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## INTO THE HUMAN PSYCHE: Dustin Farnsworth's sculptures impress with rich emotion in 'The Bones Of' at CAM

MAR 15 • ART, ARTSY SMARTSY, FEATURE MAIN • NO COMMENTS ON INTO THE HUMAN PSYCHE: DUSTIN FARNSWORTH'S SCULPTURES IMPRESS WITH RICH EMOTION IN 'THE BONES OF' AT CAM

Dustin Farnsworth's work is loud and unafraid. He reaches into the human psyche and pulls out what people seem to ignore: The world is dying and generations to come will bear the burden. "His work engages the viewer in an inner dialogue on the drama of life and death, suffering and redemption," wrote Dr. Vibeke Olson, in her essay for "The Bones Of" exhibition, on display until June 5 at the Cameron Art Museum. It features sculptures with facial expressions rich in emotion, wearing headdresses and tackling darker aspects of the human struggle.



**THE KING IS DEAD:** Dustin Farnsworth's sculpture was made in 2015 out of basswood and poplar, as well as metal rods.   
 Courtesy of CAM

Influenced by several residencies he attended at the Penland School of Crafts in the mountains of North Carolina and Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee, Farnsworth has worked with sculptors Brent Skidmore and Stoney Lamar, and has been a part of over 35 exhibitions. Yet, his work was first taken to new heights at Ferris State University in Michigan, where he majored in woodworking with a minor in printmaking.



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"The Bones of: The Sculpture of Dustin Farnsworth" takes cultural, societal and familial problems to their raw center. Here, viewers decipher meaning and create their own interpretations. encore caught up with Farnsworth to plunge a little further into his art and his mind.

**encore (e): When I look at "The Order of Lords," there's something malevolent and peaceful about it. What does this piece mean to you—what inspired it?**

Dustin Farnsworth (DF): It's sometimes difficult to discuss a single piece from this body of work without recognizing the lineage of evolution. Of all of the pieces from this series, this one feels like it has the most resolve and calm. Tweaking the relationship/awareness between the figure and the headdress is something that holds my interest. Are the headdresses real or surreal? Do they exist outside of the characters' heads? Are they projections? Each character is affected differently by the architectures.

In both "The Haunt" and "The Understood Weight," the characters are physically tied to their respective architectures. In "A More Sophisticated Form of Chaos," the structure might appear to be lighter while the mood of the character is heavy. She seems almost too caught up in her own thoughts to be aware of the headdress.

"The Order of Lords" strikes a different sort of balance than the rest. The ash of the burnt structure coating the skin connects the two more finitely, while the gesture suggests peace or resolve. I was surprised that Dr. Vibeke Olson referred to the horns of this piece in her essay for the Cameron Art Museum as "satanic"—certainly some of that comes from her background in Medieval studies. I purposefully chose a position for the horns more related to steer and First Nation culture, and attempted to avoid imagery that might reference "evil" or pop cultural references to the devil in films such as Tim Curry's costuming in "Legend."

**e: The Wake Series is like looking at human souls. Can you tell me how this came about, the process, and way of thinking that brings something different and new with each one? Are they souls?**

DF: The skulls are carved first as human faces, much like the busts. Keeping the "flesh" of the face was purposeful, in effort to capture more of the soul than death. The origin is multifaceted. My work is very labor-intensive, each of the headdresses range from two to three months in construction working full time.

The mask represented my interests in a way similar to the larger pieces while fitting in with my interests in African, First Nation and Oceanic cultural artifacts. I did start off by making variations



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and collaborations with other artists—about 32 in all. The final iteration of the series was just recently mounted on exhibition for the first time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. 330 cast masks based on 10 original carvings, each with a unique finish and randomized on a wall by using Sudoku answer keys, hang as a single piece.

While working on the original, individual masks, news stories were circulating about the children abducted by militant Islamist group Boko Haram. I was shocked with how many people I was speaking with who had no idea about this news.

Similarly, when news of school shootings in the US took to the news, I noted people seemed numb and out of touch with what was happening. The idea began to formulate: a wall of hollow-eyed children's faces, made into skulls. It was important to tip-toe between over and underwhelming. I wanted to have a number that felt similar to how people seemed to be reacting to the news. Wake was used as a title for its duality. To hold vigil next to someone who has died and to emerge from a state of slumber.

**e: You say generations to come are being passed down a cultural, societal and familial weight. Where do you see that most currently?**

DF: I sometimes feel overwhelmed with what I feel like those weights are, and those thoughts arrived when I first started considering having children of my own. I believe every generation fears for the future of the next. I would say amongst the heaviest now are issues that will be unavoidable in our near future: water and food shortages, and sustainability for an exponentially growing world population.

We know the story about the ocean culture of the Easter Islands. They overpopulated the island and then used every last resource. Jared Diamond asks in his book "Collapse," what were they thinking when they cut down the last tree? We have a fragile and tenuous relationship with our tiny blue-green marble we inhabit.

Also, issues of social justice we can't seem to work past fast enough—those are the main weights that I feel and project.

**e: Why headdresses?**

DF: They were an evolution in the work. In thinking of the inheritance, as you said—the cultural, societal, and familial weights—I wanted a physical manifestation of this weight effecting the visage. In earlier pieces, specifically "Saint Ann's Theatre" and "The Bones Of," elderly characters

inhabited decayed, theatrical stages. Although it was left for the viewer to decide, and for my own purposes, those stages were placeholders for the character's mental space. When I began to focus on the younger generations, I was thinking about development of that space. Instead of being born into a fully functional mental space, it is developed over time, albeit with borrowed blueprints and ideas of those around us. We are born into an environment—our inheritance—and we are forced to adapt. I think of these figures in their informative years, when that space is percolating and growing.

I am also interested in rites of passage into adulthood and a lack of a unified ceremony as a melting pot of people in this country. From an art historical perspective, I am very influenced by African and oceanic art, particularly for these types of ceremonies. The headdress seemed like a perfect match—some people carry emotional weight in their stomach, others in their chests. For me that weight has been a burden on the mind. This format allowed me to think about what those weights were on the next generation. That inheritance manifests as aging industrial architecture. It satisfied the question, "What might the headdress of a youth today look like?"

**e: Your art deals with decay and darkness in the world—and it's poignant. What experiences in your life helped shape that view?**

There were many issues of mental health within my family, informing my youth. If someone tells you to put your hand in a pool of fish and they might bite a little, that first reach into the pool is going to be fraught with anxiety. Fear. The unknown. Once you've experienced that first nibble, the fear mellows. Growing up in that environment, I can recognize those things around me. The darkness doesn't scare me in the same way. I'm interested in those darker corners of our culture. The things we don't generally speak of.

**e: What's a memorable moment from one of your exhibitions or residencies?**

DF: Toward the end of my residency [at Penland] a young child walked up to a broken mask piece and asked if he could handle it. "Go for it," I replied. He held the piece up to his face and wandered into the crowd and I thought, "Goddammit—that's the piece. That's what I've been trying to do."

## **Details:**

**The Bones Of: Sculptures by Dustin Farnsworth**

**Hanging through June 5**

**Cameron Art Museum**

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