

DAVID WILSON FINDS BEAUTY IN REPETITION

by John Lucas

There are certain local landmarks that appear with reliable regularity in David Wilson's paintings. The Burrard Street Bridge is one of them, and the illuminated signs of venerable theatres and cinemas—the Park and the Stanley among them—are also frequent flyers.

That's not to suggest Wilson is repeating himself. Indeed, each of his paintings is unique—even those based on the same subjects.

By way of explanation, Wilson cites a scene from director Wayne Wang's 1995 film *Smoke*, starring Harvey Keitel and William Hurt.

"Harvey Keitel has a smoke shop on the corner—I think it's in Brooklyn—and every morning at 8am he takes a photograph out the window," Wilson says via phone. "And he's showing this one character his photo collection, and the character's saying to him, 'This is the same photograph; they're all the same.'"

Wilson recounts that Keitel's character insists that they are all in fact different; each photo captures a distinct moment in time, recording changes in the seasons and various passersby.

"That always resonated with me: the idea of looking at the same doorway every day and how it can look different depending on the circumstances you find yourself in," the painter says. "And I return often to some of these places—like the theatres, especially, and the bridges—because there's sort of this collective experience that people have had over their lifetime in the city. Everyone looks at it differently, and they see different things, even in the same painting. And I have that myself. So I like to go back and look at them, and reiterate them so that it brings something new to that experience."

For his first solo exhibition in the city since 2020, Wilson has created a series of acrylic paintings depicting various views of Vancouver. A few of the usual suspects make an appearance: both *Look This Way* and *The Rocks of the Sea*, for example, offer aerial perspectives on the Burrard Street Bridge, looking north—albeit at very different times of day.

Much of Wilson's work shows a Vancouver where it is either actively raining or has just finished doing so.

This is a familiar sight to any Vancouverite, but Wilson notes that despite the city's reputation for precipitation, the weather doesn't always cooperate when he sets out to capture the photos that he uses for reference.

"I tend to go out and take photos in the rain a lot because that's where my interest lies—in the reflections on the ground, and just the way it changes everything, makes everything look so much brighter and cleaner," he notes. "But waiting for the rain to come sometimes, it's a long game, even in the winter-time. So many times I've gone out to take photographs and the rain stops just as I'm getting to where I want to be. It's not as easy as you might think in this city."

When the skies do open up, it makes for some spectacular imagery. In paintings such as *Take Me Away* and *Another Story*, what would otherwise be quotidian scenes of umbrella-toting pedestrians and passing cars are transformed by the presence of neon signs and streetlamps reflected in the shimmering surfaces of the rain-slicked roads.

Almost the entire lower half of *Passing Storm* (in which eagle-eyed locals will spot the intersection of West Fourth Avenue and Fir Street) is made up of such reflections, which Wilson has rendered in bold brushstrokes of yellow and red—representing headlights and taillights, respectively. This approach adds a dab of abstract expressionism to what is otherwise largely representational art.

"My images represent something concrete, but I do enjoy that abstract nature of the reflections in the streets, and even the buildings, too," Wilson says. "When you get up close and look at it, it's not as detailed as it might appear from a distance."

Look carefully at *Take Me Away* and you'll notice that the marquee of the Dunbar Theatre is advertising screenings of *Pollock*: actor-director Ed Harris's cinematic portrait of American art icon Jackson Pollock. That suggests Wilson has more than a passing interest in abstract painting,



David Wilson's *At the End*, 24 x 24 inches, acrylic on board.

which he confirms by revealing that he often contemplates doing an entire series of purely abstract works.

"It's definitely something that I want to spend some time working on, but what I'm doing right now absorbs so much of my time," he admits. "At some point I will. I have to carve out a series of months that I can actually work on something like that so I can create something that's worth looking at. It's not as easy as it might look to create an abstract painting. I've found in my work that the more simple it looks, the harder it is to achieve."

It should be fascinating to see what Wilson creates when he dives fully into abstraction. In the meantime, we have his paintings of Vancouver to appreciate.

"I'm more interested in the memory of a place rather than a literal depiction of it," says Wilson, who will sometimes include buildings that no longer exist or leave out ones that have popped up more recently. He also goes out of his way to render car models unidentifiable so that viewers are unable to tie any individual painting to a specific year.

"It puts where we live in a different light," Wilson says of his work. "I think that's largely what my work is about: to stop and take a second look at what we're looking at. I think throughout our lives we just miss so much because we're so busy, but I think this work will cause people who have not seen it before to say, 'I've never looked at it this way before.'" GS

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David Wilson's solo exhibition, *The Ground Beneath My Feet*, is at VisualSpace Gallery from October 12 to 28.