

**Wil Aballe**

1375 RAILSPUR ALLEY  
VANCOUVER, BC CANADA  
V6H 4G9  
+ 1 (778) 229 3458  
WWW.WILABALLE.COM

**JUSTIN SOMJEN**

*Spines*

Mezzanine space

Opening: Thurs, Mar 6, 2025, 6-8PM

Exhibition: Mar 6 - Mar 30, 2025

Image:

Justin Somjen

*Dogfight*, (detail) 2024

Pine wood frame, epoxy resin motifs, latex paint



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## JUSTIN SOMJEN

### *Spines*

*Spines are defensive structures found in both plants and animals characterized by sharp, pointed projections. In plants, spines are typically modified leaves or parts of the vascular tissue from the stem. These modifications result in hard, discoloured spikes that extend outward, such as those seen on cacti. In vertebrate animals, spines are usually modified hairs composed of hard keratin. In aquatic creatures like fish and underwater invertebrates, such as sea urchins, spines may contain venom, which can be harmful or even lethal to predators.*

*In another context, the spine is a key component of the vertebrate central nervous system. In humans, it evolved to support an upright posture, a feat no other animal has achieved to the same extent. This unique adaptation has enabled humans to stand and move upright more than any other mammalian species, allowing our gaze to evolve from the ground to the sky. The spine, which supports our vertical posture, can be seen as a biomimetic spike reaching upward like a plant striving toward the sun.*

The exhibition *Spines* investigates the parallels between architectural spikes and analogous defensive structures found in the natural world. Utilizing finials—decorative spikes commonly found on fences, rooftops, and staircases—as a focal point, Somjen highlights the shared formal characteristics between these human-made constructs and evolutionary adaptations observed in flora and fauna. His conviction that architectural spikes resonate with biological evolution informs his artistic motivation, positioning these elements as relics that bridge natural history, biology, and the innate human desire for ascendance and protection.

*Spines* consists of four decorative frames, each adorned with wooden finials and a diverse array of motifs that serve a tripartite function: enhancing the ornamental quality of the sculptures, engaging with tropes of natural history and medieval symbolism, and evoking skeletal or calcified representations of both plant and animal anatomy. Within this work, significant motifs such as dogs, orchids, poisonous plants, vertebrae, biomimetic flora, and birds emerge, often depicted in defensive postures. The work creates frames within frames, forming a clear focal point or centrepiece reminiscent of cameo carvings. These centrepieces include a disembodied hand feeding blood to a Venus flytrap, two dogs fighting, a lizard in a defensive pose, and the scales and prickles of the pinecone of *Methuselah*—the bristlecone pine tree, the longest-living organism on the planet.

This mix of biological miscellany reimagines traditional motifs and decorative moldings, departing from established patterns of repetition and order. Instead, Somjen's chaotic and perplexing arrangements allude to disorder, rejecting the romanticized notion of nature as idyllic. While elaborate, the handcrafted sculptures possess a “blocky” quality, appearing neither old nor new, serving as protective emblems of our present moment, reminiscent of coats of arms or shields.

— Text by Justin Somjen

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## JUSTIN SOMJEN

### BIO

Justin Somjen is a Canadian artist currently residing in Vancouver on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. He has exhibited in Canada, the United States, and Belgium and holds a BFA in Photography from Toronto Metropolitan University and an MFA in Sculpture from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. His artistic practice explores the intricate relationship between decoration and protection. His current work is rooted in historical research and biological studies, examining the symbiotic connections among humans, plants, and animals. Somjen creates relief sculptures reminiscent of architectural forms, which, for him, symbolize human protection. His decorative relief sculptures draw inspiration from a diverse range of architectural styles, including Art Nouveau, Baroque, Gothic, and Classical. Through his work, he suggests that ornaments function as cultural structures that shape meaning while also investigating how these meanings shift, evolve, and are reinterpreted over time.

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Justin Somjen

*Frilled Agama*, 2024

Pine wood frame, epoxy resin motifs, latex paint  
38.5 x 13 x 2 in (97.8 x 33 x 5.1 cm)



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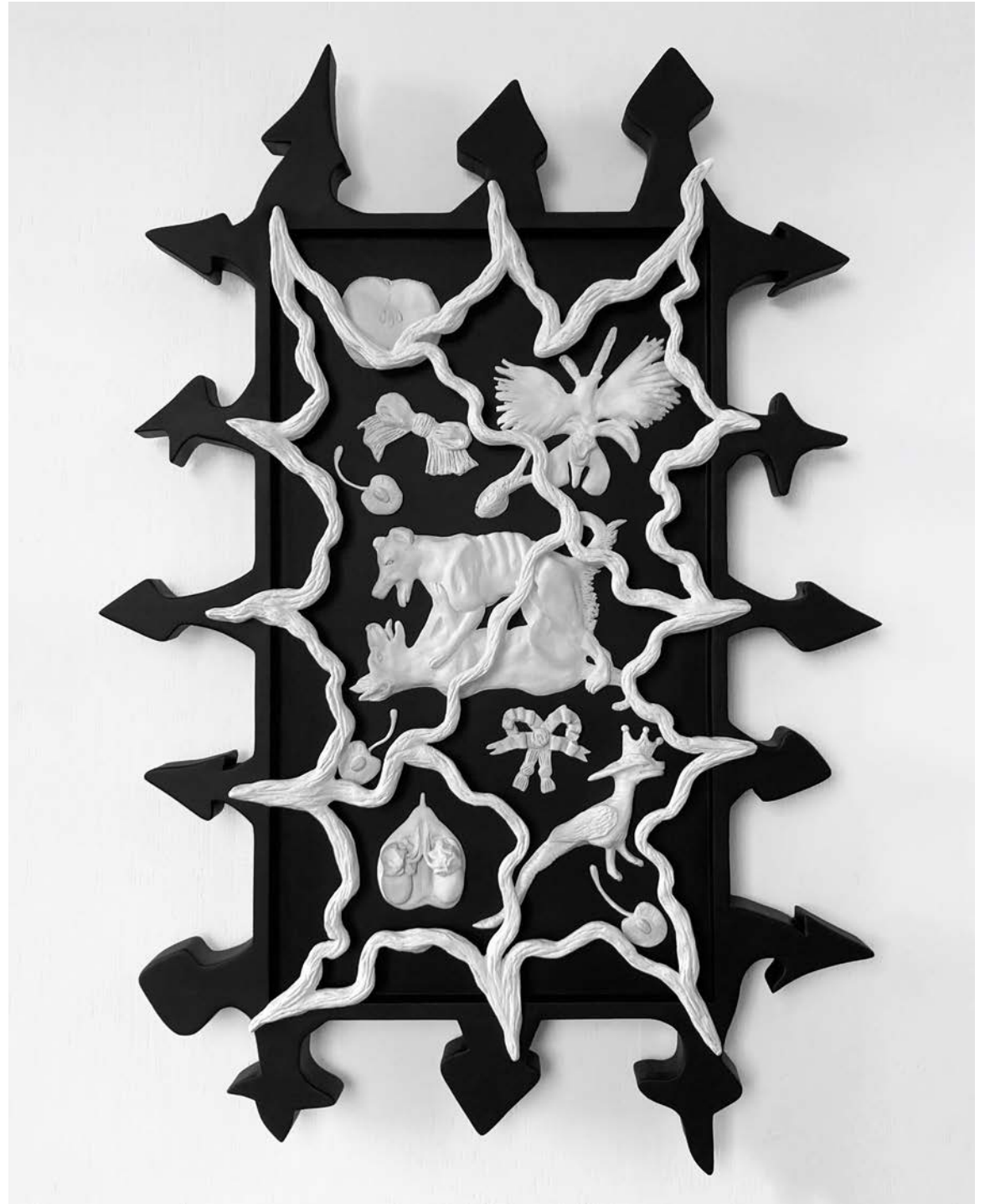
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Justin Somjen

*Dogfight, 2024*

Pine wood frame, epoxy resin motifs, latex paint  
34 x 23 x 2 in (86.4 x 58.4 x 5.1 cm)



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Justin Somjen

*Hand Feeding, 2023*

Pine wood frame, epoxy resin motifs, latex paint  
49 x 24 x 4 in (124.5 x 61 x 10.2 cm)





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Justin Somjen

*Methuselah, 2025*

Pine wood frame, epoxy resin motifs, latex paint  
28 x 17 x 2 in (71.1 x 43.2 x 5.1 cm)



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## JUSTIN SOMJEN

### CV

#### Education

MFA Sculpture, 2019, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp  
BFA Photography, 2014, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2017 *Style Life*, Gallery 44 Members Gallery, Toronto  
2015 *In the Middle of Things*, Warner Gallery, Toronto  
2015 *Placing Light*, Index Gallery, Vancouver

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2023 *A Seance In Between*, Mojo Supermarket, New York City  
2022 *A Domestic Art Fair*, La Vallée, Brussels  
2022 *Cendar*, Gallerie Zotto, Brussels  
2022 *The Problem with Tricksters*, Curated by Rachel Magnan and Clement Hebert, After Howl, Brussels  
2021 *Gather Like Dust*, Curated by Medusa Offspace and Box22, Antwerp  
2019 *Expo Citrouille*, Curated by Calaboose, Online Exhibition on Ofluxo  
2019 *David, The Cop*, (site specific project) with Stefan Cantante, Cafe Strange, Antwerp  
2018 *Cybernetics*, Curated by Grey93 and Uma Vespaziani, 165 Geary, Toronto  
2017 *Flash Forward/Flash Back*, Magenta Foundation, Toronto  
2017 *Laundry Room Pt. 2: Clay*, curated by Jess Carroll and Brian Rideout, Toronto  
2017 *Perplexities: Space, Form and Image*, Winsor Gallery, Vancouver  
2017 *Obsolescence*, Truck Contemporary Art, Calgary  
2016 *Agree to Disagree*, Sweet Pup Studios, Vancouver  
2015 *Objects Are Larger Than They Appear*, Ununhuitun, Montréal  
2015 *Holding Space*, Espace Fibres, Montréal  
2014 *Cue Depth*, Ryerson Artspace, Toronto  
2014 *Maximum Exposure*, Ryerson University, Toronto  
2013 *Space Matters*, BDRM Gallery, Toronto  
2013 *Capstone*, Toronto Laser Services, Toronto  
2013 *Space Case*, Index Gallery, Vancouver  
2013 *Night Visions*, Chinatown Night Market, Projected Installation, Vancouver

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## Auctions and Fundraisers:

2018 *SNAP!* Live Auction, The AIDS Committee of Toronto  
2018 *Salon 44*, Gallery 44: Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto  
2017 *Photorama*, Gallery TPW, Toronto  
2017 *Art Attack*, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto  
2017 *Salon 44*, Gallery 44: Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto  
2017 *SNAP!* Live Auction, The AIDS Committee of Toronto  
2016 *Photorama*, Gallery TPW, Toronto  
2016 *Salon 44*, Gallery 44: Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto

## Awards and Grants:

2022 *Research and Creation Grant*, Canada Council for the Arts  
2019 *Prize of the Academia Belgica*, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp  
2017 *Emerging Visual Artist Grant*, Toronto Arts Council  
2017 *Flash Forward Competition Winner*, Magenta Foundation  
2016 *Exhibition Assistance Grant*, Ontario Arts Council

## Publications/Press:

2022 *The Problem with Tricksters*, Brussels, Tzvetnik  
2022 *The Problem with Tricksters*, Brussels, KUBAPARIS  
2018 *Trinity Review*, University of Toronto creative literary publication, Toronto  
2017 *Flash Forward*, Magenta Foundation, Toronto  
2016 *Agree to Disagree*, Exhibition Publication, Vancouver  
2015 *LAUGH*, Royal College of Art Journal, London  
2014 *"The Mobile Artist"*, Function Magazine, Toronto  
2014 *Function Magazine*, Toronto  
2013 *Function Magazine*, Toronto

## Artist Talks:

2022 *Breakfast B. Reading Series*, reading organized by Julia Dahee Hong, Online  
2017 *Flash Forward/Flash Back* artist talk, Ryerson Image Centre for Nuit Blanche, Toronto  
2017 *Obsolescence*, Truck Contemporary Art in Calgary, Calgary

## Collections:

TD Canada Trust  
Private Collections