

encounters

Dustin Farnsworth



# encounters



## Dustin Farnsworth

June 26 — October 30, 2016

on cover: *The Order of Lords*  
(detail), 2015  
basswood, poplar, charcoal,  
various polychrome,  
55 x 22 x 30 inches

left: *Succession*, 2014  
basswood, poplar, steel, bending  
plywood, human hair, various  
polychrome,  
22 x 20 x 44 inches

opposite: *Promontory*, 2013  
pine, basswood, poplar, plywood,  
vener, bendable plywood, steel, luan,  
human hair, various polychrome  
42 x 42 x 44 inches

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# Into the Rabbit Hole:

History, Character and Narrative  
in the **Works** of

## Dustin Farnsworth

*In Dustin Farnsworth's thought-provoking sculptures, contemporary saints and martyrs enact strange rituals and suffer private pain; their afflictions often manifested as elaborately rendered structures seen in varying states of decay. Obsessively detailed and often diminutively scaled, the works skillfully fuse aspects of history, character and narrative to propel the viewer into deep psychological terrain. As Farnsworth aptly observes,*

*"I create lush, emotionally charged rabbit holes to fall into and explore."*

*I recently spoke with the artist in Madison, Wisconsin, where he is currently completing a residency focused on creating new works for the upcoming exhibition.*

— Peter J. Baldaia  
Director of Curatorial Affairs  
Huntsville Museum of Art



**Peter Baldaia:** I see your work as a unique blend of precise form and evocative storytelling. What turned you on to creating the kind of art that you make?

**Dustin Farnsworth:** Being around creative parents provided a foundation. I drew a lot when I was young, and became interested in woodworking in high school through my involvement in theater. I was in charge of set building, but also ran lights and acted onstage. I loved every aspect of it. Theater still plays an important role in how I approach my artmaking.

**PB:** I read that your father was a woodworker who made marionettes.

**DF:** My dad worked in construction. When we were kids, he'd occasionally make us gifts, and one Christmas he made me a marionette. I still have it — it's inspired several of my pieces.

**PB:** Didn't you major in woodworking in college?

**DF:** Yes, woodworking and functional art at Kendall College of Art and Design. I was technically enrolled in the furniture program. My mentor Brent Skidmore, who ran the program, saw that I was more interested in making sculpture so he let me follow that thread. When Brent left Kendall during my third year, there was a tenuous relationship with the new faculty because I wasn't focused on furniture making. At that point I needed to appease them so that I could graduate on time, and so I began producing furniture. But in the evenings I continued to work on sculpture.

Toward the end of school I began to think, "The Hell with this — I'm the one in debt for this education; I'll make what I'm passionate about!" A couple of breakthrough pieces resulted. One of them included marionettes and was

the first figurative piece I completed. It was a large kinetic sculpture, with two characters trapped in a boat that tossed violently upon wooden waves as the user activated the Sisyphian drama. I titled it *The Myth of Life and Truth of Love*. The construction of the figures was based on the marionette that my Dad had made me as a child.

**PB:** Where did you go from here?

**DF:** I secured a yearlong residency at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. While there I worked exclusively on figurative pieces, including *I Am Man: Revenge*, which was also kinetic. It references a theater stage upon which a character is poised standing at the edge of a dock, holding a cinderblock tied to his ankle in one hand, and a spear in the other. When the viewer cranks the piece, waves lap against the dock as the figure stares into the dark waters. I really enjoy kinetic works and allowing the audience to play a role in advancing the story. But I also realize that they can feel gimmicky, so this was the last one I created.

Later in my residency, I began to build sculptures that expanded on the idea of the theater and the stage. I thought of these works as vivid cinematic stills. The first one I completed is titled *Saint Ann's Theatre*. I built a second one at Arrowmont, and have plans to eventually build more.

*above: The Myth of Life and Truth of Love, 2010*  
mild steel, poplar, bendable plywood, MDF, hardware, fabric, 72 x 30 x 46 inches

*opposite: I Am Man: Revenge, 2012*  
basswood, poplar, pine, tree branches, mahogany, MDF, mild steel, aluminum, plywood, fabrics, stain, lacquer, kiln brick, rope, steel screen, HDPE, elastic, hardware, various polycoating, 22 x 18 x 34 inches, Collection of Sandy Berlin





“The character flirts with a decision, and wears a look of terror on his face. The viewer is made to understand the weight of this decisive instant.”

**PB:** There’s something thematically bleak about *I Am Man: Revenge* and *Saint Ann’s Theater*, both of which suggest death. But that feeling is mitigated somewhat by the diminished scale of the works, which gives them the storybook quality of a *Grimm’s Fairy Tale*. What’s going on here?

**DF:** One of the reasons that *I Am Man: Revenge* worked for me was that it balanced realistic attributes and exaggerated features. The scale of the head to the character’s body makes the piece more approachable, so that we might be able to place our feet where he stands to better understand him. *Revenge* came while I was considering terminal illness. The spear and brick are the lynchpins of the piece, symbolizing fight and flight. The character flirts with a decision, and wears a look of terror on his face. The viewer is made to understand the weight of this decisive instant.

*Saint Ann’s Theater* strips away the exaggeration further, both in figuration and architecture. In the piece, light floods through a hole in the roof of an abandoned theatre,

partially illuminating an old woman who sits atop a crate tying knots, ad infinitum. The props do not hold specific meaning, yet they are charged objects. There is a provocation of danger to the voyeur — the derelict building, a trap door, a knife resting across her knee, and the knots often misidentified by viewers as nooses. Viewers want to force connections between these props and finish the story — a very human compulsion. For me, this piece is about the mood of the character within that environment that tells the most interesting story.

*left: I Am Man: Revenge (detail), 2012*  
 basswood, poplar, pine, tree branches, mahogany, MDF, mild steel, aluminum, plywood, fabrics, stain, lacquer, kiln brick, rope, steel screen, HDPE, elastic, hardware, various polycoating, 22 x 18 x 34 inches, Collection of Sandy Berlin

*above: Saint Ann’s Theater (detail), 2012*  
 basswood, plywood, poplar, various fabrics, various polycoating, 36 x 28 x 28 inches

**PB:** This piece is very specifically detailed. Walk me through how it is conceptualized.

**DF:** I usually begin with sketches in my notebook. When I have something compelling, I'll start blueprinting the piece by creating a concise set of drawings — usually a side view, a top view, and a cross section. Then I move into the building phase. I'll spend days at the table saw, milling miniature stock. After I complete the basic construction, I'll work on adding details.

**PB:** Did you initially know exactly what you wanted inside this piece — who the figure onstage would be, and what story would be told?

**DF:** I usually have a clear idea of the person I'm carving and a narrative in mind, but it can evolve in the process. During my residency at the Penland School of Crafts, a couple of artists challenged me. We were talking about what type of artists we considered ourselves to be in the studio. I said that I was a ruthless dictator in my practice, because I have a firm idea of what I want and execute it almost exactly as imagined. They asked, "Where is the room for spontaneity — where do you allow for a new, unforeseen conversation to evolve?" I've subsequently spent time trying to be more conscious of that idea, and a lot of growth has happened.

**PB:** How much of your own ideas about the story do you want the works to convey to the audience?

**DF:** The narratives have never been accidental, and I would like to think they are deeply personal to humanity. I feel most successful when viewers can recognize aspects of themselves or the world in the works. My struggle is to present something that is recognizable but not completely defined — begging more questions than providing answers. That's the goal, and I constantly battle my natural inclination to provide too much information.

*right: Saint Ann's Theater, 2012  
basswood, plywood, poplar, various fabrics, various  
polycoating, 36 x 28 x 28 inches*

"My struggle is to present something that is recognizable but not completely defined — begging more questions than providing answers."





**PB:** The characters in the works we've discussed are very compelling. They're all older folks who appear to have come from an earlier time. They look almost medieval — like medieval saints or martyrs.

**DF:** I'm definitely interested in old carvings of saints and martyrs, particularly from the 12th, 16th, and 17th centuries. I am especially fascinated with the work of Juan Martínez Montañés, the Spanish sculptor who was known as *el Dios de la Madera* or "the God of Wood." I'm hoping to move into full-figure work in the future.

**PB:** What was the catalyst for creating your next series of works, which feature busts of individuals burdened by elaborate architectural structures?

**DF:** While I was constructing the theater-set pieces, I considered the theater as not only a physical space, but also a mental space for the characters situated within. I was additionally thinking about the lack of reverence for theater in this country today. The fact that our current popular entertainment is scriptless reality TV reminds me of the decline of the Roman Empire, when great theater fell out of vogue and was replaced with lowbrow coliseum spectacles. The characters that inhabit my theater-set pieces all represent an older generation. Transitioning into the newer works, I began thinking about younger people and what they've inherited from their parents, culture and society. That inheritance took the form of a contemporary headdress. It's a space that they haven't defined on their own and that they don't really fit into — it's just bestowed upon them at birth.

The first work I created in this series is titled *Heavy the Weight*. At the time, I was reading Jared Diamond's book *Collapse: How Societies Choose To Fail Or Succeed*, and questioning whether I might want children someday. I was thinking about the ominous weight of the future and what that holds, and how heavy that was on me when I was a kid. I was always worried about the future.

*left and detail opposite: Heavy the Weight, 2012  
poplar, bendable plywood, veneer, basswood, various  
fabrics, various polychrome, 34 x 10 x 10 inches,  
Collection of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

"I began thinking about younger people and what they've inherited from their parents, culture and society. That inheritance took the form of a contemporary headdress."





“People carry fear and pain in different places. While I can relate to bearing that weight in the heart, over the chest and in the stomach, I identify most with carrying that burden on the head.”

*left: Mauder (detail), 2012  
basswood, poplar, bendable  
plywood, cable, MDF, hair,  
various polychrome,  
54 x 27 x 18 inches,  
Collection of Gary Ferraro  
& Lorne Lassiter*

**PB:** Worried that the future might not be secure for you?

**DF:** Yes — I had a lot of fears when I was a child. As an adult I still worry that the future won't be secure for everyone. People carry fear and pain in different places. While I can relate to bearing that weight in the heart, over the chest and in the stomach, I identify most with carrying that burden on the head. In part it comes from my experience growing up in a family that dealt with mental health issues. Consequently, the youth in these pieces all carry the weight in this fashion.

**PB:** The character in *Heavy the Weight* supports a fortress-like structure strapped to its head like a helmet. It looks like the turret of a medieval castle.

**DF:** It's based on a 19th century water tower at the Kalamazoo State Hospital in Michigan, which was designed in a Gothic Revival style to complement the other buildings on the grounds. It's an amazing structure — I've never seen anything like it. It's one of those buildings that stands out from the rest and reminds you that you are looking at significant architecture.

**PB:** In this next piece, the burdensome structure all but envelops the protagonist's head.

**DF:** I titled it *Mauder*, which means incoherent babble. In conceptualizing the work, I looked at bridging structures as well as sounding radar from World War I — these gigantic steel or concrete ear accouterments that amplified the sound of enemy planes on the approach. With this work, I was thinking about being a child and not having a way to shut off the surrounding noise — about taking everything in and not having a chance to question or talk back.

Shortly after completing this piece, I obtained a three-year residency at the Penland School of Crafts. It afforded me the time to really focus on crafting a series of complex pieces. The first one I completed there, *Promontory*, features a head that can barely support the weight of a large architectural structure that's partially burned out.

“With this work, I was thinking about being a child and not having a way to shut off the surrounding noise — about taking everything in and not having a chance to question or talk back.”

opposite: *Mauder*, 2012  
basswood, poplar, bendable plywood, cable, MDF,  
hair, various polychrome, 54 x 27 x 18 inches,  
Collection of Gary Ferraro & Lorne Lassiter





**PB:** Tell me about the character's face. Like others in the series, it seems to project profound inner pain. Is it carved from wood?

**DF:** Yes, all of the faces in this series are carved from solid blocks of wood. The technique is similar to the way that a 16th century sculptor like Montañés would have worked. Limitations set by guilds during that time usually prevented sculptors from finishing their own pieces, so they formed partnerships with painters. I handle the painting in a similar manner to how a polychromer would have finished a face centuries ago. Many layers of white gesso are built up and sanded to establish a smooth finish. I'll subsequently layer a few dozen varying flesh tones that I'll wet sand to establish depth in the skin. It's a labor-intensive process.

**PB:** And the hair?

**DF:** I bought real hair sold by the strand for people constructing their own wigs. After building up the wig on the surface of the head, I cut and styled the hair. Within the series, I'm also playing with elements like teeth and eyes. This is apparent for example in the piece titled *The Haunt*. I'm still trying to figure out how far to push certain details, and when to pull back. At one point I remember putting eyelashes onto a face, and realizing that I'm not interested in doing Duane Hanson. But I had to try it to know where to draw the line.

*opposite: Promontory (detail), 2013*  
 pine, basswood, poplar, plywood, veneer, bendable plywood, steel, luan, human, hair, various polychrome, 42 x 42 x 44 inches

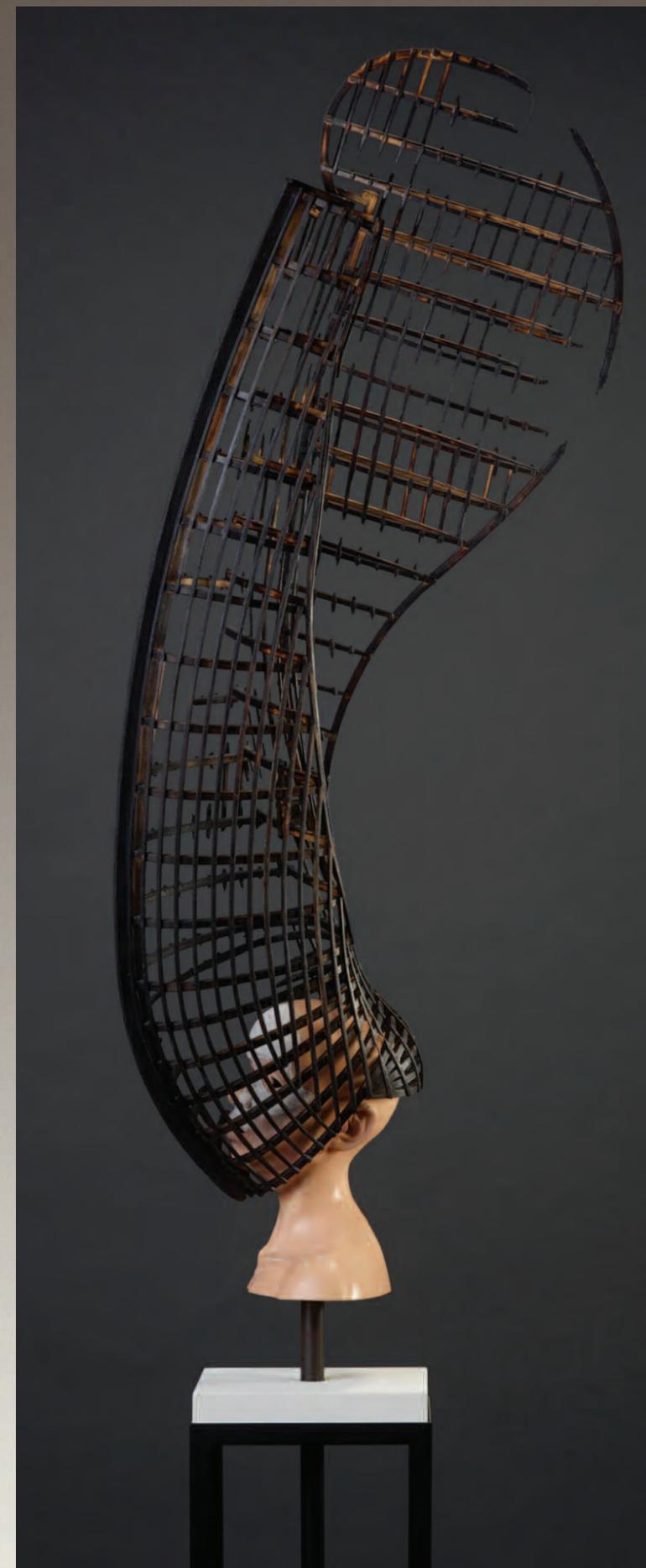
*above: The Haunt, 2014*  
 basswood, poplar, rope, steel, veneer, plywood, resin, various polychrome, 32 x 32 x 32 inches



**PB:** The most recent figurative pieces have hollow eyes and mouths.

**DF:** Yes. I was thinking of the faces as masks, which are more universal. I'm trying to captivate without using actual eyes — I think that's a good challenge. In these newer pieces I've also dropped some of the industrial architectural references. I'm currently focused on trying to create a different kind of emotion and drama in the works, using the same elements, but pared down. For instance, in *The King is Dead*, there's still a structure, but it's more suggestive. It's an elegant shape and form, with many possible visual references — a boat construction, the tail of an airplane, or a seedpod. It might be considered a cradle that supports the head, or it might be seen as a cage that constrains it.

*detail above, right and opposite:*  
*The King is Dead*, 2015  
basswood, poplar, various polychrome  
18 x 20 x 56 inches



"I'm currently focused on trying to create a different kind of emotion and drama in the works, using the same elements, but pared down."

**PB:** Tell me about these many mask-like heads I'm seeing on the table.

**DF:** During the last months of my residency at Penland, I began carving a series of relief heads in basswood. They started out as children's faces, and then I made many cuts to suggest the image of skulls.

**PB:** Did you use machine or hand tools in the carving?

**DF:** I first used an angle grinder to obtain the basic shapes, and then refined them with chisels and sandpaper. I was interested in suggesting violence where the skull is defined on the face. Some of them have subtle carvings, while others are more "hacked." I also used a carpet cutter to slice into some, and burned others. I wanted to produce a number of masks for an installation that would feel somewhere between overwhelming and underwhelming. I selected ten of the masks that I had carved to begin casting from. There are currently over 300 in the series, which I've titled *WAKE*.

**PB:** What is the casting medium?

**DF:** It's a water-soluble, non-toxic medium called Aquaresin. Within the ten variations of masks, each is finished uniquely. I paint black over the surface, and while the paint is still wet I use a cloth to remove it. The technique is similar to a printmaker inking and wiping an intaglio plate. Details begin to surface in sharp focus when the recesses are darkened, creating different mottled looks that help randomize the castings.

**PB:** You are currently building two new pieces for the upcoming exhibition.

**DF:** Yes, most of my residency here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been dedicated to working on them. One is a large form suggestive of a boat that will be suspended, based on the architecture of *The King Is Dead*. The other is a crown that has a scalloped, curvilinear design, loosely based on the architecture of Monona Terrace in downtown Madison, which was designed by



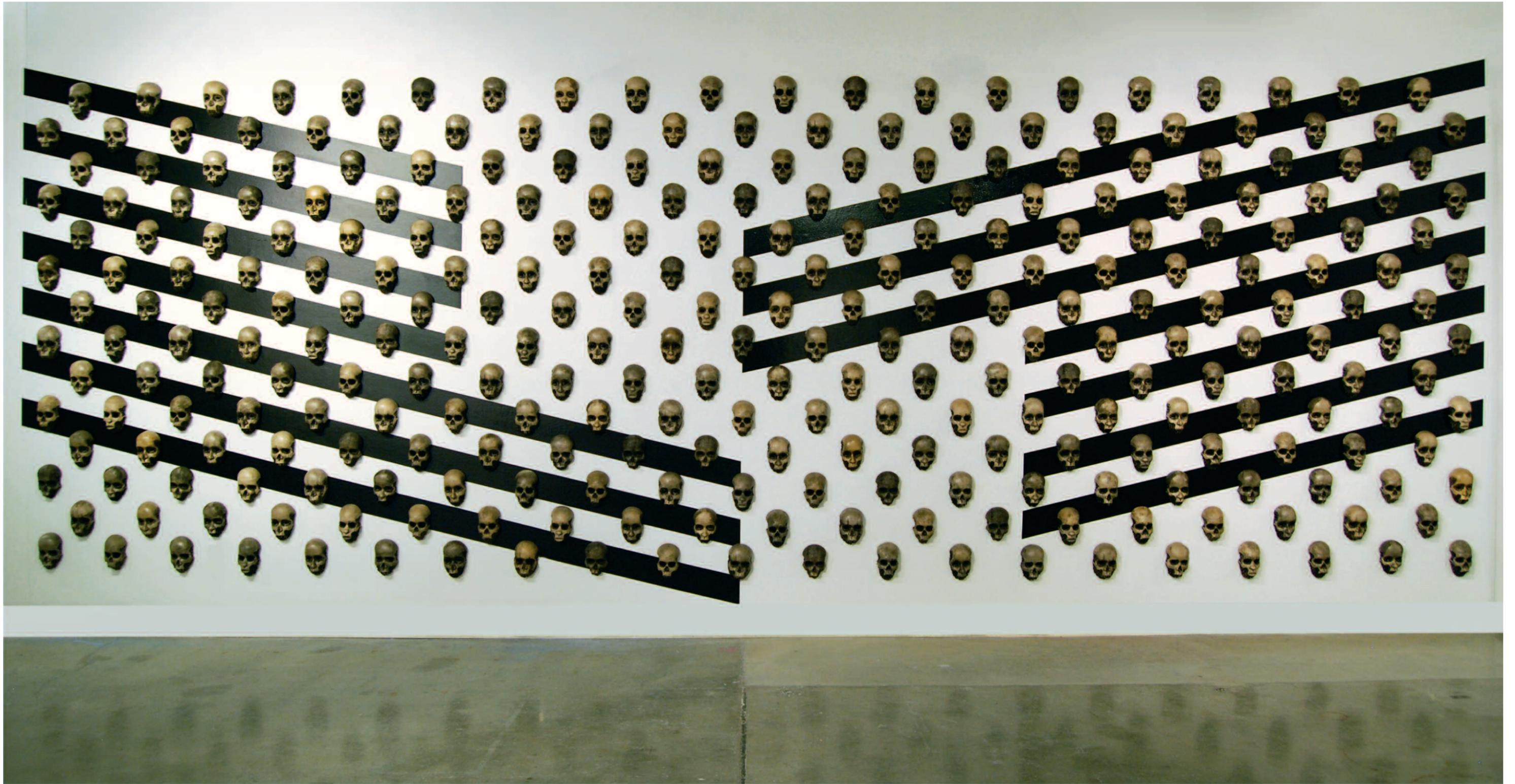
Frank Lloyd Wright. This piece will have a wood façade and I'm still debating whether the underside will be filled in or not. The interior structure will be rusted steel. The façade will initially be painted in a base color and then gilded and possibly covered in a layer of graphite. I plan to sand through the layers to reveal some of the gold accents. There may also be a bit of the base color peeking out here and there. I'm trying to let the piece evolve as I work.

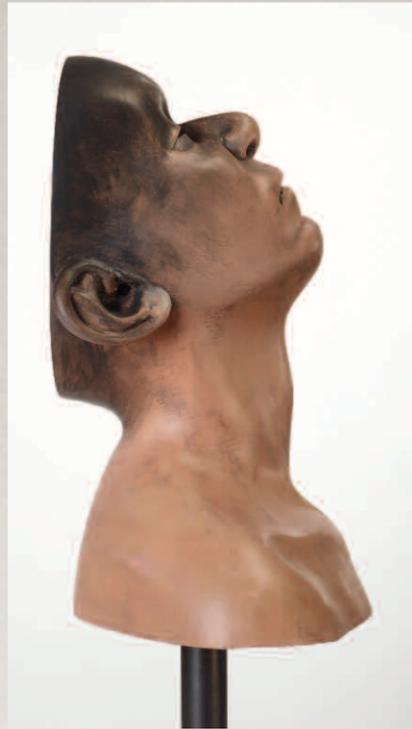
**PB:** How will it be displayed?

**DF:** I like the idea of it simply leaning against a wall — that would be unexpected for a crown. But we'll see.

*above and opposite details, and overleaf: Wake, 2016  
aquaresin, polychrome, vinyl, 26 x 9.5 feet*







# Dustin Farnsworth

left: *The Order of Lords* (detail),  
2015, basswood, poplar,  
charcoal, various polychrome,  
55 x 22 x 30 inches

back cover: *Succession* (detail),  
2014, basswood, poplar, steel,  
bending plywood, human hair,  
various polychrome,  
22 x 20 x 44 inches

- Taking Shape*, Houston Center, for Contemporary Craft, Houston, TX; The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Asheville, NC
- 2013 *Craft Forms*, Wayne Art Center Wayne, PA  
*FuN HoUse*, The University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, AR  
*Hard and Soft*, Greater Denton Arts Council, Denton, TX  
*Sculpture 2013*, Tryon Fine Arts Center, Tryon, NC  
*Speaking in Species*, Greenhill Arts Center, Greensboro, NC
- 2012 *Non-Blood Kin: Brothers — Skidmore, Farnsworth, Maddox*, Converse College, Spartanburg, SC  
*Stagecraft* (solo exhibition), Walters State Community College, Morristown, TN

## Honors & Awards

- 2016 *Grant Recipient*, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, Montreal, QC  
*Windgate Project Grant*, The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Asheville, NC
- 2015 *Windgate Resident/Honorary Fellow*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI
- 2014 *Artist Fellowship*, North Carolina Arts Council, Raleigh, NC
- 2012 *Artist-In-Residence*, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC (through 2015)
- 2010 *Best in Show*, OH+5: Ohio Border Biennial Exhibition, Dairy Arts Barn, Athens, OH  
*First Place*, Biennial Sculpture Exhibition, Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, MI

## Museum/University Collections

Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN  
University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, AR

For further information, visit [dustinfarnsworth.squarespace.com](http://dustinfarnsworth.squarespace.com)  
To see work in progress, visit [dustin\\_farnsworth on Instagram](#)

## Biography

Born in 1983, Lansing, Michigan  
Lives in Asheville, North Carolina and  
Montreal, Quebec

- 2010 BFA Woodworking/Printmaking, Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, Grand Rapids, MI

## Recent Exhibitions

- 2016 *Encounters: Dustin Farnsworth* (solo exhibition), Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL  
*The Bones Of: Sculptures by Dustin Farnsworth* (solo exhibition), Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC
- 2014 *Figurative Association: The Human Form*, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN  
*Legacy, Tradition, Reinvention*, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, NC  
*Narratives*, Blue Spiral One, Asheville, NC

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