

SCULPTOR

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into his neck. A chute aimed at the man's left eye is discharging rust or dried blood. The flow blinds his eye socket, snakes into his partially opened mouth, stains his teeth, and dribbles out again.

In "St. Ann's Theater," a wizened woman wearing a white wimple sits on a trunk on a stage that might have been a barn. She holds the end of a gold cord descending from a lush green velvet theater curtain. At her feet are the pile of golden loops she is fashioning from the cord. Or are they nooses?

Theatricality and autobiography

Farnsworth's theatrical, flamboyant imagery is autobiographical. He was raised in Lansing, Mich., where his father was a carpenter and his mother an occasional medical illustrator. He drew as a child and took art classes in school.

But his main youthful artistic outlet was high school theater. "That was the perfect mixture of art, storytelling, construction and acting," he said, "offering a huge amount for me to learn."

For college, he chose

art over theater and entered Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids as a drawing major. He quickly refocused on woodworking, functional art and printmaking after he was inspired by a freshman course in woodworking. The class was taught by Brent Skidmore, now the director of craft studies at UNC Asheville.

These concentrations, he said, "had a much higher physical demand and reminded me of both Lansing industry and of working with my father on carpentry projects around the home, while retaining the practice and interest in drawing."

Growing up, he spent time in Detroit. There he witnessed the deterioration of the auto industry. "My work explores the narrative that unfolds as industry leaves the communities built upon its promise," he said.

Like "The Haunt," a headdress titled "Succession" captures what Farnsworth calls "the vast abandon of the factories and communities that lie along the rest belt."

A woman's head with downcast eyes balances two silos connected by a metal bridge. Graffitied on the side of one of the silos are the words, "Kill the king." A rickety cat-



Wood sculptor Dustin Farnsworth working on one of his theater pieces in his Penland studio. COURTESY OF DUSTIN FARNSWORTH/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

walk on top has broken posts that might have supported a canopy. They may make you think of crucifixes and an executioner's gibbet.

'Showing up with his best'

Farnsworth, 30, first came to Western North Carolina in the summer of 2007 to help Skidmore, his Kendall mentor, fix up a home. He returned for summers while he finished at Kendall. He then received a Windgate Fellowship to relocate to Asheville to work as a studio assistant to Skid-

more and Saluda wood sculptor Stoney Lamar.

He met his future wife, Emily, in Saluda, where she was working at a restaurant owned by Lamar's wife the summer before graduate work in speech pathology in Boone.

"I believe her first words to me were, 'Would you like sweet tea or un-?'" Farnsworth recalls. "Both of my mentors will claim to be our matchmaker, but there wasn't any heavy lifting to do after we saw each other."

The couple live on the

campus of Penland School of Crafts, where Farnsworth is in the middle of a three-year residency.

Skidmore saw something special in Farnsworth in his first class. "He had a work ethic that's intense. In a creative field, you have to keep showing up," he said, "and he keeps showing up with his best. He was continually doing self-evaluation."

Charlotte art collector Lorne Lassiter and her husband Gary Ferraro bought a piece by Farnsworth at Penland's

annual benefit auction last August. She had been intrigued by one of the artist's theaters shown at the Greenhill Center for North Carolina Art in Greensboro, where she is a member of the board.

When she came to Penland for the auction, she said, "I spent some time rambling around Dustin's studio, so I had a feel for what he was working on. I think I was the only bidder, or one of two. That means I was lucky enough to have seen how talented he is before others figured it out."

Lassiter and Skidmore note that Farnsworth has both impeccable technical proficiency and great imaginative scope.

"What is exciting about Dustin's work," Lassiter said, "is that he has clearly honed his craft and then used that skill to push new ideas and boundaries."

Skidmore said Farnsworth is making work that is connected to his soul:

"He's getting right at the source of what makes him want to make things. He watched Michigan change drastically and he draws metaphors between the human condition and the industrial condition."

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