

## Artist Talk

### — Let's Talk About *A Boat Made of Dreams*

**Robert Wilhite in conversation with Scott Grieger, Margaret Nielsen, and Axel Wilhite**  
**Saturday, November 22, 2025, 1:00–2:00 PM, AMPHI Gallery**

**Editorial Note:** In the transcript below, Robert Wilhite is hereafter referred to as “Robert,” Scott Grieger as “Scott,” Margaret Nielsen as “Margaret,” and Axel Wilhite as “Axel.”

**Robert:** My name is Bob Wilhite, and I want to thank all of you for coming here today to this talk. I curated this show, and I approached Lu and Tony about six or eight months ago about the idea of maybe having a show based on dream drawings and works from the subconscious. It really had not completely gelled yet. I guess the inspiration was the works that Axel had been doing that were straight from his dreams. As artists, I feel that we are interested in a lot of different things, and it is our responsibility to search out all those different aspects of things that we are passionate about and relate to them.

I thought a lot about the idea of works from the subconscious and what it could mean. Once I started thinking about it, I immediately thought of Margaret's work because I had been married to Denise Domergue for a few years, Axel's mother, and she had purchased a painting by Margaret from a show at the Patricia Faure or [which began as] Asher/Faure Gallery. It was this mysterious painting that lived with us and had an overall effect. It was playful and wonderful. The more I thought about it, the more I thought about Patricia Faure, how this woman had been in all our lives.

I thought about these paintings that Scott had done. I had seen a show, I believe in the '80s, and the imagery had stuck with me. It was mysterious, and there was something about it that really captured my interest. And I felt for a long time that... Well, first of all, we have to make our own art, and we explore how to do that as well as we can so it can communicate with people. But that artwork becomes a focal point for a real discussion about the impetus we have for making it, and also the implications that the work can take.

And I remembered the portraits and the paintings that Scott had done. They left a lasting impression on me. So, in thinking about this, I contacted Scott, and he was interested in working with us on it.

And that is how the exhibition came about. Tony and Lu were gracious and interested enough to go to Ventura to see Margaret and then visit Scott and talk about it, and look at a number of these different works. They were really supportive of how all of this might fit together so that it made sense.

With that, I will let each person talk about what they do, where they came from. And then, if there are some points you would like to ask questions about, let's do that. So Scott, it is on you.

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**Scott:** It is on me.

**Robert:** You can do this. (laughs)

**Scott:** (laughs) Well, often in my life as an artist, I have been following the cheap rent. Whenever I had a studio, I eventually learned the lesson to put everything on wheels so I could move overnight and unplug everything.

One time, I found myself on the other end of Melrose Avenue in L.A., the epicenter of the punk music scene and the rough-trade leather clubs. My neighbors were a band called The Screamers. They were intense, interesting, young, and pissed off.

I had a storefront. It was right in the middle of all this. I would be going back into the parking lot and cleaning up amphetamines and stuff like that. I thought these people were interesting. I went on this thing; I was a head-hunter. I was searching for heads, and the heads would come by.

I had a storefront, and I had a display out in front. A lot of artists, when they take a storefront, blank it out; they do not use the front as a storefront anymore. In my case, I put up a curtain and kept doing displays. Not happy Christmas things or Halloween stuff. These were sort of depressing.

And the punks would come by and say, “Hey, can I have one of those?” I was pretty broke, so I figured out, okay, influences, I guess you would say, there were these kids. They were rough and tough, and I liked them. And they were funny. They did not know they were funny, but they were.

The conceit was that I loved Persian miniature painting, the fine tiny paintings they would do, and I wanted to know what that was like. What is that? So I started doing little portraits of heads of punks. The conceit was to find out what Persian miniature painting was really like. What is that small world?

It was interesting because it is transformative: something small becomes big. And the other conceit was to draw the audience into the painting so they would be looking right at you. Come here, go away; come here, go away.

Those were the conceits of the miniature paintings. And it has to do with how I often change, because I change locations, following cheap rent, the latest art ghetto, whatever. That was a period when I was really involved in the street scene on the other end of Melrose.

I think that describes some of the work that you can see. The idea is to enter the painting, and then the painting is looking at you. That is really great. And that is what those little paintings are about.

**Robert:** One thing that I—excuse me for interrupting—one thing I found really special about those paintings is that the angles you address the portraits from are totally untraditional, and the portraits themselves are kind of blanked out in some ways.

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**Scott:** Well, they are paintings. They are not people; they are paintings. So I would always make them like that. I would not try to address abstraction and the picture plane and all that stuff you are supposed to do. Did that answer your question? No?

**Robert:** Yeah, you did very well. (laughs) Welcome, Tom and Lennon. [Editor's note: Tom Franco and his son Lennon entered the space at this moment.]

**Scott:** That describes that part. It was a very interesting period in my life because it was such an active street scene. It was an interesting time in Los Angeles with all that music.

**Robert:** Those paintings were really intimate. They are a lot different from the works you are doing today. But that intimacy was important, especially for the work that is in the show.

**Scott:** Well, sure, because another part would be: hey, I was pretty broke. And it was like, OK, how can I do something interesting and it costs me fifty cents? (laughs)

**Robert:** (laughs) And somebody might want to buy it.

**Scott:** Yeah. I could fit the studio in a shoebox, and I could move fast if I had to.

**Robert:** I understand. Yeah. How about you, Margaret?

**Margaret:** Well, I guess what is different about the work that I am showing from these guys is that I have worked from different periods of time. So when I do a show with work from different periods, it always puts me in the place of reviewing what the thread is that ties all these things together. And I think the main thread in my work all along has been storytelling, which is like a hangover from childhood. That is what we do when we are kids, right? We make up stories to try to make sense of things.

I grew up in a cultural wasteland in a part of Canada where there were oil fields and wheat. I never saw anybody make art. I was never taken anywhere to see art. And I remember when it was finally explained to me, or when it dawned on me, that people actually made these things; they did not just exist. And that Peter Rabbit, who was a close friend, was created by a woman, Beatrix Potter. And she, in my mind, lived in an attic by herself and created these worlds for herself, with characters she could talk to, and they talked back.

So that is how I am. I start with one picture, and it evolves into some kind of story. And that picture tells the next picture what it wants to do, and that picture tells the next one what to do. That is my process.

**Robert:** That is a good process. Larry Bell always used to say that the work tells you where you need to go next. And a lot of these simple sayings take some thinking about, to either agree with or not. Irwin [Editor's note: Robert Irwin] used to say, do not buy tools that will limit what you can do. It limits what you think the capacities of the tools are, instead of letting your mind run rampant and be able to do anything. And for me, I decided I had to know what they could do because I could not afford to have other people make things for me. I had to make them myself.

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**Scott:** You are good at it.

**Robert:** So we all have to find our own path among these things. So, Axel?

**Axel:** How did I get here? I think I have been an artist for less time than the other people up here. For a long time I wanted to be a writer. I saw how hard my dad worked, and I did not want to do that. I thought writing would be easier. (laughs) But then I had a breakdown about that, because I found that writing was just as hard. (laughs)

Growing up around artists, I had examples of how to live a life that way. So after my crisis about writing, I fell into making art. The first art I made was ironic, where I was consciously appropriating images and trying to comment on them. Conceptually, maybe the pieces were interesting or successful, but they were unsatisfying because they did not have any of me in them.

During the pandemic, it was a horrible time, but it gave everybody the opportunity to pause and look inward. At that time, I stopped making the art I had been doing. I started paying attention to my dreams and my dream life. At first, I wrote them down in a notebook, but then I started drawing them. I found that paying attention to these things was spiritually nourishing and inexhaustible. It revealed a whole other plane of existence that I had discounted.

For the last five or six years, I have been doing these drawings, and color crept in. That is a thorny thing, full of responsibility. But I started doing this work, and I was happy to have the opportunity to show it, because I had never shown it before. I realized I had framed a lot of these pictures without the context of the dreams. And I think what was exciting was the opportunity to show these paintings not as paintings, but as experiences, as facts of a place. It was nice to show the pieces with the stories.

**Robert:** One thing I was familiar with was the drawings, but I was not familiar with the complete dreams. When you look at an artwork on the wall, all the decisions have been made. And when I talked to Axel about how he was going to present these pieces, it presented some problems. Like he said, I want to present the dream along with the drawing. And I said my thought was that the dream should not visually overpower the drawing. It should complement it so one refers to the other but does not overwhelm it.

When Axel told me he was doing it this way, I was happy because it works in this situation. But what amazed me was that you read the dream and it is such a rich story, and you think, which part is he going to illustrate? The whole story is rich and interesting. Where is the image going to come from?

And then you look at the drawing or the painting, and that decision has been made for you. So the lingering question in the back of my mind when I look at these is, why did you choose this part out of this thing? I think we all have questions about artwork, and that is part of the mystery.

**Axel:** I think that if I could be a filmmaker, with the skill to translate these experiences faithfully, that would be the ideal medium. But I am limited to the tools that I have. I have

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experimented a lot, as a failed writer, with bridging the worlds of images and text—bringing them together. And when you do that, you create a space that people can fall into. It gives people a way into a fuller experience.

And to the question of why these particular scenes from the longer narratives: they are usually what I can remember most vividly.

**Robert:** That makes sense. Your experience in the art community has been there from the beginning. You have been around everybody from the beginning because of your association with your mom's conservation business and the number of artists in your life. You have gone to art galleries and seen work. That is a blessing. I had the same experience Margaret did. I grew up in Orange County and the Midwest, and I never went to an art museum. So when I went to Irvine with Alexis [Editor's note: Alexis Smith] and Chris [Editor's note: Chris Burden] and others, I was trying to figure out what the hell art is. What is this thing? How do you get your hands around it? It is this thing that comes from nowhere, and it talks to other people. And it has a responsibility.

And the practical artworks I was presented with were such a smart sort. It is like, how do I make sense of this? We all go through that in our own way. And we come out of it, and it makes us find that thing that enables us to search in different directions. One thing I have to say about the three of you is that you all have the tools to lay it down and create exactly what you want to do. These works of yours, Scott, it is obvious you have control of what you want to produce, and you make it exactly the way you want to. Same with you, Margaret.

**Scott:** In my case, it is different, because I was one of those little kids that would draw. My first memory is someone saying, "Hey, you are an artist." OK, I guess I am an artist. I never thought of being anything else. The skills came fast and loose and easy because that is what I did. Whether it was Walt Disney or realistic painting or abstraction or contemporary art, I was a student of it because I was an artist, and they all told me I was. And here I am.

**Robert:** That is interesting. As a 10- or 11-year-old, I worked for a patent draftsman because I was sick for a year. This guy knew how to draw things that worked perfectly so an uneducated person could understand how a complicated thing worked. It had a big effect. I thought about that a lot. These early influences really do affect our pathways.

**Margaret:** On that subject, Axel paid me a wonderful compliment. He was talking about that painting you had in your house. I knew Axel when he was about that big, and then I did not see him forever. He said that when he was a kid, he would look at this painting of mine—a deer running on top of the water with fish and a small woodland scene. It meant a lot to him. We exchanged this on Instagram. I said, that is a better compliment than any art reviewer could give me, that a child can remember that painting their whole life and talk to me about it. So thank you.

**Axel:** Oh, my pleasure. One of my favorite things about art is when you are allowed to live with it and develop a relationship with it. Art is not just decoration. It is a manifestation. It is like a living thing, and it has a relationship with you. The only education I have in art is the art I have lived with and loved, wanting to do the same thing or match that somehow.

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For me, I do not feel I have control over my medium. A lot of my art is just managing a series of catastrophes on the page.

**Margaret:** I can relate to that.

**Axel:** You start with a white canvas or a piece of paper, and you make a decision, and suddenly it is not perfect anymore. You accept that. Learning to be an artist, for me, has been learning to make peace with my capacity for failure.

**Margaret:** Or have it be a spring. A springboard.

**Axel:** Yeah, I just want to fail harder.

**Scott:** What you are saying about living with something, maybe a piece of that gets lost today, with art being an investment opportunity and value tied to stock market situations. That sense of living with something until you love it, and it changes your life, has gotten rusty. It is no longer the prime focus.

**Axel:** It is not. The only reason you hear about art these days is if it is the Gustav Klimt that got two hundred sixty million dollars at auction. It is much more rare.

**Scott:** Yeah, the millions for Frida Kahlo. And she is really good.

**Axel:** But there is so much art out there. A lot of my friends, some in the audience right now, have made works that I adore and have relationships with. That is what art wants to be. It wants to manifest in the world. It wants a relationship with us, even in quiet ways.

**Scott:** It is a weird kind of change.

**Axel:** Something is lost in a market-driven situation.

**Scott:** Yeah, it is a funny tab of what value is.

**Robert:** Yeah, big time. But that intimate thing, the type of art you are talking about, Axel, and that this show represents, is about a different thing. It is conceptually based, but intimate, and it speaks for you. It is something you walk away from and think about.

I believe the art I am interested in must have charisma, something that draws you to look at it, a mysterious thing that makes you ask, what is that thing in there that I am holding on to? And by thinking about it, the artwork succeeds in talking to you. It might not say what the artist wanted to say, but it talks to you in another way. That intimate art has been the kind I have responded to for so long, and it is the impetus for this.

So, does anyone have any glaring questions about things we have left out?

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Audience Member A (paraphrased): In your current work, do you have recurring characters or motifs?

**Margaret:** The bears are some of the most recent work. There have been different series of work I have done, and each one started with one image. For example, the woodland paintings began because I was walking down the street and someone handed me a religious tract with a picture of a man sitting in front of a tent. I did not know what I wanted to do next, so I thought, I will start with the tent. I ended up doing maybe a hundred paintings of how that evolved into the tent and then an environment. I refer to those as internal landscapes, because they are about sacred, secret places within ourselves.

Then other things got added, like the canoe and the water. And then the water and the fish and the bears. I was sitting, thinking, what do I want to do? I had my old childhood teddy bear on a shelf, and I thought, I am going to paint a teddy bear. As I painted it, when I got to the stomach area, I thought, what if something comes out of there? A teddy bear is your main security as a kid. It is the transitional object, the one thing you can trust, unless it turns on you. I still have to have him in my room at all times.

That led to the next bear couple, one teddy bear turning into a bear behind another teddy bear. As you go along, these things take on different meanings than you expected. You do not plan ahead. So I ended up doing a bunch of bears, the big bear being the culmination. He is like my best friend. I cannot wait to get him back home. Do not tell Lu. (laughs)

**Robert:** I love that huge bear. It is the friend we all want.

**Margaret:** I know. He is big. He is cuddly. And he is dangerous.

**Robert:** Totally. And warm in this weather.

Audience Member B (paraphrased): Living with art means seeing it under different conditions; light changes, mood changes, your position changes. These shifting moments influence how you perceive it. You mentioned living with art, and it made me think about how a piece slowly enters your subconscious. When you were a child living with that painting, did it ever appear in your dreams?

**Axel:** Not in a literal way. But it has come out in my art. When we make things, we refer internally. A painting emerges from imagination and memory. You draw on the way light reflects on water, or on how you remember certain images or symbols, or how something made you feel in the work you have seen before. All of that is in your art.

Audience Member C (paraphrased): Did you ever have a dream that came specifically from Margaret's painting?

**Axel:** Her fish has come into my work because of that painting. I "copied" the painting into my art. That just happened. (laughs)

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Audience Member D (paraphrased): Do you dream in black and white or in color?

**Axel:** I think I dream in color. But with more control over graphite as a medium, the drawings come out as black and white. I like the quality of black and white. It is like watching a black-and-white movie; you can project a bit of yourself into the image. It has been interesting to explore.

**Robert:** I do not think the fact they are black and white, instead of color, diminishes them.

Audience Member (paraphrased): I agree. They look more like dreams to me.

**Robert:** The black-and-white ones? It is funny. When you think back, you think about what might have influenced you. But dreams come from another space you wonder about.

**Axel:** It is important for me to get the image right. Sometimes if I pursue color, it distracts me. I do not use references, only recollections. There is a lot of erasure. The way graphite works on the paper; things emerge, things you cannot erase. Watercolor paper has a tooth, a grain. Life emerges from working the paper and trying to set things right. Details come out. I cannot be one hundred percent faithful to the dream. It is a negotiation between my abilities and my techniques. There are mistakes in every stroke. Over my evolution as an artist, I have realized that is not a problem. That is simply how our images manifest.

**Margaret:** You are in constant free fall.

**Axel:** Oh, yeah. Once you start the first mark...

**Margaret:** I am in this now.

**Axel:** Yeah, I am in it.

**Robert:** It is a Ouija board. It is a Ouija board you are working with. When I do things, I have something in mind, and it moves toward the final product. You make decisions as it goes along, but each piece takes you on its own route. I was watching that movie *The Mysteries of Picasso*. He is working on a piece, wiping it off, working on it, working on it. Then he sets it aside and says, I know where I want to take this piece, but I cannot take this one there. And he starts another piece, and it becomes what he wanted. I have always felt each piece is driving. You fix it, you correct it, and you are along for the ride.

**Margaret:** And the next one that comes along is a result of that. I cannot sit down and say, OK, I am going to do this series of paintings, they are going to be this, this, this, and this. Some people can do that. But once I do the first painting, the next grows from it. It tells me, oh, the water in this was cool. Maybe it looks like a snake. I am going to do some snakes. One thing leads to the next.

**Robert:** I agree. So I believe with that, unless Richard wants to ask the defining question that will make everybody cry. (laughs) Thank you very much, everyone, for coming. Curating this

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show and putting it together, being close to Scott and Margaret again, has been beyond my greatest expectations. I find it a rich combination of different ideas and techniques. Together it is an exhibition that sings in its own way. And I am glad all of you came to see it. Thank you.