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The Stars of This Philadelphia Exhibition? Squirrels.

After a squirrel invaded his home, Wilmer Wilson IV decided to research everything about the creature. The result is a solo show titled "SKIRL!"



"Wilmer Wilson IV: SKIRL!" is the artist's solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

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Reporting from Philadelphia

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On Valentine's Day 2023, the artist [Wilmer Wilson IV](#) discovered an uninvited guest in his Philadelphia home: a squirrel that had moved into the cavity between the walls.

The squirrel was constantly active, moving freely through the building, keeping Wilson awake as it scratched inside the walls. It eluded Wilson's traps, spending two weeks occupying the artist's home and psyche until it finally left on its own.

While physically rid of the squirrel, Wilson became fixated, researching everything he could about the animal and eventually writing a novel on the topic.

Wilson's research caught the attention of [Hallie Ringle](#), the chief curator at the [Institute of Contemporary Art \(ICA\)](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, who had been following his work for some time.

When the museum began looking for an artist for its new residency program called R+D — one of the initiatives [Johanna Burton](#) brought when she became director in November 2025 — Ringle suggested Wilson. Intended to turn the museum into a kind of laboratory, the program leverages the institute's connections to academic and cultural resources across the city.

"I'd been thinking about what it means to be an art organization that acts as a research center on a university campus," Burton said. "We hold this idea of artists as fitting into categories like painters, but artists are also scholars. I think ideas get more interesting when they're not limited to their own field." Already deeply driven by research, Wilson was a perfect fit.

As the inaugural resident, Wilson spent time at the Philadelphia Zoo, Penn's Materials Library, and with scientists, including a squirrel neurologist. While residents can produce anything (like a book or a play), he chose to give a visual form to his squirrel research, culminating in the [solo exhibition "Wilmer Wilson IV: SKIRL!"](#)

The Eastern gray squirrel is the star of the exhibition, which runs through Feb. 21, but Wilson uses the animal to trace moments in American history and popular culture, revealing deeper messages about the relationship between humans and nonhuman species.

Philadelphia is a particularly apt setting. In 1847, officials began introducing squirrels to parks across the city to revitalize wildlife that had dwindled because of industrialization, making Philadelphia the first known major urban center in the United States to intentionally provide food and habitats for squirrels, a trend other cities would soon follow.

Over time, as Wilson experienced firsthand, squirrels began finding homes in the built environment, often causing significant destruction.

"They're a runaway success story," Wilson said on a tour of his exhibition at the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#). "I thought of myself as this apex predator, but seeing the squirrel's insurgent use of architecture in my home and then learning more about them, I became completely humbled by my hubris."

Rather than solely depict squirrels directly, Wilson gives visual form to the evidence of their presence, like the detritus they leave behind. In one work, a trash can borrowed from Penn acts as a pedestal for an apple with a single bite taken out of it. A new apple replaces the old one each day, a reflection of squirrels' voracious appetites.

Some aspects of the show are autobiographical, referencing the artist's experiences with his animal housemate, seen in two free-standing window bays installed as sculptures in the gallery. Revealing a cross-section of the wall, the large gap where a squirrel might make its home is visible.

In a series of two-part performances that expand the show beyond the walls of the institute, Wilson will feed squirrels around the city while wearing a sandwich board that reads "I'm Just Here to Feed Black/White/Red/Gray Bodies," choosing which color squirrel he intends to feed. The following day, he'll enter the window bay sculptures, moving and scratching just like his own interloper, the artist's sounds amplified into the gallery with a microphone.

"I listened to the squirrel scratch all day and all night, etching into the wall," he said. "It was like the animal was drawing or writing, an incessant attempt to communicate with me." Inspired by this thought, Wilson made large ink drawings with small marks resembling fur or frenetic paw prints.

To capture the vertical nature of squirrels' movements, Wilson installed a soaring canopy of paper bag nests like squirrel dreys above the gallery, taking advantage of the 34-foot ceiling.

With ample time and resources for his research, Wilson investigated everything from how squirrels interact with orangutans at the zoo (the latter enjoy petting them) to the role of squirrels in American history, including as pets for wealthy colonial families. "Benjamin Franklin gave them as gifts to British aristocrats, like they were diplomatic tools," Wilson said.

Some squirrels the artist researched have their own folklore, like Custis Morgan, the pet of Robert E. Lee's youngest daughter. Wilson learned that the Confederate general loathed the animal, with Lee writing to his wife that he fantasized about eating Custis Morgan.

"The squirrel wreaked havoc on Lee's house and disappeared right before the South lost the Civil War," said Ringle, who curated the show with [Cecilia González Godino](#). "People think of Custis as a secret agent for the Union." Wilson created a conceptual portrait of Custis in the form of cast bronze feces on a Confederate flag, a nod to the animal's reported political stance.

While the stories are quirky, their inclusion is a reminder of how squirrels shifted in the American psyche from pets to pests as they proliferated and subverted the role humans expected them to play.

"They are a reflection of our own decisions," said González Godino. "Introducing squirrels to the city made them urban animals. Now they show the limits of our own control of other species and the limits of our infrastructure."

As Wilson researched more about squirrels, he became increasingly humbled by their intelligence. Speaking with Lucia Jacobs, emerita professor of psychology and neuroscience at the

University of California, Berkeley, who specializes in squirrels, Wilson learned about their ability to assign values to different nuts.

“The more they like the nut, the more effort they put into hiding it,” Jacobs said. “They bury them further from another nut of the same type, which reduces the chance that if another squirrel finds one, they will find the next. Squirrels create an organized, hierarchical field and they remember where each nut is.”

For Wilson, working with scientists and historians during the residency solidified his respect for the creature that once tormented him.

“I’ve put myself into the shoes of squirrels, and I hope the viewer can do that too — imagine themselves as something nonhuman playing this important role in American history,” he said. “The cleverness and intelligence of squirrels completely surpassed my awareness of what they can do.”