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Ronna and Eric Hoffman
Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College

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Foreword

This past summer, Bill Will had a serendipitous experience while riding the train between Los Angeles and Portland. He was seated in the dining car, accompanied at the table by fellow passengers whom he did not previously know, when the conversation turned to “must see” sights in Portland. One of the passengers enthused about a public art piece, something that she always recommends to people visiting Portland: *Core Sample Time Line* (1998), the very site-specific, 280-foot-long geological boring sample that was extracted near the TriMet’s MAX underground light rail station at the Washington Park/Oregon Zoo stop. The core is housed in a contiguous glass tube, which is installed along a stone wall engraved with an annotated fifteen-million-year geologic and cultural history. *Core Sample Time Line* was created by Will, and it remains one of the most complex and compelling examples of public art anywhere. It is surely one of my favorite examples of public art because the experience of viewing *Core Sample Time Line* in person inculcates a sense of place that would otherwise be lost or absent. This is a sensibility that I find prevalent in Will’s work: by viewing his sculptures and installations, I am led to a more thoughtful space, one where contemplation and discourse cannot help but occur.

Will and I began to discuss *Bill Will: Fun House* several years ago when he had the idea of creating an interactive art experience based on a retrospective of his work from the past ten years. As a person who loves popular culture, roadside attractions, and amusement parks and their histories, Will envisioned an environment that would link his work together in a prescribed continuum that would direct the viewer to various foci and stances. As is typical of Will, he engaged his incandescent sense of humor and his love of tinkering with found objects to construct this domain. *Fun House* hooks the viewer with his inventions, which serve as decoys for expressing much deeper and more serious concerns about the social, political, and economic culture of the United States. Will likes to think of his work as an opportunity for people to talk to each other because they for a moment have something in common: strangers walking dogs at a park sharing the oddities of canine companionship or neighbors chatting over a shared fence. The common denominator for Will is the ubiquitous chuckle his art provokes from his viewers. Will’s sleights-of-hand are never didactic, but they are

profound. They offer the viewer a platform from which sincere deliberation can evolve.

Bill Will: Fun House is an enormously ambitious exhibition. Will himself has curated and designed every cubic foot of space in the Hoffman Gallery, using the summer as a period of on-site residency in which to realize this spectacle. Having taken years in planning and months in execution, the extravaganza required a veritable army of support.

Will’s *Fun House* was initially funded by the generosity of a Creative Heights Initiative grant from the Fred W. Fields Fund of the Oregon Community Foundation. This project grant provided the budget for Will to reconstruct and refine his vision, and it paid for the artist’s and his studio assistants’ time. That American art venues traditionally do not compensate the exhibiting artist whatsoever for presenting his/her intellectual property is a particularly critical issue in the case of highly specific installations. I am deeply grateful to the Fred W. Fields Fund and the Oregon Community Foundation for recognizing the need for this important shift in support and making funds available for complex enterprises such as *Fun House*.

The catalogue for *Bill Will: Fun House* was funded by a grant from The Ford Family Foundation, which magnanimously supports exhibition documentation as an integral part of Oregon’s art ecology. Thank you especially to Carol Dalu and Kandis Brewer Nunn, who shepherd applicants through the grant process with elegance and deep respect for Oregon’s artists. The Hoffman Gallery would not be able to produce exhibition catalogues without you, and I am deeply grateful.

Thank you as well to the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC), which awarded the Hoffman Gallery a project grant in support of *Bill Will: Fun House*. We are truly fortunate in Portland to have RACC’s enthusiastic endorsement of visual art programming.

Finally, of course, I thank Bill Will for bringing his vision to life at Lewis & Clark College. In this challenging political climate, perhaps a dose of humor is the one sure stepping stone to common ground.

Linda Tesner
Director





Us: House of Mirrors
2010
Mirrored acrylic
72 x 120 x 6 inches

Bill Will: Sculpture as a Roadside Attraction

Bill Will: Fun House is not a typical or traditional art-viewing experience. For starters, it's way more intentionally fun—and funny. Will's work is imbued with humor, a quality that is not particularly evident in most contemporary art. He calls humor his “Trojan horse” because it is often the first thing one notices about his work before the serious social and political content sneaks in. The circumspection of Will's deeper message leaves room for a typical Will sculpture to make one immediately laugh out loud. His work is quirky and kooky, often animated by herky-jerky motion. Sound and lighting are important components, too. And while *Fun House*—an ambitious installation that incorporates the entire 3,500 square feet of the Hoffman Gallery at Lewis & Clark College—is clearly art, it is in equal measure theater, a performance where Will is the director and the “actors” are his sculptures. Even the way in which the visitor experiences *Fun House*, strolling through the gallery on a prescribed pathway, is unusual. By directing his audience as well, Will is a moment maker, a creator who gently manipulates the viewer experience, staging specific contiguous “sightings” that purposely focus the gaze. The presence of the visitor becomes intrinsic to many sculptures as the lighting and kinetic movements are activated by motion detectors. Though *Bill Will: Fun House* is a collection of pieces, the entire installation comes together as a complete thought: it is more than the sum of its parts. Will is not merely exhibiting a retrospective review of his work from the past ten or so years, but orchestrating a multisensory, time-based encounter.

A lifelong tinkerer, Will grew up in Lakewood, Washington, a rural town on Puget Sound between Olympia and Tacoma. He lived across from a lake and close to a junkyard, which provided endless materials to be used imaginatively. He wanted to be an inventor. He tells anecdotes about how his father, uncle, and grandmother used to give him defunct appliances that he would break down in hands-on explorations to discern their inner workings. He even worked one night dismantling a thrill ride for a traveling amusement company—he brought his own wrench and was paid in cash—but had to decline the offer to travel with the show because he had to attend high school the next day.¹

Despite his early fascination with mechanical construction, when Will went to college at Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, he first studied architecture, then graphic design, then photography, then painting, in which he finally earned his degree. He describes his undergraduate experience as a process of fortuitously landing at the right place at the right time. His first drawing class was held in the turret of WSU's Edward R. Murrow Hall, a round room with tongue-and-groove floors, and it was taught by the eminent Pacific Northwest neo-expressionist figurative painter Gaylen Hansen. For Will, it was a watershed moment of recognition: he instinctively knew that he had taken the right fork in the road simply

by happenstance.² He also studied painting with Robert Sterling and photography with Francis Ho.

While Will's academic discipline officially was painting, it did not take long for him to break out of that orbit.³ For one thing, painting for Will was a solitary practice—a little too intense and even a bit depressing. Making *things*, in contrast, was *joyous*. After college and stints living in Japan and New York City, Will found himself in Portland, Oregon, where he serendipitously got involved in theater as a set designer, working with a number of experimental troupes. Drawing on his background in photography, he created slide dissolves and rear projections, contributions to offbeat productions that were in vogue during the late 1960s and early '70s. He met Bill Thomas, a former member of Andy Warhol's Factory, and Jack Eyerly, founder of the Portland chapter of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), a sixties group that developed collaborations between artists and engineers. Among Will's first Portland projects was the set, designed with a rear projection, for Thomas's original play *Burst* (1978). The play was produced in the basement of the now historic Long Goodbye, a small, mostly music venue at NW 10th and Everett (the Dead Kennedys performed there in 1979, then Black Flag in 1980). Will next became involved in a production of Alfred Jarry's absurdist 1896 play *Ubu Roi*, for which he made marionettes in collaboration with the visual artist Ken Butler.

By the 1980s, Will had been hired on an adjunct basis at the Oregon School of Art and Craft (now Oregon College of Art and Craft), where he taught photography and offered conceptual classes—like “Experiments in Time and Motion”—that expanded the school's nontraditional offerings. Eventually he segued into teaching foundation courses and studio classes in sculpture and installation art, retiring in 2016 after more than thirty years in the classroom. During these decades, Will also developed a reputation as a powerhouse in the arena of public art. To date, he has completed more than thirty public commissions and design team projects in the Pacific Northwest and beyond—more than enough to justify a separate publication devoted solely to Will's public works.

Will, who used to anonymously observe people's reactions to the things that he made and exhibited collaboratively, soon came to realize that his constructions were popular as objects in and of themselves. The making of them brought him full circle to the things he loved to do as a kid. As his signature hybridized bricolage shows, Will delights most in constructing sculpture from found objects, often introducing a mechanized kineticism that infuses his work with gleeful exuberance. He claims that one of his earliest influences was Robert Rauschenberg and his *Combines*. It's hard to recall now, well into the twenty-first century, how groundbreaking the idea of seamlessly synthesizing sculpture and painting once was.

Will recalls it as a true “aha” moment in his early career. Other early and enduring influences are, not surprisingly, Jean Tinguely and László Moholy-Nagy; current influences are Sarah Sze, Tim Hawkinson, and the Yes Men. But Will cites Edward Kienholz’s massive, thirty-three-foot-long tableau *The Portable War Memorial* (1968) as a work that has influenced him the most.

The source materials for *Fun House*, however, are even more populist than the stuffed goat or electrical hardware or vending machine appropriated by these earlier artists. Coequal to his fascination with mechanical constructions is his abiding love of roadside attractions and carnival environments. In 1962 Will visited the Seattle World’s Fair, which was perhaps his first experience of a pop culture amalgamation of art, science, commerce, and zeitgeist with its own version of social commentary (remember that the Seattle World’s Fair not only introduced the Space Needle, but also offered a ride on the “Bubbleator” into a “world of tomorrow” complete with fallout shelter). Since then, Will has been a collector of similar pop cultural moments, and he enthusiastically cites various attractions and amusement rides as pivotal to his artistic vision.

These include roadside attractions such as the Enchanted Forest in Turner, Oregon; Petersen Rock Garden in Redmond, Oregon; Oregon Vortex and House of Mystery in Gold Hill; Woodstock Mystery Hole in Portland, Oregon; Hole N” the Rock near Moab, Utah; Coral Castle in Miami-Dade County, Florida; and Joanie’s Blue Crab Café near Ochopee, Florida. Will finds them all inspiringly low brow and low tech, but utterly charming in their unpretentiousness. He is equally intrigued by the higher production values of more sophisticated amusement park attractions “imagineered” at Disneyland or Universal Studios, especially the classic “dark rides.”⁴ He cites all sorts of theme park experiences as important antecedents to his work, from the local Oaks Amusement Park in Portland and the regional Washington State Fair in Puyallup, to Luna Park and Dreamland at Coney Island, Playland in Rye, New York, and Toshimaen and Hanayashiki, both in Tokyo.

Will’s fascination with these genres is not in the least bit casual. Because of his interest in the amusement park industry and through his relationship with Jack Eyerly, Will was invited to a behind-the-scenes tour at the Eyerly Aircraft Company in Salem, known for its manufacturing of classic carnival rides such as the Octopus, Loop-O-Plane, Rock-O-Plane, Roll-O-Plane, the Spider, and the Monster.⁵ Will also befriended Walker LeRoy, the former ride superintendent at Portland’s historic Jantzen Beach Amusement Park and later Oaks Amusement Park (where LeRoy lived).⁶ At one time, LeRoy offered Will an old Ferris wheel, sans seats, which Will seriously considered turning into a large-scale kinetic sculpture.⁷





Into the Fun House

The first thing one sees upon entering *Bill Will: Fun House* is a wall sculpture called **Us: House of Mirrors** (2010). It is a map of the United States made up of mirrored acrylic; each state is individually cut, and the parts are assembled like a giant jigsaw puzzle (Alaska and Hawaii are strategically, if not geographically accurately, mounted on adjacent walls).⁸ Of course, the title refers to the U.S., but more importantly, it evokes the collective “us,” *all* inhabitants that call this country home. It is impossible to view this sculpture without actually becoming a part of it: as visitors stand in front of the work, their reflections inescapably appear in it, a subtle but provocative implication that “we are all in it together.” There are no red or blue states here, only self-reflections. But like a carnival house of mirrors, the cutouts cause images to be distorted and replicated, stuttering across the surface of the map. Even as the work reminds us that our country is the aggregate of multiple individuals, the literal distortion and disfiguration created by the mirrored surfaces suggest the warped and misconstrued views that Americans have of one another, especially today when the country is so intensely divided along political lines.



Left and right (detail)
Us: House of Mirrors
 2010
 Mirrored acrylic
 72 x 120 x 6 inches



Left: *House Trap*
2011
Wood and rope
127 x 85 x 122 inches

Below: *Chair of Nails*
2017
Chair and metal spikes
37 x 17 x 18 inches

Also in the front gallery is another of Will's visual puns, ***House Trap*** (2011). The sculpture looks like a stick-and-box trap—something that fascinated Will as a Cub Scout—huge enough to trap a very large animal, perhaps especially a human being. The “box” component of the trap, built of 2 x 2-inch lumber, is in the iconic shape of a house. It looks like the framing of a real domicile before the walls have been added, but this is a visually confounding house, one made of wood but simultaneously made of nothing more than air. The framework further calls to mind the bars of a prison, and therein lies Will's tongue-in-cheek commentary. Sometimes security and entrapment are two sides of the same coin. The intended subtext here has to do with the Transportation Security Administration and how collectively we have traded individual rights for the ephemeral illusion of national security. The precariousness of *House Trap*, propped ready to fall, and the anxiety it creates with the subversive sensation that the trap is meant for people, not critters, combine to create a certain vertiginous unease, which parallels the warping reality in *Us: House of Mirrors*.

Adjacent to *House Trap* is the sculpture ***Chair of Nails*** (2017). It is a very simple construction composed of a wooden chair with its seat penetrated by a patch of closely spaced spikes, which reference the bed of nails used in magic tricks or meditation. Here it is a sinister and threatening piece, adding to the edgy disquietude established by *Us: House of Mirrors* and *House Trap*. *Chair of Nails* is a place to sit where, given the smallness of the spiked area, sitting would be hazardous. A traditional bed of nails is harmless: whereas lying down on one nail would be enough to puncture one's skin, a bed of many evenly distributed nails supports one's weight without harm. It has become a visual idiom, a metaphor for the phenomenon where a person says or does so many crazy or negative things that no single thing stands out as cause for alarm—even though the crazy or negative things are all still dangerous. Some would suggest that this metaphor applies to our current political climate.

From the front gallery, the only entrance into the rest of the *Fun House* is via a turnstile—and the only exit is via another turnstile positioned at the end of the







Overleaf: *Undertow*
2012
Dress shirts and ties
Dimensions variable

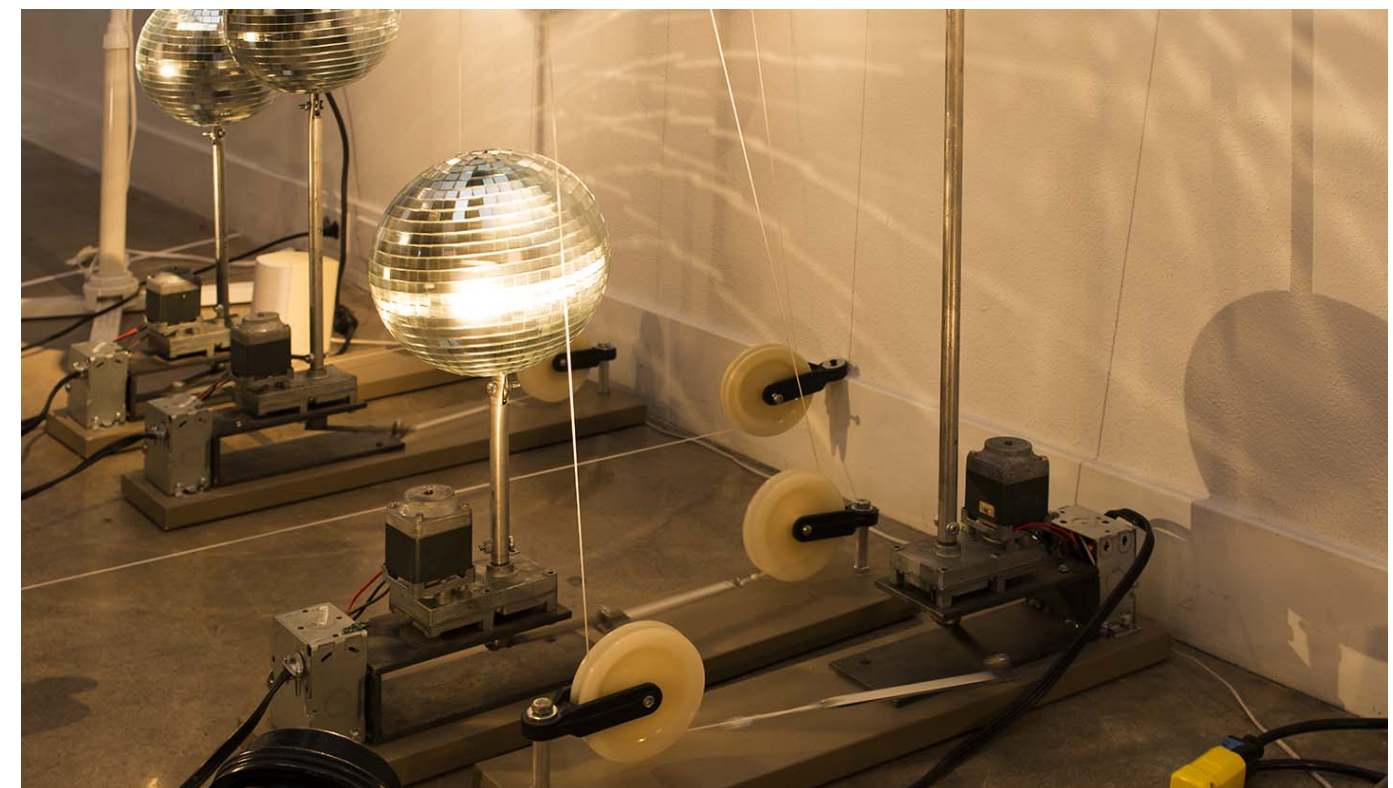
Left: *The Rapture (Simulator)*
2016
Pants, motors, lighting, mirror balls, pew,
soundtrack, and microcontroller
Dimensions variable

viewer's passage through the installation. From the entrance turnstile, the visitor is introduced to *Undertow* (2012), a hanging phalanx of formal white shirts "wearing" black neckties, all gently undulating in a breeze from an unseen source. *Undertow* was inspired by Will's observations of the human tendency to be swept up by conformity—whether the youthful Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn's DUMBO neighborhood or the commuter crowds packed together at Tokyo train stations.⁹ In the latter, Will was struck by the mundaneness of modern work life that is mostly just comings and goings with very little genuine autonomy over one's choices. In *Undertow*, the shirts and ties—like people—all show slightly different variations yet remain essentially conformist.

At a pause just beyond *Undertow*, one finds a tableau called *The Rapture (Simulator)* (2016), an odd convocation of various pants hanging from the ceiling, small disco balls on sticks, and a church pew. The pants and disco balls are attached to cables that are threaded through pulleys; when set into kinetic action, the pants rise up and down as if ascending into the heavens, and

the disco balls rotate under lights, throwing a sparkling, but slightly cheesy, constellation onto the walls, pants, and pew. The farcical soundtrack accompanying the installation features slapstick sound bites of "Hallelujah!" (snippets of a gospel choir singing or an evangelical minister preaching). This is not the obvious—a jab at fundamentalist Christianity—but instead is Will's commentary on the human tendency to abdicate one's own decision-making authority: to be a sheep rather than the shepherd of one's own life. There is an undercurrent of sadness in *The Rapture (Simulator)*, too, as it speaks to the false hope of seductive but ultimately hollow claims to salvation.

A few steps past *The Rapture (Simulator)*, the viewer is guided to *Love Thy Neighbor* (2015), an installation composed of nine modified electric bread-making machines set on the floor. From an aperture in the top of each machine rises a tall pole topped by a small ballistic missile. When the work is activated, the paddles inside the machines, there to knead the bread dough, start to move, which causes the poles to gyrate clumsily, "waving" the missiles high in the air. The effect in each





Love Thy Neighbor
2015
Bread-making machines, tent poles, felt, and microcontroller
Dimensions variable

is a bit like a little kid's waving a flag at a parade. The missiles are actually felt soft sculptures, literally harmless and metaphorically emasculated. They speak to the concept of short-range ballistic missiles, which are calibrated for very short distances, specifically between neighboring countries. But all of this busy pirouetting is shown to be useless as the missiles just buzz around in circles.

As is typical of Will's work, the title, *Love Thy Neighbor*, offers a clue to the work's deeper meaning. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is a universal dictum, but what does it mean? The bread-making machine, besides being the base mechanism to agitate the missiles, is literally a machine for the production of real sustenance. "Breaking bread together" is synonymous with concepts of family and community, but in the physical arrangement of Will's bread-making machines on the floor, each source of nourishment is its own mechanical containment, its own island (or country) separate from the others. Of course, in the canon of aphorisms about the comforting qualities of "bread," there is nary a word about rockets. There is, however, the now obsolete

term "ammunition bread," a reference to the material used in the charging of firearms (balls, powder, shot, shells, etc.). It seems that the eighteenth-century Prussian military, by co-opting language—"bread"—hoped to mollify the realities of war. Curiously, when power to *Love Thy Neighbor* is turned off, the machines themselves emit an audible, slightly pathetic sigh.

Next in Will's designated path through the *Fun House* is a stop at **War Machine** (2017). This installation is a complex jerry-rigged assortment of anomalous parts: a vintage Eiki film projector, ironing boards, Erector Set components, and toy soldiers. The playful display is best seen from the perspective marked by a stark white pedestal bearing a proud red button and the instructions: "Start a War." When the viewer presses the button, the apparatus begins to move. The soldiers, stuck to film running through a long Erector Set bridge before being threaded through the projector, advance and retreat over the bridge, accompanied by sound effects of war (Will and his studio assistant recorded the audio, including the commands to "attack!" and "retreat!"). Once again, Will subtly manipulates the





START A WAR



NEXT WAR POSSIBLE IN

500:009.5

Overleaf and below: *War Machine*

2017

Film projector, ironing boards, Erector Set pieces,
toy soldiers, soundtrack, and microcontroller
Dimensions variable

Rig: *The Permission Givers*

2013

Aluminum, mulberry papier-mâché, motors,
and microcontroller
Dimensions variable

viewer's experience. On the same pedestal where one can "start a war," a digital panel counts down the time before the "war" can be reactivated again—120 seconds. Not only is the two-minute interval a reference to casual, everyday parlance—"just wait two minutes!"—but it is surprising how long it feels for two minutes to pass when one is jonesing for a turn at the red button and the chance to start the war machine. As a diorama, it's a bit of visual horseplay, but the sobering nuance is the realization that it may indeed be just that easy to start a war.

In contrast to the assemblage of ready-mades used in *War Machine*, *The Permission Givers* (2013) is a stark installation of twenty ghostly human heads mounted around the perimeter of a darkened room. The heads themselves were sculpted by Will in papier mâché made out of mulberry paper; he began crafting the heads while in attendance at the Rauschenberg Residency on Captiva Island in 2013. Each head is abstracted and virtually featureless, having an elegance and refinement reminiscent of Constantin Brâncuși's *La muse endormie* (1909-1910). Each head is also

mechanized so that it nods either up and down for "yes" or back and forth for "no." By virtue of Will's title, the viewer understands that each of these personas has been asked permission for something, and the replies form a dissonance of contradictory answers. The movement of the heads is slightly robotic—they are animated by tiny motors—and their animatronic nature and blank stares make one think of the anonymity and ennui associated with corporate or government cultures. What are they approving or disapproving? And who are these personages from whom human beings must seek permission? When one thinks about it, all sorts of important decisions require some sort of dispensation from someone, somewhere. Critical issues of today, whether immigration, refugee status, gay marriage, or access to needed surgery—require permission. Sadly, those critical issues are often adjudicated by functionaries who have no ability to grasp the nuances of such complex situations. It is as if life itself can somehow be distilled into a continuum of yes or no questions, answered by random factotums.





Overleaf and below: with LeBrie Rich
Bloat
2012
Plastic shopping bags and fan
26 x 125 x 85 inches

Right: *Rotisserie Army* (detail)
2016
Fan, toy soldiers, rotisserie motor, wood,
aluminum, and microcontroller
54 x 48 x 38 inches

Upon exiting *The Permission Givers*, the viewer comes to *Bloat* (2012), a sculpture that resembles a giant, animated pillow, inflating and deflating as if it were breathing. The surface is a patchwork quilt made of consumer plastic bags, ironed and melted together to represent the American flag. The surface decoration is lively—Will and his partner LeBrie Rich created the “fabric” from a rich variety of throwaway plastic. Corporate logos (Target, Bed Bath and Beyond, Borders, Macy’s, The New York Times, New Seasons Market, Powell’s, Office Depot, Wal-Mart) are identifiable in the red and white stripes and field of blue. Will offers a doubled emphasis on American consumerism and the “bloat” in the American lifestyle that results from it. How many things do American customers need to haul home in plastic bags? The title refers to all sorts of tendencies toward excess fueled by consumerist society, from a seemingly never-ending supply of nonessential trifles available for purchase to the absurdity of “super-size me.” And the way the flag heaves and respires underscores a certain heavy megalomania that is sadly part of American culture.

The next thing one sees on Will’s demarcated path is *Rotisserie Army* (2016). This is a kinetic contraption in which a large barbecue spit skewers a metal platform. On one side of the platform is a platoon of toy soldiers, all poised for battle. An oscillating fan in the installation generates a breeze that is strong enough to topple the toy soldiers as it passes over them—they are successively “blown away” (though they remain attached to the base). Then the platform is rotated as the rotisserie is set in motion, and the toy soldiers are resurrected, returned to upright positions once the contrivance completes its cycle. It’s pretty funny to watch, and the flip-flapping of the soldiers as their platform revolves in space makes a clattering sound, like one might hear at a carnival midway game. But after the initial chuckle, one begins to read *Rotisserie Army* metaphorically, as a simulation of armed interventions that count on an infinite supply of young men and women to sacrifice in battle. As the wind blows, all of the soldiers fall down, but in a matter of moments with the turning of the spit, an unrelenting resupply of troops is at the ready.







Left and below: *World's Greatest #1 Hand*
2017
Expanded polystyrene, lift chair recliner mechanism, and microcontroller
125 x 44 x 27 inches

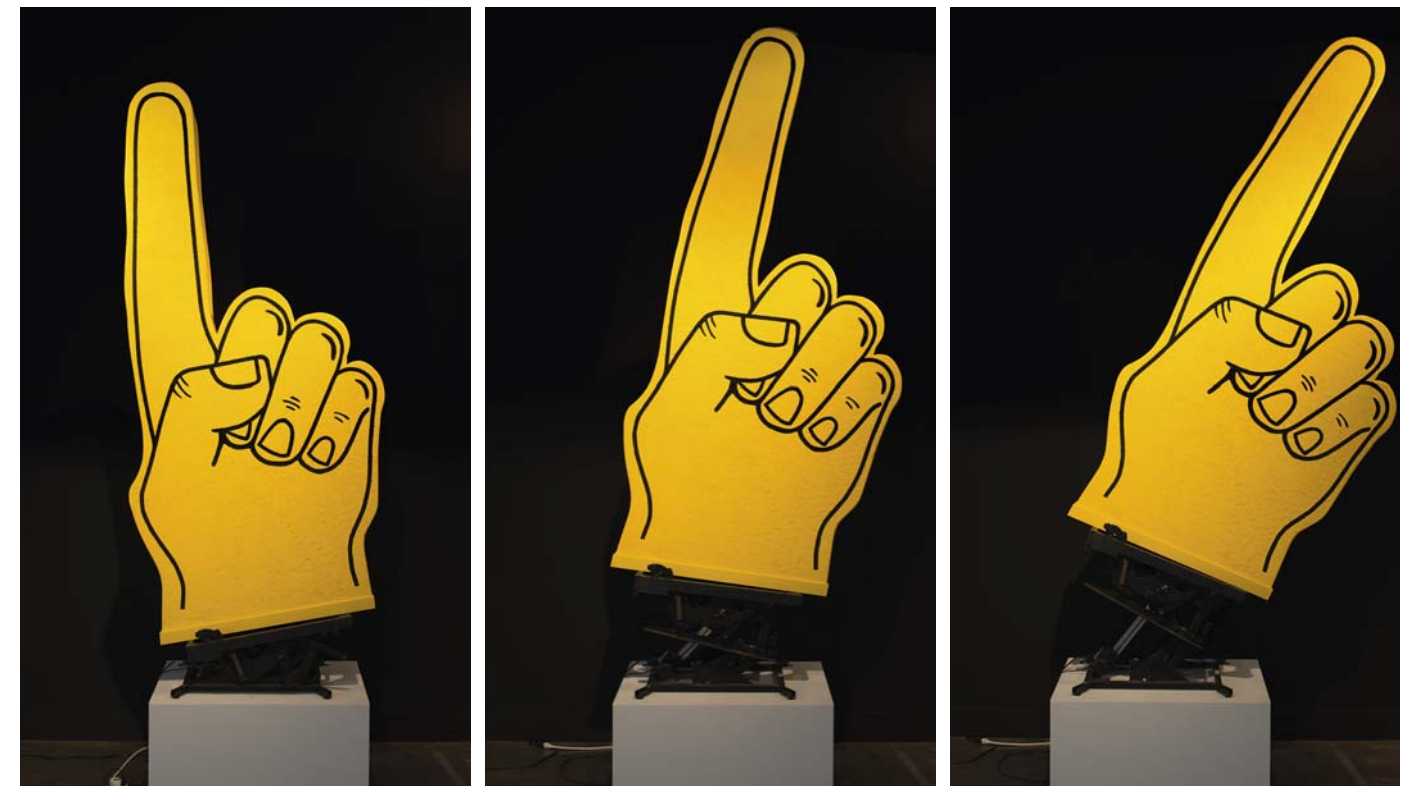
Left: *Patriotic Devices*
2016
American flags, tent poles, and motorized neck massagers
Two parts, 72 x 12 x 36 inches each

World's Greatest #1 Hand (2017) is another rumination on the human (and, in particular, the American) impulse toward domination and preeminence. It is a simple sculpture familiar from spectators at sports events: a jumbo hand with the index finger pointing skyward, here made of polystyrene that has been textured to look like foam. But this hand is mounted onto a peculiar mechanism, the apparatus from a mechanized recliner, a lift armchair used by mobility-disabled people to assist them in getting up out of a seated position. The iconic hand, gesticulating in a “we are number one!” gesture, is ubiquitous in visual culture, not just in crowds at sports arenas, but also in the role of the Dreadful Flying Glove character from *Yellow Submarine* or as the nonverbal communication symbol for “look here.” The “#1 Hand” is a powerful and instantly recognizable semiotic. As the motorized platform slowly and fitfully lifts the hand into the air, the initial impression once again is utterly comical, but in light of the declaration “World’s Greatest,” it is also jingoistic. How can a country be #1 anyway, and by whose metrics? The idea of a

country being “greatest” in any regard is the height of arrogance.

Meanwhile, Will is quick to undermine that competitive pride. As a postcard created for the gift shop documents, “we” in the United States are #1 in the world at the following: percentage of the super-rich in our population, rates of citizen imprisonment, number of plastic surgeons and diagnoses of anxiety disorders, rates of death by violence, and small arms imports and small arts exports. Sadly, we are also #22 in gender equality, #24 in literacy, #34 in water and sanitation, and #45 in freedom of the press. None of those statistics seems like something to boast about.

On either side of the *World's Greatest #1 Hand* are two small sculptures, matching *Patriotic Devices* (2016). These are twin assemblages made of American flags on sticks mounted into decommissioned neck massagers that automatically and perpetually “wave” the flags. The tableau, *World's Greatest #1 Hand* flanked by the *Patriotic Devices*, cues the viewer to Will’s ever-present subtext: Is the United States the undisputed leader of the world? Or is American smugness, especially in





Are You Listening?
2010
Coffee pots and motorized control mechanism
Dimensions variable



Below Left: *Shuffling*
2007
Shoes and motor
6 x 10 x 34 inches

Below detail and right: *Designator*
2013

Coin-op mechanism, surveillance camera, soundtrack, and microcontroller
38 x 12 x 8 inches

light of today's fragile international relationships, overblown to the point of clownishness?

A quick turn from *World's Greatest #1 Hand* reveals an installation called ***Are You Listening?*** (2010). Arranged on a wall is a collection of vintage metal coffee pots—the old-fashioned type that one might find on a campfire or wood stove—but these are mounted upside down. Most of the pots are blue enamelware, stippled with white speckles. Inverted, they look positively anthropomorphic: the coffee pot spout resembles a nose, while the hinged lid opens and closes, like a gaping mouth. Each coffee pot is individually connected to a nearby contraption that controls the opening and closing of the lid/mouth, so when all of the vessels are in motion, viewers are engulfed in a clickety-clang cacophony, like too many people talking at once. Are you listening? It would be impossible to hear anything over this mechanized clatter. Today's world is so full of talking heads, self-proclaimed pundits, and over-amped social media that it is hard to follow one's own thoughts, let alone make sense out of the ceaseless barrage of communication encountered on a daily basis.

From *Are You Listening?* the viewer exits through another turnstile, but there are still “attractions” to enjoy. Just before the turnstile is a very simple kinetic sculpture, ***Shuffling*** (2007), made of motorized bars connected to slightly comical and overscale black shoes. The motor causes the shoes to literally shuffle on the floor, dawdling but going nowhere. It is as if the feet belong to a downtrodden person, wearily continuing on through daily life.

Just on the other side of the turnstile is ***Designator*** (2013). It is a wall-mounted, coin-operated machine that will tell each viewer willing to respond to a questionnaire if he/she is a terrorist. It is a completely preposterous idea, of course, and a risible one: that a quick, automated questionnaire can produce an ID certificate preemptively exculpating an individual from ever being thought of as a terrorist. *Designator* looks like a mass-produced machine, manufactured by “Automated Identifying Systems” with the product number “NTI-800.” Once viewers drop a coin into the slot, they are asked a series of random questions (like, “yes or no, are you presently in the possession of any of the following:





Pomposity
 2017
 Polyester upholstery fabric, cotton, polyester satin, and furnace fan
 120 x 114 x 72 inches



Overleaf: *Disaster Wheel*
2017
Vinyl and paint on wood
37 x 29 1/2 x 1 1/4 inches

automatic weapons, gasoline, dynamite, throwing stars, hockey sticks, or scented candles?”). After that, a camera “scans” them, the machine deliberates, and then, no matter how they answered, either they receive designation as a non-terrorist or the machine informs them they will have to come back and try again later. In essence, the entire exercise is both rigged and idiotically ineffectual—an indictment of the idea that government agencies can prevent every single act of terrorism likely to erupt today.

Nearby, *Pomposity* (2017) is practically a pendant piece to *Bloat*. This is another inflatable structure, only instead of a flag, the object is a mammoth business jacket, complete with dress shirt collar and “silk” tie. As it slowly “inhales” and “exhales,” the chest and belly distend then contract.¹⁰ The metaphorical allusions are many, from “puffing up” in pride to “beating one’s chest” in superiority, applicable to governments and individual alike.

Finally, a midway game is available that the visitor can participate in. *Disaster Wheel* (2017) is a traditional carny wheel of fortune that can be spun to predict

the player’s fate. Will’s wheel is a crapshoot of extremes, designating either calamity or, in equal measure, “safe for now.” The various catastrophes include scary events: earthquake (the big one); flu pandemic; mass shooting; asteroid; tornado (or hurricane); flood (or drought); terrorism; and nuclear war. It’s a funny stunt that focuses on the game of chance that all humans face—one minute we’re “secure” and the next everything falls apart. It also capsulizes the culture of fear that is propagated by the media, alerts in the so-called war on terror, and YouTube scenes of brutality.

Exit through the Gift Shop

Once the visitor moves out of *Fun House*, passes through the exit turnstile, engages with *Designator*, views *Pomposity*, and plays the midway-like game, there is one more Will fabrication: the gift shop. Here Will and his collaborator LeBrie Rich are poking fun at the omnipresent merchandise “opportunities” that museums (and amusement park rides) have built into the art-viewing (or thrill-riding) experience. It’s a little absurd, isn’t it? To experience, say, a profoundly moving

exhibition of paintings, only to be spat out into a melee of tacky reproduction-embellished umbrellas, lunch boxes, and floaty pens? But this is exactly the reality of today’s spectacle—it’s not complete until one shops. Will continues to question this arcane and pervasive convention, and his *Fun House* is the perfect opportunity for him and Rich to create their own version of this ritual.

The *Fun House* gift shop is chockablock with all sorts of tongue-in-cheek souvenirs: postcards, Frisbees, pub coasters, beer cozies, lapel pins, spinner buttons, various iterations of the #1 hand, and “bags-of-war,” which contain the extra toy soldiers that were purchased for *Rotisserie Army* and *War Machine*. A T-shirt is available that reads “Art Souvenir,” an impertinent keepsake that reminds its wearers that they had an art experience somewhere at some time. Will purposely celebrates the sort of tacky, dime store quality that one often encounters in souvenir shops. Even more, everything in the *Fun House* gift shop is for sale, another ironic twist that comments on the peculiar role of the artist in contemporary society. What is the intrinsic

value of a work of art? The emotive but ephemeral quality of experiencing the actual work? Its presumed “pricelessness”? Or the “lasting” memento, a cheaply produced replica of the thing that inspired the purchase of the reproduction in the first place? It’s incredible but true that many a museum-goer visits the museum store before, or even instead of, actually viewing the exhibitions.

A Lamentation

Will likes the noun *kludge*, which means an ill-assorted collection of parts used to fulfill a particular purpose. Each of his sculptures and installations appears, initially, to be “kludged”—everyday objects and an assortment of flotsam and jetsam reimagined into fully realized concepts. The works in *Bill Will: Fun House* are farcical and silly, but only on the surface. Each and every work in Will’s unfolding odeum is based on the artist’s observations of contemporary culture and, frankly, his discomfiture by what he sees. In reality, *Fun House* is in equal parts an art installation and a jeremiad—another word Will favors—a long, mournful



lamentation or a list of woes. While Will typically eschews didacticism or anything else that overtly proselytizes a particular point of view, he does want his audience to laugh first, then think. In his hands, humor is like the explosion of a flash bulb; it grabs our attention and engages our collective funny bone. And then the conceptualist undercurrent begins to percolate and surface in real and meaningful ideas. *Fun House* is a meta meditation on prankishness—and the unexpected poetry that comes from thoughtful contemplation. ■



¹ Will tells another story from his childhood about how his father encouraged his fascination with mechanical processes. Once Will's dad came home with a box full of loose Raleigh bicycle components. Will made two complete bicycles out of the parts.

² Will is not the only former Gaylen Hansen student to speak of Hansen as an instrumental figure in his early career. Cartoonist Gary Larson, creator of *The Far Side*, said this about Hansen's influence: "From almost the first moment I lay eyes on any one of Hansen's paintings, I feel a sensation that is reminiscent of that day he drew the human figure in our class. And that sensation is best described as an emotional cycle of awe, exhilaration, envy, humility, and depression." From Keith Wells, *Gaylen Hansen: Three Decades of Painting* (Pullman, Wash.: Museum of Art, Washington State University, 2007), 13.

³ Will recalls how he would enter both paintings and sculptures into art competitions; the paintings he signed Bill Will, and the sculptures he signed with a pseudonym, William Warren (his first and middle names). These experiences eventually defined sculpture, not painting, as his milieu.

⁴ A "dark ride" or "ghost train" is an amusement park ride that involves boarding a special vehicle that winds through animated dioramas, such as Disney's Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, Alice in Wonderland Ride, or Peter Pan's Flight. The earliest "dark rides" date to the nineteenth century.

⁵ Jack Eyerly was the grandson of Lee Eyerly, who founded Eyerly Aircraft Company in 1930 to make inexpensive flight simulators. Thanks to a carnival salesman who urged the company to introduce their machines as amusement park rides, Eyerly Aircraft Company became best known for its development of carnival ride staples, even though the company retained "Aircraft" in its name. The company closed in 1985.

⁶ According to Will, who met him in the early 1980s, Walker LeRoy rebuilt the wooden roller coaster Coaster Thrill Ride at the Washington State Fair in Puyallup in 1950, and in 1958 he assisted with the building of the wooden roller coaster at Playland, Canada's oldest amusement park, in Vancouver, British Columbia. Both roller coasters are still in operation. LeRoy lived at Oaks Amusement Park in a house built on stilts over the Willamette River. He had a one-person submarine in his garage that he built himself and once offered to Will.

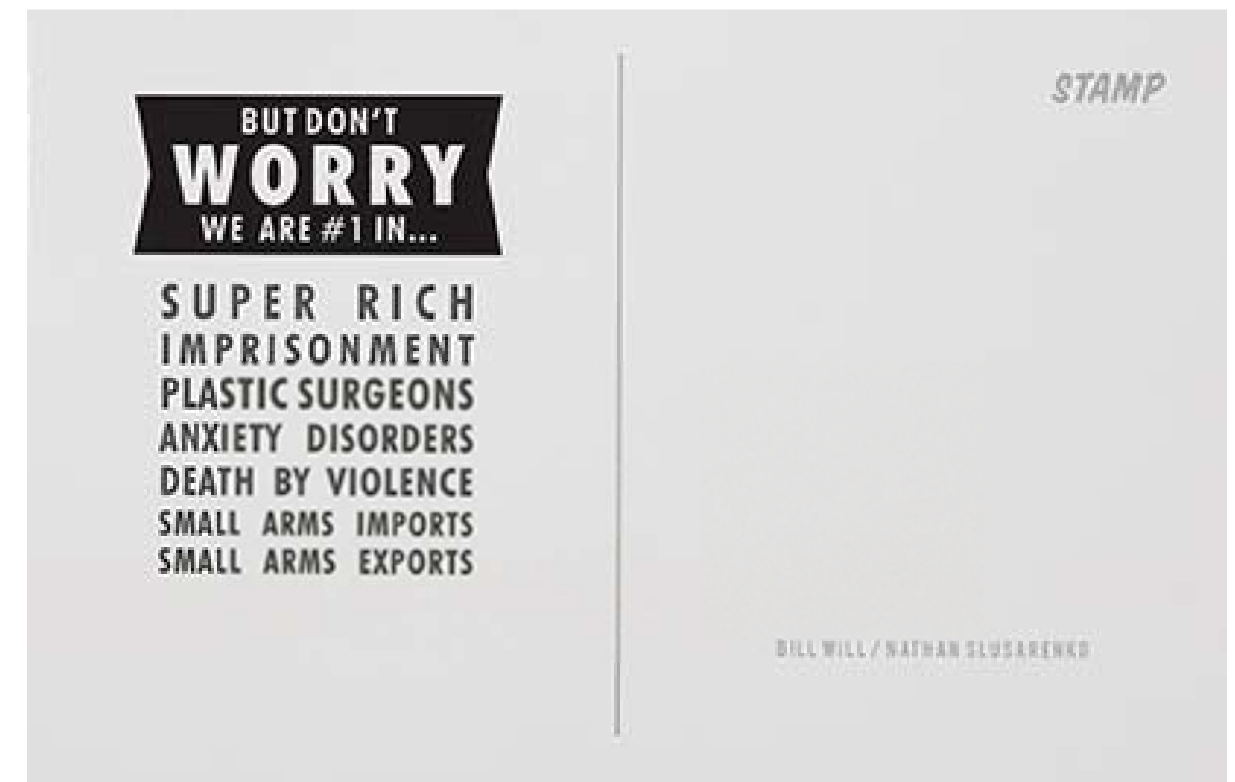
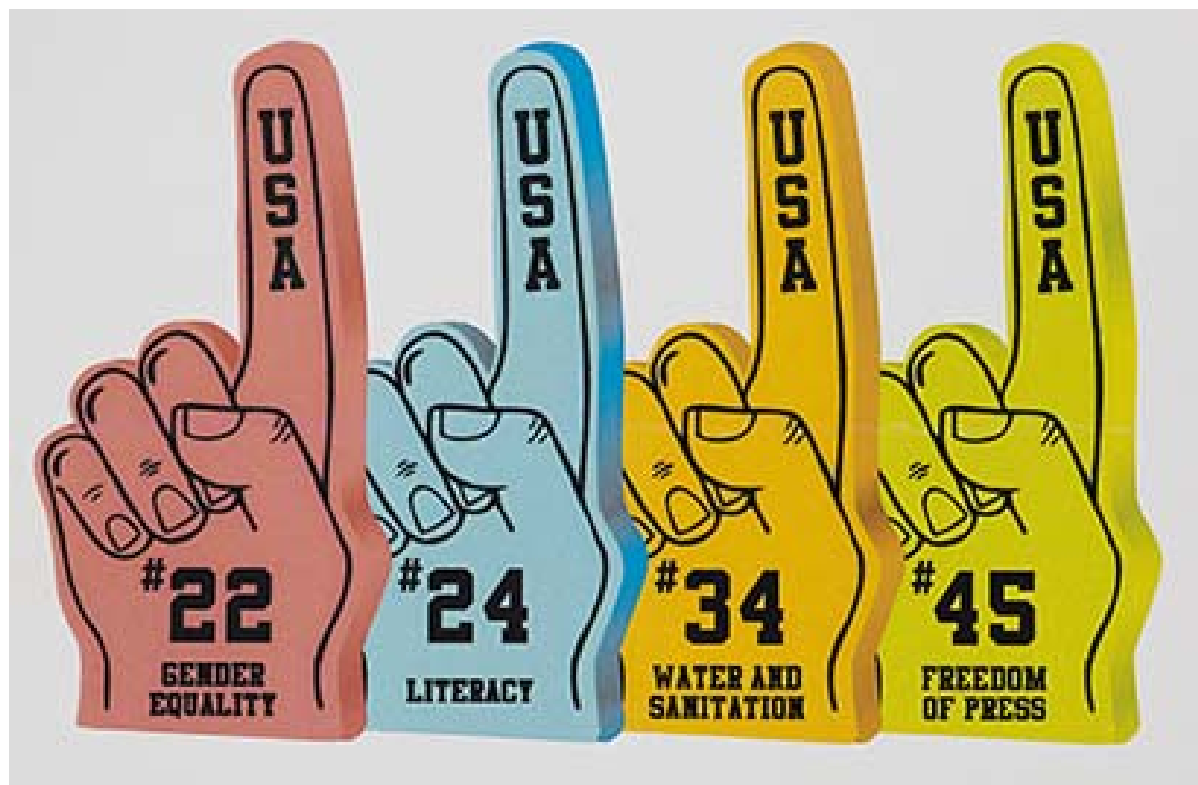
⁷ A sculpture based on the Ferris wheel framework was ultimately not realized due to liability insurance issues.

⁸ An interesting historic antecedent to *Us: House of Mirrors* is a print by G. Humphrey titled *Theatrical reflection, or a peep at the looking glass curtain at the Royal Coburg Theatre* (1822), which illustrates a mirrored curtain reflecting the audience at the Royal Coburg Theatre in London while Ramos Samee, a juggler, magician, and sword swallower, is juggling on stage. By virtue of the

mirrored curtain, the audience became an inextricable component of the performance.

⁹ *Undertow*, which was first exhibited in 2012 at the Art Museum of Nihon University, Tokyo, was directly inspired by Will's observation of Japanese middle management workers. Will also cites a favorite film from his youth, *The Time Machine* (1960), in which the character Weena and her fellow Eloï respond to a siren by becoming automaton.

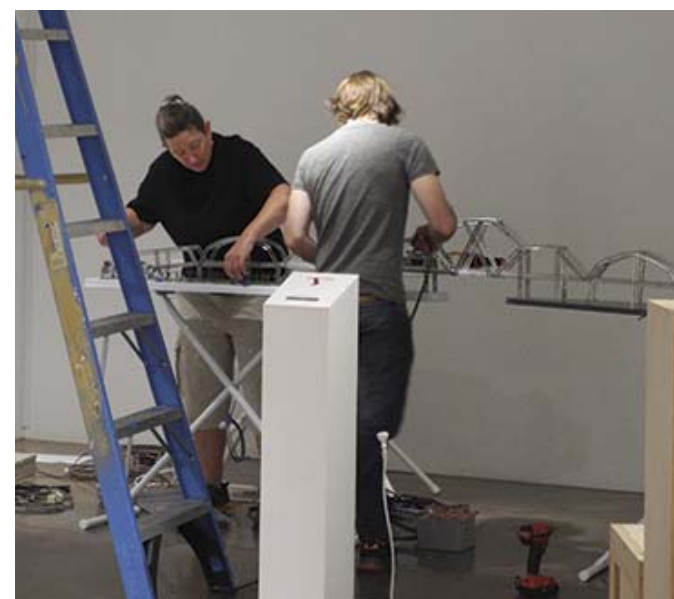
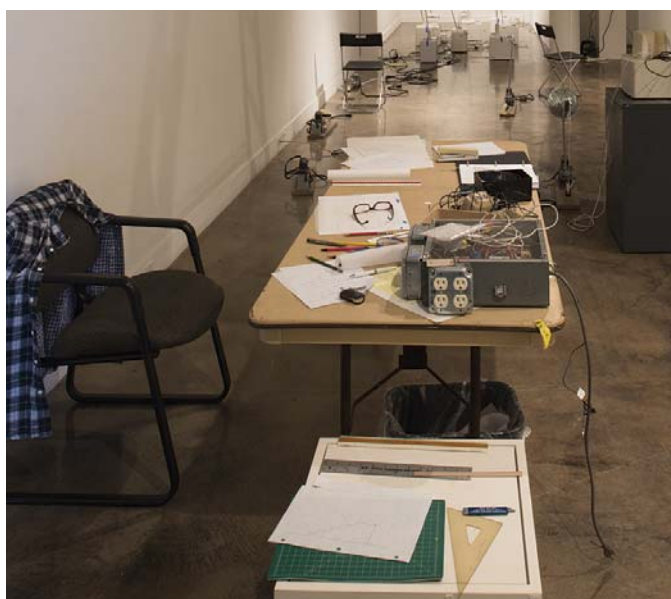
¹⁰ *Pomposity* is an interesting example of the lengths to which Will goes to find materials to perfectly detail his ideas. Using a traditional suit fabric, such as gabardine, for *Pomposity* would not have worked, as the fine weave would not translate in the vast scaling-up of the suit jacket. Instead, Will tracked down a fabric with a coarser weave, almost an upholstery fabric, so that the texture would read as a traditional "suit fabric" at the oversize scale.





The date is the year in which each sculpture or installation was originally conceived and built. All works were reconstructed for *Bill Will: Fun House* in 2017. Works are listed in the order they appear in the installation. Dimensions are height by width by depth.

<i>Us: House of Mirrors</i> 2010 Mirrored acrylic 72 x 120 x 6 inches	with LeBrie Rich <i>Bloat</i> 2012 Plastic shopping bags and fan 26 x 125 x 85 inches
<i>House Trap</i> 2011 Wood and rope 127 x 85 x 122 inches	<i>Rotisserie Army</i> 2016 Fan, toy soldiers, rotisserie motor, wood, aluminum, and microcontroller 54 x 48 x 38 inches
<i>Chair of Nails</i> 2017 Chair and metal spikes 37 x 17 x 18 inches	<i>World's Greatest #1 Hand</i> 2017 Expanded polystyrene, lift chair recliner mechanism, and microcontroller 125 x 44 x 27 inches
<i>Undertow</i> 2012 Dress shirts and ties Dimensions variable	<i>Patriotic Devices</i> 2016 American flags, tent poles, and motorized neck massagers Two parts, 72 x 12 x 36 inches each
<i>The Rapture (Simulator)</i> 2016 Pants, motors, lighting, mirror balls, pew, soundtrack, and microcontroller Dimensions variable	<i>Are You Listening?</i> 2010 Coffee pots and motorized control mechanism Dimensions variable
<i>Love Thy Neighbor</i> 2015 Bread-making machines, tent poles, felt, and microcontroller Dimensions variable	<i>Shuffling</i> 2007 Shoes and motor 6 x 10 x 34 inches
<i>War Machine</i> 2017 Film projector, ironing boards, Erector Set pieces, toy soldiers, soundtrack, and microcontroller Dimensions variable	<i>Designator</i> 2013 Coin-op mechanism, surveillance camera, soundtrack, and microcontroller 38 x 12 x 8 inches
<i>The Permission Givers</i> 2013 Aluminum, mulberry papier-mâché, motors, and microcontroller Dimensions variable	<i>Pomposity</i> 2017 Polyester upholstery fabric, cotton, polyester satin, and furnace fan 120 x 114 x 72 inches
	<i>Disaster Wheel</i> 2017 Vinyl and paint on wood 37 x 29 1/2 x 1 1/4 inches



Acknowledgments

The planning for, and installing of, *Fun House* has been the most enjoyable and rewarding exhibition experience of my career. More than anything else, this is because of the people with whom I have had the opportunity to work.

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Most importantly, I am indebted to my studio assistants, Jesse Taylor and Joni Yates, who labored tirelessly through several years of preparation and for the entirety

of the installation of the work in the gallery. I would not have been able to do this without them. Bringing to this project their own insight and vision, they should be recognized as collaborators.

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Finally, my greatest appreciation is reserved for LeBrie Rich. My profound thanks for her indefatigable support and for her critical insight, which I have learned to both trust and rely on. And for the joy that she brings to my life daily.

Bill Will

