

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: BOOK ENDS

Kenneth J. Hilker, Masters of Fine Arts,
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Thesis directed by: Associate Professor Cy Keener, Department
of Art

This thesis marks a pivotal transition in my artistic journey, detailing the creation of *Book Ends*, a large wood sculpture that emerged as a culmination of my experiences and reflections during the MFA program at the University of Maryland. Moving away from my previous focus on painting, this work embraces sculpture to explore themes of memory, loss, and rebirth. *Book Ends* is crafted from repurposed wood, each piece with its own history and emotional weight, collected from dismantled homes and reshaped into a new form. This sculpture not only represents a physical assembly of materials but also embodies my personal and artistic transformations, reflecting on the interconnectedness of life's continuous cycles and the impermanent nature of existence. Through *Book Ends*, I aim to connect viewers with the deeper narratives embedded in the materials I use, inviting them to contemplate the layers of history and transformation inherent in the wood.

BOOK ENDS

by

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Dedication

To Erica and Dora for your unquestioning support and love. And to my grandmother, Marie Hilker, for making real space for creativity and always believing in me. Thank you to my parents, John and Mary Jo Hilker, my sister, Beth Stecz, and Aunt Stella and Uncle Ed Holmes for your love and support.

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Oil on canvas

33 ¼" x 59"

2. *Mornings*, 2021

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3. *Transitions*, 2022

Repurposed wood, metal

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4. *Emotion Without Language*, 2023

Burnt repurposed wood, metal

36" x 132"

5. *Increments of Time*, 2023

Burnt repurposed wood, metal, acrylic paint

96" x 72" x 36

6. *What One Should Know*, 2023

Burnt repurposed wood, acrylic

23" x 16" x 6"

7. *Book Ends*, 2024 (view 1)

Repurposed wood, metal

23' x 14' x 10'

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Repurposed wood, metal

23' x 14' x 10'

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Repurposed wood, metal

23' x 14' x 10'

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Tempera, acrylic on tar paper, repurposed wood

147" x 93"

Artistic Process

In most academic art settings, there's an assumption that artists begin with words and ideas, then progress toward material realization. However, my art-making process starts from a place of emotion—a feeling that guides me toward a material that inspires me with its unpredictable nature. This emotional connection influences my choice of materials and how I interact with them. As I work, I reflect on my feelings and the piece's emerging expression, allowing the artwork to evolve naturally from that point.

I used to think that as an artist, I should be able to articulate my process clearly, write it down, and communicate in a way that not only told a story but also engaged people. Over time, I realized that words are not always a part of my process. My art comes from the act of doing, from the act of creating, and it's often only at the end of this process that I find the language that fits the piece. This approach sometimes makes me feel like an outsider, or as if I'm not doing things the 'right' way, as traditionally taught. There have been times when people, after starting to work with me, have noted that I am articulate, which makes me wonder about the initial impression I give. But when I reflect on how my art develops, it's clear that the connection to words doesn't come immediately because the emotions and feelings that inspire me often exist beyond words.

My art process typically starts with a concept—a shape, a line, or a mark that I want to explore. From there, each step builds intuitively, whether in sculpture or painting. As the piece develops, I pay close attention to the shapes and the three-dimensional aspects, reacting to the unpredictable elements that emerge. I then decide whether to follow these unexpected turns or to continue with my original plan. For a long time, I thought I needed to adhere to a more structured, academic approach to my process, often disregarding the intuitive responses. However, I'm now focusing on embracing and following these instincts more openly, curious to see how they shape the evolution of my work.

I have dyslexia. The common assumption that thinking primarily occurs in words extends to art as well, and as someone with dyslexia, I find that my approach can be quite different. Dyslexia means that I don't always fit neatly within the traditional educational structures, which are often very rigid and linear. My process tends to happen more on the peripheral edges of these structures, and it takes effort to pull my ideas into a form that fits into the conventional "box."

Often, people are quick to make judgments because my way of functioning doesn't align with the standard academic or artistic frameworks. It takes me time to get there, and my wiring is different. My thought processes and the steps I take may not occur in the traditional order. This is evident even in the way I speak; my thoughts can jump around more than others'. This aspect of

dyslexia influences not just how I create art but also how I communicate about it, often requiring me to find alternative pathways to express and validate my artistic vision.

Reflecting on how my artistic process deviates from traditional expectations, particularly the strong emphasis on language in academic settings, has led me to a place of acceptance and confidence in my unique approach to art. I've come to understand that there's no inherent reason to connect words and art, which is a valuable lesson from my MFA experience. This realization has encouraged me to embrace the way I engage with art, focusing on the process itself—the creation and the journey from start to finish—rather than conforming to conventional language-based interpretations.

By letting my process tell its own story, rather than always anchoring it in a verbal narrative, I can enter a more authentic space of experience. This approach not only enriches my personal artistic journey but also invites others to experience art in a way that emphasizes the visual and emotional impact over the verbal explanation. It's a powerful shift that celebrates the diversity of artistic expression and acknowledges the value in all creative processes.

Previous work in painting before MFA

Before entering the University of Maryland MFA program my paintings were spaces of comfort, revisiting childhood memories like walking the fields with my dad in Missouri. We'd go after the rain to look for arrowheads in those open spaces.



Corner to Corner

But at some point, I felt I needed to shift away from landscapes. They weren't working for me anymore. The message I wanted to convey through them was going stale; I wasn't feeling connected to them. They had become formulaic,

and their purpose had faded. I was just making paintings to sell them, and that wasn't satisfying anymore. I didn't feel like I was compromising myself by making something people wanted to buy, until suddenly, I did.

I decided I wasn't going to do landscapes for myself anymore. I'd keep making them because they were supporting my career, but I started to carve out a separate painting and drawing practice. In this new space, I allowed myself to create images without much forethought, reacting to the materials and my body's interaction with the work. It became a period where I was trying to connect my body more to the work. I started working on the floor, getting much more involved with the action of painting, pushing the material around. I was really trying to break from the way I had previously worked, paying attention to the marks as they happened, not knowing where it would lead, and just allowing it to develop.

Transition to Sculpture and First Year Work

In my first year at UMD, I made a significant transition from painting to sculpture. This shift began right after COVID started. During the first semester back, I had been working through painting on my own, without studio mates. I was driven to attend graduate school because I wasn't satisfied with the work I was doing. I knew I was experimenting with new things, but I was over-painting them. I began a new body of wire-based sculptural work, still dividing and playing with space in the same way but leaving it in its simplest form. I continued using lines and colors, but not in landscapes anymore. I was working with elements I've always been interested in, particularly in terms of abstractions. In some ways, I think not painting and doing sculpture for a while has been really good for me. It pulls more of myself into the work than painting did. Playing with wire, braiding it, and working in three dimensions for the first time was exhilarating. I figured out how it hung on the wall, how it protruded from the wall, and really began drawing in a way with the wire. This allowed me to get outside of my painting brain in a way I hadn't before, which was probably the most positive outcome of this shift.



Mornings

Then, I did a show and became fascinated with the idea of braiding, a task I connected with deeply as it was something I did with my daughter for many years before she started doing her own hair. I understood wood from my time monitoring the woodshop, so I started exploring how I could apply the process of braiding to wood. Could I cut the wood in such a way that it would mimic a braid? This experimentation led to three-dimensional works that were still on the wall, playing with shadows and creating a connection I hadn't felt before. This was the first piece I made here that felt genuinely interesting and like it was going somewhere.

My technique evolved as I began connecting with the idea of not buying materials but rather using scraps from the woodbin. I took flooring from a friend's house and whittled it down on the band saw. Initially, I thought it would be more wall-bound, possibly leaning like stacked stone. But as I developed the piece, using lumen-welding rods as connectors, I realized I could manipulate its shape extensively. As the piece grew longer, it began to embody emotion and a feeling that my other work hadn't up to that point. Looking at these works, it became clear: this is what my sculptures are meant to be.



Transitions

Second year / Limbshift Exhibition

In the *Limbshift* exhibition, my aim was to extend my engagement with painting into the domain of sculpture. The exhibition became a platform for exploring material, form, and spatial relationships in a new dimension.

Emotion Without Language emerged from a period of re-evaluation over three days. An existing piece in my studio was disassembled, leading to fresh considerations of water, flow, and the contrasting interactions between wood and steel. Light and its movement around the materials became a focal point, although the shadow interactions on the wall weren't a primary concern initially. Initially conceived as a freestanding piece, it found its coherence when leaned against a wall, touching it delicately at the top.



Emotion Without Language

Moving on to *Inc in Time*, the largest piece in the show, the utilization of repurposed materials continued to be a central theme. The integration of

metal scraps and reclaimed wood, which were reshaped and rejoined, emphasized a form of material recycling. The necessity to create a freestanding sculpture led to a process of figuring out the structural and aesthetic dynamics. The piece began with a more geometric and linear approach but evolved into a more open form towards the end, embodying a visual progression that I found compelling. The final form evoked a sense of motion, akin to figures dancing.



Increments of Time

In addition to *Emotion Without Language* and *Increments of Time*, the exhibition included a series of smaller sculptural studies. These works, though

smaller in scale, were significant as they informed and led to the development of my thesis work. They maintained a sketch-like quality, allowing for experimentation with welding and three-dimensional relationships between metal and wood.



What One Should Know

The show also featured a series of drawings, which served as study sketches to better understand the sculptures. The marks on these drawings related to the fragments observed in the sculptures. A departure from the familiar, I used a pallet knife instead of traditional drawing instruments, pushing myself out of my comfort zone. This experimentation extended to the medium as well, with five works on paper and one on wood. The wood piece further explored materiality with the addition of carved elements and metal. Through these drawings, I aimed to extend my understanding of the sculptural pieces, exploring the transition from two dimensions to three, and experimenting with unfamiliar tools and techniques.

Transition to thesis

The journey into the 2D pieces began after I had the sculpture underway, springing from the same conceptual foundation established at my second-year show. These began as drawings of the sculptures once they were completed, evolving into 2D works and extending to pieces made from rods—not wire, but similar in their manipulation and assembly. This progression carried over the connection I felt to the construction of the wood sculpture, reflecting the same flow and interconnection among the components.

Initially, the rod pieces evolved from working with aluminum flashing. As I began to create an armature for it, or repurpose it, I discovered a familiar engagement with these materials similar to my experience with the wood pieces. I would bend the rods, pass them through the roller, cut them, and roll them again, eventually holding them up to piece together in a playful exploration. It felt like playing, akin to making art or building something as a child with whatever materials were at hand, responding instinctively to their possibilities.

This process often transported me back to my grandmother's basement, where I would tinker at her workbench. The fear that occasionally surfaces is that I'll fall back into a mindset where I feel compelled to make art destined for

exhibition—something I'm increasingly hesitant about. I question the purpose of creation when it's bound by expectations or marketability.

This experience has provided a solid structure that frees me from such concerns. Until my second show, everything I made was experimental, from mere thumbnails to more fleshed-out ideas, unconcerned with longevity or structural integrity. It was about capturing a fleeting concept, a commitment I made to myself to act on ideas as they arose, especially in an environment that supported such freedom.

As I progressed into my second year, I took a more deliberate approach, aiming to create works that were not only coherent but durable—not excessively fragile. You advised me during that semester, and I experimented with various forms, pondering how they might relate to the drawings or spaces I envisioned. By the end of that year, I felt I was truly beginning to craft sculptures that I could identify as my own art.

The realization that I might not have another chance to work on such a scale again was pivotal. Knowing we had access to a gallery with ample space, I seized the opportunity to explore what was possible in a larger format. This decision to embrace the challenge was exhilarating, marking a significant departure from my earlier, more tentative experiments. This break from smaller, more cautious projects has invigorated my practice, infusing it with new energy and purpose.

Thesis Sculpture: *Book Ends*

The original idea for *Book Ends* stemmed from contemplating life's growth, intertwined with watching my mom deteriorate due to dementia and Parkinson's disease. This process highlighted the complexity of losing parts of one's life, yet within that, there's a grace that surfaces as we approach life's end—it's not all chaos. These thoughts fueled the emotional aspect of my work, influencing how I approach each piece of wood and the overall structure of the sculpture.



Book Ends

The resulting sculpture uses repurposed wood from old homes, dismantled by individuals recently released from jail and then delivered to Second Chance. Here, they trim the ends off the lumber they sell, discarding it in the parking lot for people to use as firewood. I collect this wood and reassemble it, mirroring the way we rebuild our own lives. In doing so, I gave new life to wood that not only has a history of being part of someone's home but is also transforming into something new yet again.

One of the interesting things I discovered about this sculpture is that in homes, angles seldom reach 45 degrees. Instead, many of the pieces I work with have angles ranging between 15 and 30 degrees, and some even between five and 10 degrees. I utilize these angles to recreate and maintain the same rhythm throughout the piece. The textures also play a significant role; some of the wood is stacked and sandwiched together, while other parts are hollow, creating spaces within them. This interplay between the negative space and the positives, along with the hollow sections, adds depth.

Additionally, some pieces are capped, effectively holding everything together. The steel brackets, some of which are pinned, aren't just aesthetic; they're structural. Initially, I hoped to pin most of the structure together, but soon realized it wasn't realistic—it wouldn't remain stable. Surprisingly, we've moved it five times, and it has remained intact.



Book Ends

The relationship I have with each piece of wood from this sculpture is deeply intimate, almost akin to the proximity of another human being—whether standing beside them, lying next to them, or experiencing that sensation of

someone being uncomfortably close. It's about the physicality—the weight of each piece as I lift it, how its curves alter its behavior in my arms, much like holding a squirming child who moves in unpredictable directions. This dynamic imbued each piece with a sort of life, a phenomenon that became more apparent when I started to assemble it. The pieces seemed to communicate through their reactions when handled.



Book Ends

Crafting these pieces from scraps of wood with varying densities, not knowing beforehand what each piece will weigh, adds an element of mystery to the

process. Sometimes, the smaller pieces are surprisingly heavier than the longer cantilevered ones. There's a whole relationship unfolding within that dynamic. I feel embodied by, or connected to, each piece based on its unique characteristics—how it feels each time I move it or try to make it conform to a shape it resists. This interaction brings a personal dimension to the art, where each piece's response informs and shapes the overall creation.

Moving Forward

As an artist, I feel a much deeper connection to my work when there's a tangible, physical engagement with it. This extends to my painting practices as well, which I've recently revisited with the intention of making them less precious. I've abandoned using brushes and charcoal, opting instead for unconventional tools like pieces of rubber or anything I find that might make an interesting mark.



Dance Within the Body

This method allows me to react spontaneously to the marks I create, often unsure of the outcome when I apply the paint, whether by brush or by pouring

it directly—not on canvas, but on paper. Moving forward, I'm carrying this desire to not just make art in the traditional sense, but to explore and interact with the materials in a more immediate and unpredictable way.

This whole process reflects my evolving understanding of how I make art and my relationship to it, which had been obscured for quite some time. Working with sculptures has allowed me to embrace accidents and respond to them without covering them up or forcing a change. I feel more in tune with the spontaneous and genuine aspects of creating, which has been profoundly liberating.

Moving forward, I hope to find residencies and fellowships where I can create sculptures, and place some of these sculptures within institutions or building projects. I'm hoping to carry with me the interactive process that has become a stronger aspect of how I develop my art. It's much more intuitive than it was before, and I find it exciting. There's a possibility that it won't always feel like hard work; there is some joy and fun, almost childlike at times, which is much more inspiring to me.