the ultimate value of our lives is decided not by how we win but by how we lose. You and I together, Mr. Katagiri, were able to prevent the annihilation of Tokyo. We saved a hundred and fifty thousand people from the jaws of death. No one realizes it, but that is what we accomplished.'" - Super-Frog Saves Tokyo, Haruki Murakami
(Murakami 75-95)



Fig.79 Kat Palmer (Mum), *Melee on the Beach*, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 28 x 24".

"If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went." - Will Rogers. (D.Saunders)



Fig.80 Wiley Saunders, *Dog*, 2025, Oil on Canvas with LSL Frame, 8 x 8".

bark up the wrong tree.

all trees have bark.

(D.Saunders)



Fig.81 *Boat* reference image, Toronto, 2026.

Great flash of colour from this brave boat in the middle of winter.



Fig.82 *Podstawko, Altar Wedge Tomb*, County Cork, Ireland, 2023.

Like a dog with a bone.

I'll be with you till the last dog dies.

(D.Saunders)



Fig.83 Chris O., *Sparnberg*, GDR, 1980's.

Interested in the walled city/fortress/barrier acting as a large scale box.



Fig.84 Lia Jatdoeva, *Horses eating carrots*, Russia, 2018.

I loved the surreal quality of this image and had to include it. Like Horse Heaven.



Fig.85 The Farm, *Relaxing Video of Dogs Running in Big Open Field* screenshot, Australia, 2021.

This balanced out the work, starting light in the top corner and making the way through heavier content; it needed the bottom right to bring the mood back up. Now there's a Horse Heaven and Dog Heaven respectively.



Fig.86 Wiley Saunders, *Red Panels in progress*, 2026, Oil and Paint marker on Canvas, 16 x 16”.

These works are trying to capture the oscillation of dreams, to erect a platform in the middle of the sea without anchor nor mooring. By offering someone a window into my mind and experiences, I am curious to see if it is possible to share in this sense of *deja-vu*.

CONCLUSION



Fig.87 Wiley Saunders, *Oak Vortex*, 2023, White Oak, 6" diameter.

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88. Fig.88 Wiley Saunders, *Screens 2*, 2026, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24". (Back Page)



Fig.88 Wiley Saunders, *Screens 2*, 2026, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24".