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Dustin Farnsworth's BY SUSIE J. SILBERT REDEMPTIVE VISION

For someone just over 30, Dustin Farnsworth has seen a lot and intuited much more. Raised in Lansing, Michigan, he witnessed firsthand the plight wrought by the collapse of the auto industry. What the rest of the country only read about in the paper and watched on the news, he saw etched in the faces and recorded in the bodies of his family, friends and neighbors, and in the decimated expanses of their neighborhoods. Houses left abandoned. Families uprooted. Backs bent and heads hung in sadness and desperation. And, in the aftermath, an empty landscape and spiritual vacuum as an entire region was left to grapple with the abrupt end to an entrenched way of life.

At the time, Farnsworth was halfway through a degree in furniture design and printmaking at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He had already begun experimenting with the expressive power of sculpture before the collapse, but the tidal wave of emotion it brought caused him to redouble his efforts. Using the skills of his hands, which, like those around him, had until recently been

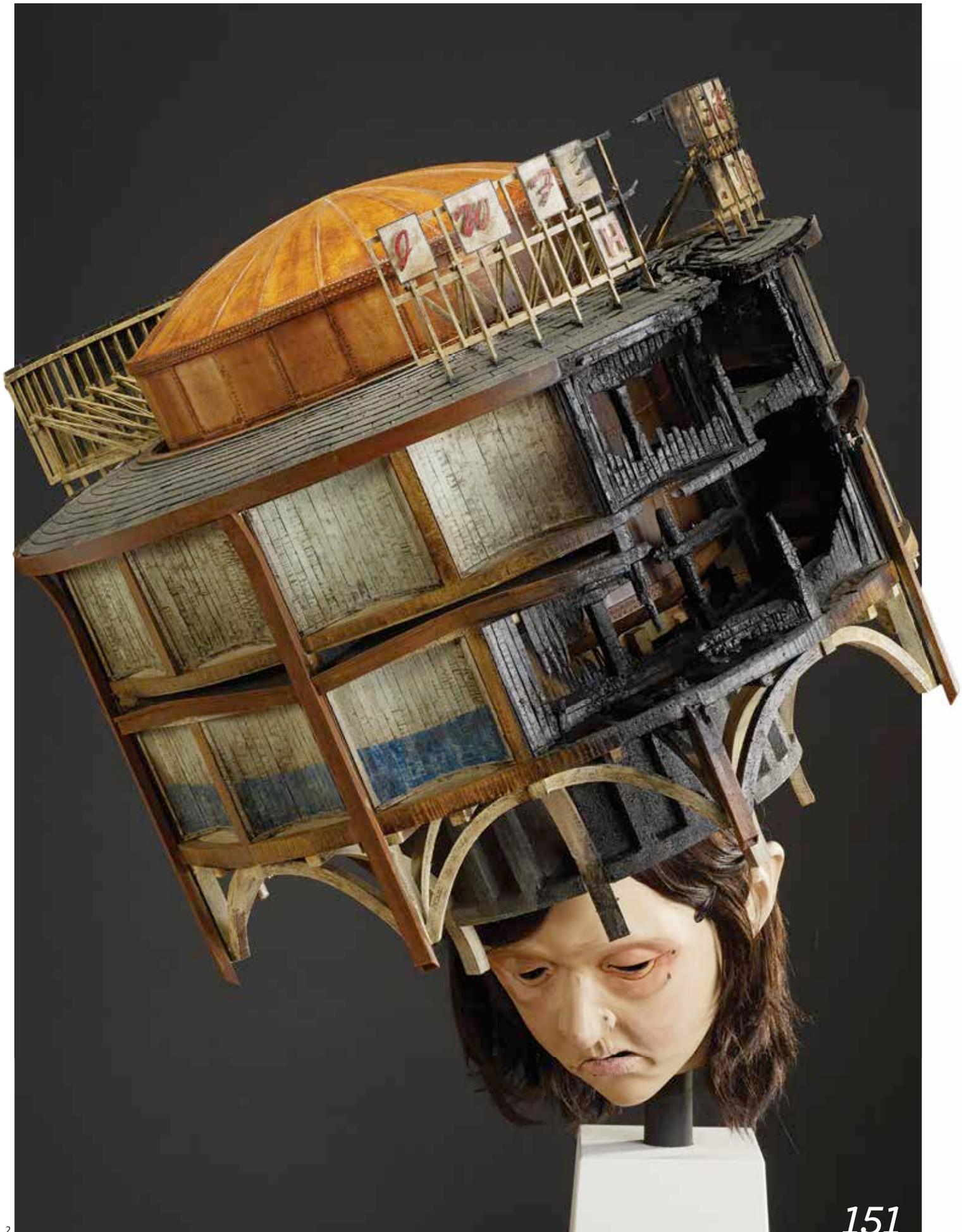
ensconced in learning a trade, he began carving wooden figures to document the grief that blanketed his surroundings.

A guileful material, wood is almost human in its ability to endure. Soft, warm and alive, it is shaped by its experience. Like flesh, it incorporates scars into its structure and bears the marks of its life on its surface. Perhaps for this reason, wood has been used by cultures from time immemorial to create effigies representing their greatest hopes and deepest fears. From Congolese *nkisi* statues to polychrome depictions of Catholic saints, wood is an intercessory material used to navigate forces beyond human control. Farnsworth's sculptures act in this tradition.

Drenched in pathos, their heads bowed beneath the weight of elaborate headdresses that twist and arch like the abstract remains of a burnt bentwood boat or that topple with the specificity of a broken-down industrial relic, Farnsworth's torsos and busts depict characters in agony. Their faces grimace in pain, and their eyes are either shut in despondency, opened wide in fear or

1
A More Sophisticated Form of Chaos, basswood, poplar, steel, resin, human hair, various polychrome, 34 x 24 x 28". Photo by Steve Mann.

2
Promontory, pine, basswood, poplar, plywood, veneer, bendable plywood, steel, luan, human hair, various polychrome, 42 x 42 x 44". Photo by Steve Mann.





3

hollowed out altogether. To be sure, this is decidedly dark subject matter, but the exemplary construction and execution of his works make it clear Farnsworth's intention is not simply to shock or unsettle. Instead, in their highly detailed structures and burnished surfaces, they appear as venerations of loss and destruction, as if to say that only by fully indulging the bleakness of these emotions is there any chance of a brighter future.

Farnsworth sculpts his pieces with the single-minded focus of a devotee. So thorough is the illusion in works like *The Understood Weight*, 2013, that they recall the immersive environments of films by Wes Anderson or Federico Fellini. In this piece, a sullen, freckled boy, his chapped lips downturned in distress, winces under a water tower so old and off-kilter, it looks like it is about to collapse at any moment, despite scaffolding and cables meant to sustain it. Its speckled paint surface, as if layers have been added over years and weathered through, and the individual rivets that outline each panel across the roof, are so carefully and conscientiously done that viewers are inculcated into Farnsworth's way of seeing without even noticing they are being converted.

Promontory, *Succession*, and *The Haunt*, 2013 to

2014, each continue this bimodal format, pairing a highly individualized figure with an equally specific, if fantastic, piece of infrastructure. Groaning under the weight of these antiquated silos and storage tanks, gamely persevering through their obvious suffering, Farnsworth's pieces appear as patron saints of late capitalism: Our Lady of Abandoned Grain Elevators, Our Lady of Perpetual Timing Belts. Taken together, they become stations in a *via dolorosa* intended to expiate the sins of unsustainable growth and fallen commerce, each piece chronicling a different excruciating phase of crisis on the path to an anticipated salvation.

Most recently, Farnsworth has begun loosening the associations in his works, replacing direct references to existing building types with elaborate abstract forms that recall the underlying structure of systems, from the architectural to the digital. In *A More Sophisticated Form of Chaos*, 2014, the first in this format, a giant curving framework adorns a woman's head like a cross between an outsize Elizabethan-ruff and a feat of aeronautical engineering. Mouth open, eyes wide, she seems stunned by the sudden influx of information. *The King Is Dead* and *The Order of Lords*, both 2015, blur the separation between headdress and head, opening

3
The Bones Of, poplar, bendable plywood, plywood, veneer, basswood, various fabrics, various polychrome, 40 x 31 x 40". Photo by Phil Haralam. The collection of the Cameron Art Museum.

4
The King is Dead, basswood, poplar, various polychrome, 18 x 20 x 56". Photo by Steve Mann.

5
Succession, basswood, poplar, steel, bending plywood, human hair, various polychrome, 22 x 20 x 44". Photo by Steve Mann.



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the pieces to further interpretation. With faces half painted and partially obscured, and bearing organically arcing skeletal constructions, these figures appear caught in an incantatory moment, captured in the process of spiritual communication.

Today, from his current appointment as an Honorary Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Farnsworth is scaling up and diversifying his work in anticipation of two solo exhibitions slated for 2016. In that year, the Huntsville Museum of Art in Huntsville, Alabama, and the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina, will host the charismatic seduction of Farnsworth's pieces. Like a soothing balm relieving the ache of an ailing nation, Farnsworth's sculptures—laboriously constructed feats of craftsmanship—offer themselves like a redemptive vision aimed at healing the wounds of lost labor. ●

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