

Wilmer Wilson IV, “Faust in the City,” Reviewed

By **Kriston Capps** on Oct. 4, 2013



When Wilmer Wilson IV and his friends found themselves surrounded by police vehicles in Georgetown last month, it had to have crossed Wilson's mind that the encounter might add some context to his upcoming performance at Connorsmith.

Wilson and his friends, artists chukwumaa and E. Jane, were leaving the Georgetown waterfront after the final leg of a performance in which Wilson carried a stepladder across the city, from Marvin Gaye Park all the way to the water's edge. After the trio hopped into chukwumaa's Ford Explorer, police officers descended upon the SUV. As the artists soon learned, police were responding to a call from

someone who'd reported "suspicious-looking black man in an Army jacket" near the water. The date was Sept. 16, the same day Aaron Alexis opened fire at the Navy Yard. The caller apparently thought chukwumaa, who was wearing a camo jacket, matched a description of one of the shooting suspects.

Whatever the episode meant for the artists, it contributed the tense overtones in Wilson's show, "Faust in the City," a performance that addresses economic factors that overwhelmingly weigh on poor and primarily black Americans, in D.C. and across the country.

For the performance, Wilson collected hundreds of instant lottery tickets and, at the show's opening, scratched them off one by one. There's a sculptural component to much of the previous work from Wilson, a young artist who graduated from Howard University a year ago, and this show's no different. At Connersmith, Wilson erected a series of high step-ladders in a single gallery. Standing near the ceiling, he then scratched off ticket after ticket, until he got a hit—at which point he descended the ladder and then violently knocked it over. Then he repeated the process. ("He who strives on and lives to strive can earn redemption still" reads the end of the tragedy that Wilson obliquely references, Goethe's Faust.)

The crowd at the opening-night Connersmith performance contributed as much to the piece as the artist. Buzz and chatter came to a screeching halt when Wilson sent a ladder crashing to the ground. The piece represents both the way that this featherweight kind of gambling targets and undermines poorer communities, and how this perpetually predatory system—essentially an extraordinarily regressive state tax—operates unnoticed by people unaffected by it.

Scattered McDonald's French fries and lamps made from cans of Crisco cement the demographic on Wilson's mind, though these are unnecessary markers. It's the invisibility of the system itself that Wilson gives a face: his, but also those of the collectors and patrons who make a gallery scene a capital pursuit. It's more pointed than the historically oriented performance in which he covered himself head to toe with postage stamps and, like the slave Henry "Box" Brown, tried to mail himself to freedom.

Yet like that performance, with "Faust in the City," Wilson runs the risk of leaving too little for the viewer to do in terms of interpretation. Fortunately, he presents a series of untitled sculptures that read a little less plainly—pieces of board, for example, to which he's nailed scratch-off tickets. These add a final, and crucial, layer of context to the gallery show. Art objects, after all, are the most visible kind of conspicuous consumption. Take enough trips through Miami Art Basel—or, potentially, the (e)merge Art Fair in D.C. this weekend—and you might be convinced that there's something about art that belongs to the same category of vicious consumption Wilson has in mind.

The show is on view to Nov. 2 at Connersmith.

Photo by Tony Hitchcock/copyright Wilmer Wilson IV, courtesy Connersmith