

‘In Times of Great Uncertainty, One Can Look to the Creatives...’

Painter David Wilson on his show ‘Close to Home,’ which captures a slippery Vancouver that never stops changing.



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Feels Like Only Yesterday (2020). Acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72".

Vancouver artist David Wilson’s new exhibition *Close to Home* (<https://www.kurbatoffgallery.com/exhibitions.html>) captures the city in a particularly curious moment. In the liminal period before theatres shuttered their doors and audiences went home, his paintings of wine-dark rain-soaked city streets take on a new level of poignancy.

In these paintings, the lights are still shining down on Granville Street and on the Burrard Street Bridge. People are making their way to and from events, wielding umbrellas and bulky winter coats. It’s a strange interstitial moment, before everything shifted. In light of the strange days yet to come, some precarious, delicate quality hangs in the balance.

While Wilson’s work has always contained a certain level of nostalgia for the Vancouver of old — be it corner stores or older model cars — the convergence of image and emotion takes on a new resonance in this pandemic moment. Although only a matter of months separates that previous

version of the city from the current iteration, arguably something has changed. Whether we'll return to this place remains to be seen.

Close to Home opens at the Kurbatoff Gallery in Vancouver and runs from Oct. 1 to 22. This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

The Tye: Your new show is about Vancouver in the before times, and there is a great deal of melancholy attached to these images. Do you feel like you're fashioning an elegy of sorts for the spirit of this place and a time that is now passed?

David Wilson: In some ways, yes, I do. It's in our nature to look back at the good times with a sense of longing and maybe even a chance to go back and relive those days. (Bruce Springsteen's ode to the Glory Days comes to mind.) At times while I painted this series, I couldn't help but entertain those feelings as well. The world felt so precariously positioned in the first weeks of the pandemic. And there was no way out of it. But for this series my mind and intention were set more upon looking back as a means to look forward.

The historian Yuval Noah Harari (<https://www.ynharari.com/>) is a fine example of someone who in three consecutive books meticulously documents our history, all the while projecting where that history points us as we move into the future. I think as we look back to where we were it can reveal the way forward, where we want to go. We can save what was and is good and leave what is not behind.



Come Back to Me (2020). Acrylic on canvas, 72" x 24".

Has this period of confinement been useful or not in making work? Has this winnowing down given you a greater sense of what is most critical to you as an artist?

Honestly, when the true nature of COVID-19 became apparent and the world felt like it was on fire, my desire to paint evaporated. As people were losing their jobs, their health and even their lives, painting seemed like a trivial act of self-indulgence.

After about six weeks of watching, listening and learning, my interest in creating art slowly returned. But it felt dangerous to do so. Walking into my studio felt risky, as each time I go to my studio the risk of exposure to the virus is real. But it is what I do, how I make a living, and I have a responsibility to get back to work and be productive.

I am typically on my own as artists generally work in seclusion in their studios. So, the notion of working while separated from the world outside isn't something new to me. But that extra layer of uncertainty most certainly factored into the creation of my work and what I thought about while I painted.

I do think this era has given me a renewed sense of awareness of those things that are truly important, the idea that life is indeed short and precious, and we would do well to make the most of the days we have left.

As Vancouver continues to change — older things disappearing and newer things taking their place — why are you drawn to revisit certain images, such as the Burrard Street Bridge?

Vancouver is a city of transition and change. Some things remain constant, like our proximity to the sea, the bridges that connect us to each other or certain architectural structures. But much changes over time, and I think perhaps I'm drawn to some of those familiar motifs, like many others who live here, as a sort of anchor that keeps us stable within a sea of change. But it can be disorienting at times.

We [Wilson and his family] used to live in Dunbar and moved to East Vancouver seven years ago. A few nights back I was driving down West 16th after the sun had set. It was a route I had driven many, many times before, and I was struck by how much the view of Vancouver's skyline had changed. It looked like a different city to me. It's exciting and disorienting at the same time. So, it feels like these familiar points of reference offer some stability in an ever-changing world which feels like a good thing at this point in our history.



A Path Through the Sea (2020). Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 72".

Much of your work deals with reflection, specifically how wet streets reflect different sources of light, be it headlights, venue marquees or streetlights. What is it about capturing this mobile, fluid, moving aspect of the city that you find most compelling?

I'm interested in the idea of mirroring — the reflections found in the rain act as a sort of mirror for me. When we look at ourselves in a mirror it's the reverse of what we are actually projecting. A reflected image is not necessarily an accurate representation of what we see and that idea of not knowing, the ambiguity around what we know about ourselves and the world we live in is compelling for me.

As your style has developed, are there areas that you would like to further explore (like pushing further into abstraction). Do you feel the pressure to stay within a certain subject area?

The notion of working abstract is of overwhelming interest to me. Abstract art knows no bounds and is entirely free expression. I incorporate some of that into the reflections you find in my work. Working within a representational style does restrict that sort of painterly approach, but I incorporate it into my work as much as I am able to.

At some point I feel the work will move in that direction, but I think I will always maintain a practice that includes both, as representational art speaks to me in a way abstract does not. I do not necessarily feel pressured to constantly work as I have in the past but doing so does provide me an income and paying my bills is a pretty big impetus to maintain that genre!

I keep hoping to find the time to explore other subjects in different ways, and at times I do, but I have a number of galleries that represent my current body of work and keeping them in good supply pretty much takes up all of my production time right now. But I plan to carve out some time here and there to work on new things and that's a very exciting prospect to me.

What is it about painting itself that you find most compelling and or challenging?

The most challenging aspect of being a painter is simply finding the time to do all the things I want to do. I've been doing this for over 25 years now and I feel like I have acquired a decent toolbox of knowledge to draw from to be creative. And I am constantly thinking in those terms even when I am not at the studio. So, the ideas keep flowing and my greatest frustration is not being able to execute all those ideas on paper or canvas.

I am very fortunate to be in such a position where I can consider this to be a problem. I've certainly worked hard at my profession over the years to make this a reality and have always relied upon a supportive family to do so. So, I'm entirely grateful that I can work within this profession as it's really all I have ever wanted to do. There has never been anything else.

What do you think artists can offer in a period of great uncertainty?

Artists, as a rule, always live with uncertainty, be it about the work (is it any good, do I like it, will anyone buy it?), financial independence of any sort, finding a place to create their work, community support. The list goes on. But in the midst of that uncertainty, artists are incredibly adept at finding ways to make things work so that they can continue on in their professions. It's not an easy life and it has many ups and, at times, painful downs.

But I believe artists (anyone within the arts, really) learns to embrace what it means to be human, to be a creative and to take what we have been given and to simply make more. During times of great uncertainty one can look to the creatives to see how they are rising up, both out of necessity and desire, and recognize that this is what all of humanity has always done. Art is simply a reflection of that process. ■