

working, ostensibly, toward freedom — in the “ontological” sense and in the Ruskinian notion of craft as an ennobled, transformative occupation in the industrial age.

Michel Foucault wrote about the shift from “carceral spectacle” — bodies in space — and “carceral culture.”⁵ Though the skill-driven methods through which Wilson’s work is created are analogue, even ancient, they speak to us no less forcefully of a contemporary reality with a disturbing veracity.

In this time, as beautiful as they are, it is impossible to view these bewildering and beguiling instruments of restraint without the words *I can’t breathe* — now recited as a rallying cry for justice — echoing in our minds. In the recently rephrased words of Frantz Fanon, “When we revolt it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.”⁶

⁵See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977.

⁶Fanon’s original words: “It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because ‘quite simply’ it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 226.

Jennifer-Navva Milliken is the artistic director for The Center for Art in Wood. Prior to her arrival at the center, she served as an embedded staff member in international art museums, as an independent curator, and as the founder of a cross-disciplinary art space. Her exhibitions have been presented in museums, art fairs, galleries and unconventional spaces, and her writings have been seen in exhibition catalogues, anthologies and publications that investigate and critique the intersecting fields of art, craft and design. With a global perspective, honed through a life split between two continents, she is driven by the extraordinary power of the arts to challenge preconceptions and bridge divides.



“Amisssyou,” 2020, walnut, silicone rubber, 9 x 3 x 20 inches, image courtesy of artist.

The Freedman Gallery at Albright College, named after former Albright trustee and alumna Doris Chanin Freedman, is located on the ground floor of the Center for the Arts. Since its inception, the gallery focuses primarily on contemporary, living, American artists and hosts approximately 10-12 exhibitions each year rotating in the Main Gallery, Project Space and Foyer Gallery. Freedman Gallery is located at 13th & Bern Streets, Reading, PA 19612. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 1-4 p.m. The gallery is closed on Mondays, holidays, breaks and summer. (See Albright.edu/calendar). During the COVID-19 pandemic, please call (610) 921-7541 or (610) 921-7715 to confirm gallery hours of operation.

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David J. Wilson: “Ontological Inebriation” exhibited in the Project Space, Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pa., August 18 - October 4, 2020.

Installation curated by David M. Tanner. Essay written by Jennifer-Navva Milliken.

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Cover Image: “Agit Guinol,” 2019, walnut, silicone rubber, 46 x 35 x 30 inches, image courtesy of artist.

DAVID J. WILSON

ONTOLOGICAL INEBRIATION

AUGUST 18 - OCTOBER 4



DAVID J. WILSON: ONTOLOGICAL INEBRIATION

By Jennifer-Navva Milliken

The arrangement of the seven works that comprise David J. Wilson’s “Ontological Inebriation” are meant to be accessed and experienced in physical space, at a time when the mere act of congregating in public is provocative. But the ideas and objects suggested by the artist refer to a different kind of containment of human bodies: imprisonment. The qualifying principle of imprisonment is the barrier erected between they who are imprisoned and they who are not, so the artist’s invitation to enter is charged with the crackle of transgression — an act that challenges the sacred space of the gallery.

Each of the works in the exhibition have an *unheimlich*¹ compulsion. We recognize buckles and straps, meticulously laminated, steam-bent and carved to scale in wood, sometimes accessorized with silicone rubber. They have the deceptive appearance of supple leather, like bridles and harnesses. But we have never seen headstalls or reins like these. The resemblance to horse tack is intentional and meant to evoke the role that cavalry plays in policing and crowd control: “Hermès” (2019), as well as “Amissyou and Post-History” (both from 2020), for example — were inspired by a series of extravagant children’s games, called “brain teasers,” produced in 2017 by the luxury company Hermès, to celebrate its origin as a maker of *groom attelé*. The absurdity of these opulent toys, juxtaposed with the awareness of growing disparities in American society and as the national prison population grew to 2.3 million, provided an opportunity for the artist to leverage an exhaustive body of research, a commitment to activism and his ability to create exquisite forms in wood to shed light on systemic injustices of the prison system.

On approach, aided by the display of the works at an approximate human height, it would be impossible to view them without seeing our own bodies in their restraints. The negative space beckons contemplation of the human form, and we insert ourselves inside this narrative. Who are these objects meant to restrain? Is it us? Who is capable of imagining such strange, anxious objects, and for what purpose?

¹For an explanation of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the “uncanny,” see his essay, “The Uncanny,” published in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–19): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 217–56.



“Ontological Inebriation,” 2020, walnut, silicone rubber, 4 x 32 x 14 inches, image courtesy of artist.

The works remind us of the uncertain space between justice and innocence. Wilson parallels this question further by trapezing between art and craft, concept and labor, suspect and enforcer, victim and witness. Craft is at once an autographic and allographic practice, in that it represents the distinct vision and hand of the maker, while it also relates to repetition and time passing. The question of time is deeply resonant in Wilson’s work, the result of painstaking processes and the maker’s facility with time-honored techniques. As Wilson describes it, he took on woodworking in his sculptural practice as a way of “slowing time”²; certainly, one characteristic of the material of wood is the documentation, in its very cells, of time. In the artist’s studio, however, *he* is the master of time, but the works that result from his labors suggest bodies from whom time has been taken.

Holding true to the character of the wood itself, Wilson sourced the walnut for these works from naturally felled trees growing near prisons. The work “Angola” (2018), which evokes a plastic zip tie handcuff, or perhaps the leather arm restraint on an electric chair³, recalls the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, or “Angola,” the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Black walnut is native to Louisiana, and the prison, which holds 6,300 inmates (as of 2015, nearly 80% of them are Black⁴), named its dormitories after local tree species. The Angola prison is renowned for its annual craft fairs, featuring objects and artworks made by inmates, while woodworking and furniture making is a feature of many state prison programs. The dialogue between Wilson, the artist on the “outside,” and the skilled inmates on the inside, offered a chance to directly address the “economies of labor” that Wilson has dedicated himself to researching through his work. I can think of no other place where the promise of craft as a path to self-determination is so intensely proffered than in the criminal justice system, and yet the question of the carceral system’s exploitation of labor is posed here, in the presentation of Wilson’s sculptures and their value in the gallery context, versus one-of-a-kind works in wood made by inmates, subject to physical restraint while

²In conversation with the artist, 31 July 2020.

³The Louisiana State Penitentiary used the electric chair for executions until 1991.

⁴Jeffrey Goldberg, “The End of the Line: Rehabilitation and Reform in Angola Penitentiary,” *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/a-look-inside-angola-prison/404377/.