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ALTERNATIVE PROJECTIONS

Experimental film in Los Angeles, 1945 - 1980

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUBJECT: David Wilson

Biography:
David Wilson was born in Detroit, Michigan and grew up in Denver, Colorado. He started making 16mm films while attending Kalamazoo College in Michigan, and went on to earn an MFA in Experimental Animation from CalArts in 1976. His films from the 1970s and 80s explore the act of perception and qualities inherent to the medium of film, often using the optical printer as a creative tool.

Wilson co-founded Independent Film Oasis, a screening series for avant-garde film, with a group of Los Angeles area filmmakers in 1977. In 1984, he shifted his focus from film to the installations that would form the Museum of Jurassic Technology, which he co-founded as a permanent museum in Culver City in 1988 with his wife, Diana Wilson. The museum was the subject of a 1995 book, MR. WILSON'S CABINET OF WONDER, by Lawrence Weschler. David Wilson was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2001. His recent films, which can be seen at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, utilize High-Definition and 3D video.

Filmography:

A Film for Log Hill Dogs (with Diana Wilson; 1974, 16mm, 00:02:00)
Casting Shadows (1977, 16mm, 00:17:00)
Dead Reckoning (1980, 16mm, 00:09:00)
Presence of Mind (1976, 16mm, 00:15:00)
Saturn Cycle (1974, 16mm, 00:16:00)
Stasis (1976, 16mm, 00:08:00)
…... [Dot Movie] (1973, 16mm, 00:03:00)

Tape 1: Pages 3 - 18
Interview date: January 30, 2010
Interviewer: Mark Toscano
Cameraperson: Elizabeth Hesik
Transcript Reviewer: Ben Miller, Jon Irving

Tape 2: Pages 19 - 36
Interview date: January 30, 2010
Interviewer: Mark Toscano
Cameraperson: Elizabeth Hesik
Transcript Reviewer: Ben Miller, Jon Irving

Tape 3: Pages 37- 53
Interview date: January 30, 2010
Interviewer: Mark Toscano
Cameraperson: Elizabeth Hesik
Transcript Reviewer: Ben Miller, Jon Irving

TAPE 1: DAVID WILSON

00:03:00 MARK TOSCANO
If you could, say and spell your name, not that it's that complicated.

00:03:06 DAVID WILSON
All right.

00:03:08 MARK TOSCANO
Your full name.

00:03:09 DAVID WILSON
My full name is David Hildebrand Wilson, and Hildebrand I can spell: H-I-L-D-E-B-R-A-N-D, and Wilson is W-I-L-S-O-N. David is D-A-V-I-D, David. Right.

00:03:28 MARK TOSCANO
So, we're in the Museum of Jurassic Technology...

00:03:32 DAVID WILSON
We are.

00:03:32 MARK TOSCANO
Good place but we're not going talk about that just yet.

00:03:35 DAVID WILSON
Okay.

00:03:36 MARK TOSCANO
So, could you just start by talking a little bit about where you're from and your early life.

00:03:47 DAVID WILSON
I was born in Motown. My mother's side of the family came from Michigan. My father's family came from Lincoln, Nebraska. It's a very solid mid-western background, but my family had just moved to Denver, Colorado, so at a very young age I was brought back to Denver. I grew up in Denver, which was a great place. It was a wonderful town at the time. It's still a great town but it's not the same charm that it was then.

00:04:38 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I went through high school in that part of the world, and then went back to Michigan to school and felt at that time like it was a culturally totally disorienting thing to do because I went into this environment that really I didn't understand in a kind of way, so I had a essentially miserable four years in college.

00:05:11 MARK TOSCANO
Which college?

00:05:13 DAVID WILSON
It was a place called Kalamazoo College. It was a small liberal arts school that was trying to model itself on the model of places like Reed and Antioch, and it did in terms of its academics, which were great—actually really good—but its cultural, social underpinnings were still those of a Baptist school, that this school had had only recently allowed dancing. [mutual laughter] So that was a really confusing period,

00:06:01 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But it was actually during that period, at the end of that time—and these years were 1965 or something to '69—and those were explosive times. Jonas Mekas came through, and I came to begin to understand that there was this world out there that had to do with motion picture. I mean, I had been interested in motion picture forever, and especially in high school, I really discovered this world—which at the time, had the same impact as independent film— the world imported European film and Japanese film, and I used to religiously go to Denver University's film screenings and be stunned and astonished by these films and the possibility of film.

00:07:07 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Then, once I got to Michigan and started to see this world of really independent film that people were making themselves, I was knocked out and undertook to do a film as my kind of graduation project from that college, and to the college's credit, they allowed me to do it. So I borrowed the physical education department's Bolex, 16 millimeter Bolex. I had it for a year because they didn't use it and I made this movie, and it was great.

00:08:01 MARK TOSCANO
Was it ALEX'S FIRST MOVIE?

00:08:03 DAVID WILSON
ALEX'S FIRST MOVIE, yeah, exactly. I was ecstatic about the process. Then, in a certain way, I was going to say it never stopped but, actually, I did for quite a period of time. But it really got into my blood.

00:08:25 MARK TOSCANO
Coming back to earlier in your childhood, were you exposed to film or art or anything that from an early age inspired you?

00:08:34 DAVID WILSON
Not so much. I mean, just in a standard film sense. I mean, I was always susceptible to those experiences and so I had very moving experiences as a kid watching films. Also, the thing that was parallel to me was the world of museums, even then. I think that those two thin— well, museums, film and music are the things that really, all through my growing up years, had the most affect on me.

00:09:28 MARK TOSCANO
By the way, for the whole thing, we definitely don't have to purely limit it to film.

00:09:32 DAVID WILSON
Okay, great. Great.

00:09:33 MARK TOSCANO
We can talk about anything at all.

00:09:36 DAVID WILSON
Okay.

00:09:37 MARK TOSCANO
If something was an influence...

00:09:39 DAVID WILSON
[overlapping] Sure. Right.

00:09:39 MARK TOSCANO
So, you said you had a miserable time in college?

00:09:47 DAVID WILSON
Well, it actually really was. Or it was confusing because I was at a school that was primarily the sons and daughters of Baptist ministers, and there were these social regulations. I had had pretty unfettered years in high school and was pretty free to do what I wanted and did, but then I got to this school thinking that it was going to be a progressive school and it wasn't, but I somehow didn't have the wherewithal to understand that, oh, maybe I should leave.

00:10:35 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
The one real advantage of the place was that's where I met Diana, so that made it worth it, but, yeah, that was just a quick chapter in life that didn't seem so quick at the time.

00:10:50 MARK TOSCANO
Was the four years of pain for [unintelligible]

00:10:51 DAVID WILSON

[overlapping] Yeah, exactly, right. [laugh] Right. There were great things. I mean, I was very interested in poetry at the time and there were some really wonderful connections that way.

00:11:07 MARK TOSCANO

Was there anything else that happened during that period that had an impact on you?

00:11:10 DAVID WILSON

Not so much. Outside of the school, I traveled a lot, my brother and I took an epic journey to South America, so there were other good things that happened during those years.

00:11:26 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Mark, you want to also flesh out the childhood more, like: mother, father, siblings, household…

00:11:32 DAVID WILSON

So my father was a physician, my mother was a home engineer. I had two brothers, I'm the middle of three. I went through public school and I was a problem child— not a problem child, I was a problem adolescent. I went through public school up until the last two years when my parents were sure I was going to hell in a hand basket so they pulled me out of public school and I went to essentially just a private school that my older brother had gone to and that was a great, great experience for me, actually.

00:12:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Somewhere along the way, I had to actually write about my eighteenth birthday. I had what has in my personal mythology come to be called a conversion experience, where I'd had this moment of realization that I still can't explain how these things come to pass but where I could understand the purpose and meaning of my life, and it charted the course for my whole life. It's interesting, it's really interesting.

00:13:21 MARK TOSCANO

Do you want to say anything else about that…?

00:13:24 DAVID WILSON

It's hard to say. Not that it's sacrosanct territory but it was a period of time where something erupted mentally. I essentially took it as a religious experience at the time, and I think I even stopped going to school and I would just go to this chapel on this campus of a school there and I just sat in this chapel for like a week or something.

00:14:18 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I understood that this was a very valuable and important thing. My greatest concern was that I would forget this, that it would go away, because I just understood… What? I don't know, but I understood. It was great, it was actually a really important experience…

00:14:50 MARK TOSCANO
It hasn't gone away?

00:14:52 DAVID WILSON
Hasn't gone away.

00:14:52 MARK TOSCANO
Okay.

00:14:52 DAVID WILSON
Yeah.

00:14:56 MARK TOSCANO
So then was that something that kind of carried you through your college years…?

00:15:00 DAVID WILSON
In a certain way it did, because that was just before going to college, or maybe a year and a half before going to college. But that essentially got me through. I knew that that work was just something I had to go through those college years and that I would come out of that and be able to carry whatever this work was.

00:15:28 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I had no idea what it meant, what this work was, but I'd be able to pick it up once I was able to shed this other experience that I was having to go through.

00:15:45 MARK TOSCANO
So how did you meet Diana at this time?

00:15:48 DAVID WILSON
This is charming—Diana and I met the first night, I can't remember if we've had these conversations in the past, but Diana and I met the first night of school. There was a mixer and I had seen her picture in the school—whatever book that they give you of the other people coming to that school in that year. I thought she looked interesting and wonderful.

00:16:16 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I just was like a heat-seeking missile to find her, and I did. There was some off and on through the first year, but after that it was pretty solid straight through.

00:16:36 MARK TOSCANO
So she was a student...?

00:16:37 DAVID WILSON
She was a student, same year. Yeah.

00:16:41 MARK TOSCANO
So could you talk about what you did once you finished school and then you had this film. If you could come back to that.

00:16:48 DAVID WILSON
Well, after leaving that school—Kalamazoo College—Diana and I moved to Chicago because that was the big city that we had come to know during that time. My older brother, Steve, was in Chicago at the time. We would go on weekends to Chicago because it was interesting, and go to see films, greatly. There was, I think it was called The Playboy Theatre in Chicago.

00:17:25 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was great, it was a really good independent theater that screened all kinds of really good films, and so we would take the bus in. It was like a two or three hour bus ride, but then we'd have a weekend in Chicago and it was great. So after we finished college, we moved to Chicago and I was looking for work in the film industry, actually. I had discovered—maybe through Gene Youngblood's book, I'm not positive, which is curious…I'm trying to put all these pieces together…

00:18:05 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
[Through] EXPANDED CINEMA, I think I had discovered Pat O'Neill's work through that book, I'd never seen it. Various people brought independent films through…Jonas came, but Jonas would not have had Pat's work. Somehow I knew about it. I think I had not seen it in motion, I'd only seen images, but the images knocked me out and so I wanted to do that.

00:18:46 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I already understood that that work was done with an optical printer. So I went in search of that kind of work. I went to a place—I forget the name of it now—it was on Michigan Avenue, right across the street from the Wrigley buildings that… Do you know Chicago at all?

00:19:06 MARK TOSCANO
A little bit.

00:19:07 DAVID WILSON

It's just north of the Loop. There's a river— I'm not sure what river. Once you cross the river on the west side of the Wrigley buildings, and this place was down to the right. They did motion picture, but they also did slide work for companies like International Harvester, because at that time, a great deal of in-house work was done through slide presentations and they would make slides that would be used in these presentations.

00:19:51 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But the slides were made on an AGFA machine that was a lot like an optical printer. So it had a load of 35 millimeter film and then essentially a gate where you would put the slides that you made, and it was using 5369 or 5362 high contrast, black and white lino film, essentially.

00:20:32 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Which is what I knew that Pat O'Neill was using, and so I started to make—I have no idea where these things are, maybe they all burned up—but a ton of still images that were build up composite images. I haven't thought of those in a long time… I was wanting to do these kind of composite images.

00:21:11 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I just somehow had enough latitude. I don't know if I'd stay after work or something, but I just produced tons of these things and then I would have these slide shows. They had at that place an optical printer and so I would go and hang out. They had a producer service optical printer and I would hang out with the guy that ran it, and I was in hopes of graduating from making slides to doing moving images.

00:21:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But this was 1969 and there was a war in Southeast Asia, so my draft board saw to it that my life was interrupted. I had foreseen this possibility—it was more than a possibility, this inevitability—and so I had started on the path of applying for a conscientious objector status, which, miraculously, I was granted.

00:22:23 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

My draft board, unlike many draft boards, wanted me to come do the service in Colorado. Usually, they would have required that you leave your home to do alternative service, so I came and did, but they wanted it done in state so I went back, Diana and I went back in 1970—actually, New Year's Eve 1970. We drove across snowy Kansas to Colorado and set up and then I reported to Colorado General Hospital for alternative service.

00:23:18 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
For that alternative service, I worked for a spell with a mad psychiatrist, and I got the job because of my interest in film because he filmed everything. He was truly nuts [laugh]. But then he and I didn't get along. There was a deep philosophical divide, and so he fired me and instead I went to work in the emergency room there at Colorado General.

00:23:59 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
That was a pretty profound experience because Colorado General is like the main everything hospital, and I was an orderly in the emergency room for almost two years there. It's tough because you get these hideous traffic accidents, and people shooting each other, and an endless string of suicides. So that was a really very intense, and actually, in a lot of ways, important experience for me.

00:24:37 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I wrapped so many dead people and so that was in a way a crazy period of time, but I knew at the time that it was meaningful and invaluable. Diana and I got a small house, rented a small house. I set up the second bedroom of the house as a darkroom and I was still hugely interested in doing this kind of composite motion picture work.

00:25:17 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I bought a Bolex as soon as I started to make money from this job—which probably paid three or four dollars and hour—but I gathered enough money together to buy a Bolex, which seemed like a fortune but I somehow was able to do it pretty quickly. Then I made an optical printer, essentially based on the Bolex, and started to do this work.

00:25:47 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I had some sense of it, and I was able to do bi-packs with the Bolex. I did my own processing and I had tanks and would hand-process film, and I actually really liked the quality of the hand processed stuff. I made lots and lots and lots of loops. Basically, I suppose it was just a lot of tests, a lot of experiments, but that was all movies to me, I just loved it so I had a wonderful, wonderful time.

00:26:26 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
My job in the emergency room was such that I really had quite a bit of time. A lot of time I would work nights, which was like 11:30 to seven in the morning, and then I'd come back and sleep for a while but then I'd have all afternoon until 7:30 to work. So that was actually a great period of time. That was really good.

00:26:50 MARK TOSCANO

During that time from when you got to Chicago but also in Colorado, during those years were you in contact with anybody else making work or were you just doing this on your own?

00:27:01 DAVID WILSON

Yeah, it's very much on [my own]. Yeah. I was showing it to anybody that would look at it, basically, but I didn't know anybody else. In those days, very, very few people made film. It was really not so common. Diana and I had started already to do a number of projects together.

00:27:31 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I didn't graduate when I was supposed to graduate because I never finished anything on time, and so in order to finish certain requirements, I can't even remember what they were, we made some films and Diana and I made two or three animation stories that—I can't remember when it was, but right in those years—that were great. I don't know if those showed up, if we had those. I can't imagine that we don't.

00:27:59 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

We did an animation to a Bob Dylan song, PEGGY DAY. It was really nice. Then what did we do…? We did two or three animations. Before I got the Bolex—all this comes back—I had a 8mm Bolex which was really nice. It was a really nice little camera. It took the split 8mm reels, and I shot a film that I really liked a lot in the amusement park there in Denver.

00:28:41 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I don't know when it was, had to be in that time. So, there was a moderate amount of work we were doing, and finished films that we were producing that you could say, well, that's done.

00:29:02 MARK TOSCANO

Going back a little bit, could you talk a little bit about some of the films, could you talk about ALEX'S FIRST MOVIE?

00:29:09 DAVID WILSON

ALEX'S FIRST MOVIE was not quite scripted in that it was MOS, there wasn't sound. I can't remember if it was storyboarded but it had a very clear narrative arc. It was shot in multiple locations around the mid-west. It ultimately is kind of a psychological thriller. It's not really a thriller, but it has a lot of psychological content and it had a lot of archetypal figures.

00:29:52 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I got all my friends to work on it. This fellow named Alex, who I've totally lost contact with who was the lead in it and he was great, he was actually really good. Then a number of other people who were willing at that time to participate in film. It was all very done. We had equipment and it was lit…

00:30:27 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was a combination of—like all good movies of that era—a lot of it was like dream sequences. It wasn't quite dream sequences, but it was some other world… I'm sure it was Cocteau-inspired, like not quite falling through a mirror but almost, you go into another space, another reality where this confrontation takes place.

00:31:04 MARK TOSCANO
What was the response…?

00:31:06 DAVID WILSON
The response was good. It looked like a movie [laugh], that was a good sign. It had a common start soundtrack that was pretty complex. I think we've lost [it], I don't think we've got it.

00:31:25 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Yeah, I think it didn't survive, but I think there was a lot of John Fahey on the soundtrack. I think, too, a lot of sound effects, I remember we made a lot of sound effects. It was a great experience to make that film, and it felt like, yeah, this is working. And it had an affect on people, it had something behind it.

00:31:57 MARK TOSCANO
Did the experience of making that— or, I should say, how did the experience of making that push you further into wanting to make even more films?

00:32:04 DAVID WILSON
Oh, yeah. I never doubted for a second that I wanted to keep doing it. Yeah. I didn't undertake anything that big for a long time again, but I was very interested in animation. I don't think that film had any animation that I can remember, but I was really intrigued by graphic film, or the possibilities of that whole world of graphics, animation in combination with shot film.

00:32:48 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
This was only a year before moving to Colorado so, really… Time takes on such different senses then, because that seemed like eternities, each one of those eras, but really it was only a year's time. That led directly to then all those experiments in Colorado, and then the films that got produced there too.

00:33:15 MARK TOSCANO
So was it in Colorado you started to really work on movies, shall we say?

00:33:22 DAVID WILSON

Yeah, well, I was in Michigan with ALEX'S FIRST FILM, but then after that I kept doing them, I just kept doing all the explorations of the graphic work. Then during that time—during those two years that Diana and I were in Denver—we started to build buildings, and we built a geodesic dome in our backyard, and we built a zome…

00:33:57 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

These were all brilliant designs systems that people had worked out at the time. We built a sauna, so we'd have all our friends over and take our clothes off and go into the sauna. Yeah, it was crazy, it was nice. But we realized as this, as my CO was coming to an end, that Diana and I needed to go out somehow and get away…

00:34:35 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

We wanted to leave the city, and we found a piece of property in western Colorado and bought it, and very soon after that period of service ended, we went there. It was remote, but we somehow were able to buy a huge four-wheel-drive pick-up truck and we packed everything we could into it—including our zome and our dome—and took it up to this piece of property and started to build. It was like 40 acres of pinyon and juniper. It was quite beautiful…

00:35:25 MARK TOSCANO

Can you talk about how remote it was?

00:35:27 DAVID WILSON

It was 15 miles of county road and then a mile and a half off the county road that was, curiously, only passable in summer months, so in the winter we'd have to ski in., especially those winters. The winters that we were there were very heavy snow winters, so we'd have to ski in and we would be up on the land all week and then go to town.

00:36:12 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

We'd park our truck down at the county road and ski up with our groceries It was just straight up a hill, it was crazy. But it was great. It was an amazing time, actually, and all during that time—it's so funny telling you all this because you know all this, but I'll tell you it again. [laugh]

00:36:39 DAVID WILSON

We started to build this house, which was very elaborate. It was a ten-sided house. It was kind of like a pie, and every level of the house was—or every piece of the pie—was at a different level. There was a courtyard in the center. It was pretty big, I think it was like 12 or 16 hundred square feet. Not huge, but big enough. It was a lot to undertake. We built it all out of pretty rough lumber that we got at this wonderful sawmill that was not terribly far.

00:37:29 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was dead quiet up there, it was just unbelievable. Our nearest neighbor was a couple of miles away and in the winter time you could hear him chopping wood because the air is so totally clear, and the way sound travels in completely clear cold air is really amazing. So we were there a couple of years.

00:37:56 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I set up a darkroom. I turned the dome—which was on a different part of the land—I turned that into a darkroom and continued to make films to the point where, actually, we started to support ourselves by making films. We went out and visited merchants in town, anybody that would have us…

00:38:24 MARK TOSCANO

What town was this?

00:38:25 DAVID WILSON

This is a small town called Montrose. Especially then, a small town. It was a town that served ranchers and farmers in this quite rural part of western Colorado. We were in a county called Ouray County and I think our license plate was like #57. It was just unbelievable how few people were there, and utterly beautiful country, really nice. But we would visit Montrose and talk merchants, like the people at the lumber yard, the people at the Trailways bus station, the local jeweler…

00:39:11 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

We got all these people to allow us to make them television commercial, and we set up an animation stand. Most of them were animation of some kind or another. The earliest ones that we did, we actually shot the animation with a Coleman lantern and a mirror system to try and light the animation evenly. It was pretty nuts.

00:40:04 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Then we were starting to do films for the Chamber of Commerce of Western Colorado, it was for promotion of the western half of the state. We got to the place where we felt like, well, if we're going to do this we should really—because neither of us had had any training in this at all—we thought, well, if we're going to do this, we should get good at it.

00:40:35 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So we started looking around and discovered CalArts. This was in 1973 or so that we were looking, CalArts was just a year or two old, and I think we may have been looking at Artforum in those days. I don't know how we'd get it in [unintelligible], but somehow we knew about this school, that this school existed.

00:41:00 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I think Diana found that this school existed and then I found out that this guy named Pat O'Neill was teaching there and I was just, okay, that's where we'll go. I was just knocked out. So I made a film specifically to apply and was accepted and in, whew, I guess 1974, then packed up our pick-up truck again with everything that we thought maybe we'd need and drove out here to go to school for two years in their Master's program in experimental animation.

00:41:53 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

During that time, we did loan our house to a friend—actually, a friend of my brother's—so that somebody would be staying in this house that we'd been so painstakingly building for almost three years. We came out in October because we were working on this film for a chamber of commerce, and we were late actually getting to school because we had to do various things.

00:42:24 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But we got out here I think October 10th or something… Diana could say better, but maybe on the last day of November—I was thinking the last day of October, but I think it wasn't Halloween, I think it was last day of November—we didn't have a phone, we were dirt poor, but the sheriff in Newhall came knocking at our door and said, you need to call your brother.

00:43:00 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So I went to the pay phone and then called my brother and he said that our house had just burned to the ground. So that was a life changing moment. Our house and everything that we had, everything that we owned except for the few things we'd gotten in the back of the pick-up truck, burned to the ground. So all of a sudden there was nothing to go back to in Colorado, so we finished out those two years in CalArts,—and we can go back to that—and then came down here, drove down the 405 to Los Angeles and stayed.

00:43:47 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
CalArts was great. For me, it was a really, really great experience. Only one of us went to school. I mean, only one of paid tuition, but really we both went. CalArts was pretty good in those days, it was just a community of people that loved people that made things…

00:44:05 MARK TOSCANO
So Diana basically attended…?

00:44:06 DAVID WILSON
[overlapping] Diana attended school as much as I did and produced probably more work than I produced. We did work with Jules Engels who was— well, when we got there, Pat O'Neill was taking a sabbatical, so I met him during that time but couldn't work with him. Really, you were just on your own anyway,

00:44:48 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was then—I think still is, as far as I can tell—as much student-driven as it is instructor-driven in terms of where you get instruction. I started to meet all of these wonderful people, David Berry, Chris Casady, Adam Beckett, these great people who were either in school or had just graduated, but nobody left. The distinction between being in school and bot being in school, it was a very graduated field, it didn't make any difference...

00:45:39 MARK TOSCANO
I did want to go back a little bit, because you're producing all this work while you're in, well, first Chicago and then Colorado, as well as the commercial work.

00:45:49 DAVID WILSON
Right.

00:45:50 MARK TOSCANO
But I was wondering, to the best of your recollection, could you maybe talk about let's say the independent work you were doing? Like the personal work, and if you can remember, titles or descriptions.

00:46:02 DAVID WILSON
Beginning at the beginning, the first film was ALEX'S FIRST FILM, and then I think the next films after that were probably shot regular 8mm films. That amusement park film, which I don't think we have. I'm sure it had a name, I don't remember what the name was.

00:46:44 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
If you can sit Diana down sometime she may remember more of this, but I think there were two or three animations in there. I know that there was a Peggy Day animation. There was one other animation that was done at the same time I'm positive of but I can't even remember what it was. Maybe it'll come back to me. Then the next films after that, apart from boxes and boxes of loops, were some of those loops, then, because you could print from loops, became this film called CIRCUS FILM that, actually, it was kind of a breakthrough for me. I really liked that. It was short, I think it was three minutes.

00:47:28 MARK TOSCANO
We've got that, right?

00:47:28 DAVID WILSON
Yeah. We've got that, right?

00:47:30 MARK TOSCANO
It was labelled just CIRCUS?

00:47:32 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, maybe it's just CIRCUS, yeah. It was shot at a Ringling Bros. circus… That had sound, too, right? Is there a soundtrack on that…?

00:47:45 MARK TOSCANO
I can't remember.

00:47:46 DAVID WILSON
I think there is. I think that maybe even got printed as a release print by the lab. I'm not positive about that but I think maybe so. I think that the only other finished film to come out of that period that I can remember…

00:48:13 MARK TOSCANO
Was there PAUL, too?

00:48:14 DAVID WILSON
Oh, there was PAUL. PAUL was, in a certain way, an unfinished film—and this is probably important to say—it was essentially inspired by [Sergei] Parajanov. It was inspired by SHADOWS OF FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS, which I had seen—and it actually would be important to me to be able to remember this—I'm not positive when I actually first saw that film, but it was when I was in high school—which it could have been from a time point of view—or if I saw it after college. I can't remember.

00:49:00 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But whenever it was that I saw it, it had a really profound effect on me and affected my life in a lot of different ways. You know the film. It's unlike, really, any of Parajanov's other films. I'd love to know who the DP was on that film. I've looked it up, I just can't remember...

00:49:27 MARK TOSCANO

It probably was the guy that also shot I AM CUBA.

00:49:30 DAVID WILSON

That's what everybody thinks, but it's not. It's not him. Right. It's so curious, that's in the popular lore that it was the same DP and it's not. It's somebody else, which is curious. What might be possible is a lot of people shot I AM CUBA. That wasn't just one DP and it's distinctly possible, I suppose, that one of the camera people on JA CUBA was actually the same guy that shot with Parajanov on Shadows.

00:50:07 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But SHADOWS has sequences that when the protagonist—what's his name, not Ivan. I can't think of his name—when the protagonist is killed essentially at the end, and a couple of other moments during the sorcerer's…, that the film goes into this beautiful posterized graphic sequences. The whole film knocked me out, but those especially knocked me out. I wanted to do exactly this kind of film that was a combination of just shot motion picture but then with these graphic inner weavings.

00:50:51 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I started this project that I think only ended up as PAUL'S FILM. Paul was a friend who was I think by then was living in New Mexico in a kind of rural way. I had known him since high school, he was really very good friend and really interesting guy.

00:51:21 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

That film, that went back to this period of conceiving of projects that I didn't somehow complete. That was a very elaborately conceived film that was all about splitting, and I think about it now and I really wish I would have made that movie because it was philosophically really interesting to me and important. But it never really got finished and I think there were only just test sequences that I put together as a film.

end of tape 1

TAPE 2: DAVID WILSON

00:00:37 DAVID WILSON
So you want to keep trying to do that chronology of movies, yeah.

00:00:41 MARK TOSCANO
Well I'm saying chronologically but also when there's an area I want to maybe focus on more, because you've got us all the way up to CalArts...

00:00:50 DAVID WILSON
No we can back up.

00:00:53 MARK TOSCANO
The idea that you were making work in that abundance before even doing formally, or even being part of any kind of community.

00:01:03 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Yeah, definitely. It was really internally driven. Like when friends would be there, I would try and turn out the lights and get out the projector and show them. But in Denver, there was no place to show the films. There was no screening organization, there was nothing like there was when I came to Los Angeles. There was certainly no community when we were in Montrose. I remember that some friends of ours, actually—some of our closest neighbors, these people would— I don't know if they rented or bought a house in town and set up a café.

00:02:02 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So we would have a movie night at their cafe, and I'd bought by then a Bell & Howell 385 Projector, and I think we were renting movies from Facets. I'm not sure, some place. We would rent movies, because there was no way to see movies, period. No ways. So I think we would rent movies and take them down, and then people from the town would come and we would show them movies. Just in their café. It was like a coffee house before people had coffee houses. I would always at the beginning of those shows, Diane and I would show films of ours as shorts before whatever longer film we may have rented.

00:03:06 MARK TOSCANO
How often would you do it?

00:03:08 DAVID WILSON
I think we tried to do it once. We were doing it once a month, I think. I don't know how long it went on. It went on for maybe a year or something like that.

00:03:20 MARK TOSCANO
Did you get like classic features…?

00:03:22 DAVID WILSON
Classic features but more things that we had been impressed with. But we also felt that we had to be conscious of who our audience was. I cannot remember what films we rented. It was also what films were available, because we had to mail off for a catalogue, and they'd send us the catalog. That was great. Going back to that point, essentially there was completely no community. It was just us.

00:04:09 MARK TOSCANO
But these films that you two were making, you showed.

00:04:12 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, we would show them as shorts. Anybody making a movie was interesting. Nobody made movies, it was unthinkable. I'm trying to think then in terms of the chronology—I completely forgot about PAUL'S MOVIE.. I think then the next film probably was the film that I made in the attempt to get into CalArts that was, the name is just six dots in a row.

00:04:44 MARK TOSCANO
Oh, dot movie [……].

00:04:44 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, dot movie. It was like ellipses actually. How you have like ellipses in a sentence, that was to my mind what those dots were about, an ellipses. We've talked about this, but I had mixed feelings about that. I think I hadn't made a film in over a year, year and a half because of making the house, and that film ended up just being a whole, everything including the kitchen sink. It was kind of too much, and I didn't love it. I think when you and I screened it, I ended up feeling a little bit better about it, but I wasn't crazy about it. But somehow it got us to CalArts, and that was a good thing.

00:05:36 MARK TOSCANO
When you wanted to go to CalArts and you knew, in a way, what you wanted to make and what you wanted to do.

00:05:41 DAVID WILSON

Yeah, exactly. Our thought was, let's do something to show our efforts in this direction. Then I think in terms of just the chronology of films, the next thing would be the work AT CalArts. It was constant shooting and processing, most of which just ended up as tests and loops and not finished things. I was at CalArts two years. The first year, I was mostly coming to know the equipment and still working in that way of just generating lots of things that didn't coalesce into a film, but then a lot of those components actually went into the film that was kind of my thesis film, that was called SATURN CYCLE. It was a film in three parts. It actually was using some loops.

00:06:54 MARK TOSCANO

How about the FILM FOR LOG HILL DOGS?

00:06:57 DAVID WILSON

FILM FOR LOG HILL DOGS. So during that time, Diana kept making films, and she made at least three animations during those years— FILM FOR LOG HILL DOGS, which was, to my mind, this beautiful animation that then was optically printed. What are the names of her other films?

00:07:34 MARK TOSCANO

That one was '74, and then THE LOG HILL STORY was '76.

00:07:41 DAVID WILSON

LOG HILL STORY is the other one that was still CalArts, right. I'm pretty sure LOG HILL STORY was still CalArts. Things were so different then in terms of the experience of seeing your work. I remember getting LOG HILL STORY from the laboratory and taking the projector—I think I've told you this story—down to the airport. I think Diana was flying to Ohio something, and carrying this projector because she was just desperate to see it before she took off. It was just coming out of the lab, and somehow I was available to go to the lab, and I got it, and I met her at the airport with this projector. These projectors were huge and heavy.

00:08:32 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

And we set up kind of under the benches in the airport, and I brought a little screen so that she could see it before she left and it was great. It was such an event then to get a film out of the lab. It was so charged.

00:08:51 MARK TOSCANO

I think only because we didn't mention it earlier, but could you say what "Log Hill" was referring to?

00:08:55 DAVID WILSON

So "Log Hill" was the remote place that we lived. It was a mesa 25 miles from Montrose in Ouray County, covered with pinyon, juniper and sage and coyotes and bobcats…it was a great place. So LOG HILL STORY and LOG HILL DOGS all referred to that place and that era.

00:09:33 MARK TOSCANO

So, SATURN CYCLE— I'm going to go back up just to the experience of moving to L.A. and all that, but since we're pretty much into the films, do you want to talk about [SATURN CYCLE]?

00:09:42 DAVID WILSON

Sure. SATURN CYCLE is a film in three parts. It really grew out of that way that I'd been making films with these components, often time loop components, and printing essentially from loops into making something more permanent. That came from the experience of looking with loops, really. Especially back then, I had been working that way in Colorado. When I was in Denver, I started making loops, but it turned out when I got to CalArts that all those guys—Adam [Beckett] and Dave— well, less David Berry, but Adam and Chris [Casady] and a lot of people were doing the same thing. You'd have these film boxes and they'd just be full of these carefully rolled up loops.

00:10:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Very often when you get together to look at movies, you weren't putting a film on the spindle and feeding it to the projector, you're just loading loops into the projector. I'm sure other people did that then, but it was pretty natural evolution to take those loops and put them in the optical printer, in the printer head, and you'd roll some of that loop and then you could backwind the camera, so you could then devise whole systems based on— I don't know if people then knew about this, but it was really analogous to what Steve Reich was doing with COME OUT TO SHOW THEM, all those early loops pieces that he was doing.

00:11:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

This was really very analogous to that kind of work, that way of working. And SATURN CYCLE was essentially a product of that. I haven't really had these thoughts before, but now thinking about how that whole film was made, maybe not all the components, but almost everything in there is some form of repetition that happens again and again, but then it slowly evolves into something else, and so it becomes very rhythmical. There's a section in that, there's a tap dancer that just keeps dancing the same step ad nauseum. And trains, there's a whole section with a close up of a passing train that turns into these—at the time, probably still does—looks like these very beautiful kinds of silver blue streaks and smears.

00:12:45 MARK TOSCANO

And you scratched the film.

00:12:46 DAVID WILSON

And scratched film, right. Yeah and a mountain actually came. There was the central geologic feature from where we were on Log Hill, was this beautiful set of mountains and the San Juans, and the pinnacle is this mountain, Mount Sneffels, and for this chamber of commerce film we were doing, we rented an airplane and flew around that mountain. So I used that in one section of this film. I think what those films were doing—I can't remember if other people were necessarily doing this—but then with different successive passes, the treatment of the image would be slightly different, so it was like theme and variation. I think that there was a moderate amount of that with Sneffels and then with the other things too.

00:14:02 MARK TOSCANO

Was that the only film that you did it on?

00:14:07 DAVID WILSON

I don't know, I think maybe that was the only film, in terms of a completed film. I think I was still at CalArts during the time. Actually, we went back to Colorado and I shot—I can't remember if this was before or after graduation that I printed this film—but we went to Colorado, and went down just off of Log Hill to this place called Dallas Creek, which actually now is where Ralph Lauren has his ranch. It's just this vast, beautiful area. It's where Ralph gets all these colors, all these nice muted tones. So I shot a film of a babbling brook.

00:15:12 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I guess that was still during CalArts. Then at some point in there, on the printer at CalArts, I went and reprinted that film, and that film became this film STASIS, and STASIS began this other era of work that lasted really [about a decade].

00:15:38 MARK TOSCANO
Five years.

00:15:39 DAVID WILSON
Five years, yeah. I probably did that film in '76. I don't know when in '76 that was. Yeah that's right, because CalArts was '74 to '76, so that was just essentially at the end of CalArts. So that was a big switch for me.

00:16:09 MARK TOSCANO
Well they're so different from each other, and it obviously does mark the beginning of a new period.

00:16:15 DAVID WILSON
Of a new period. Right.

00:16:15 MARK TOSCANO
But I want to go back a little bit to being in L.A. and [at] CalArts and everything. Could you talk about the environment at CalArts? There's probably a lot to say, but maybe the people—the instructors and fellow students...

00:16:30 DAVID WILSON
The only real instructors that I can recall that had any particular impact were—I'll probably think of others as well—but were Pat O'Neill and Jules Engles. Really, Jules and I didn't— Jules was enormously supportive and really helpful, but I didn't really fall into his camp in the way that people like Adam [Beckett] or Kathy Rose or Henry Selick or a lot of other people did. The CalArts film department was structured in a curious way at the time— It wasn't curious, it just reflected the way things were culturally I think.

00:17:33 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
There was a live action segment that was Kris Malkiewicz, and Don Levy, and they were all interesting, good people, but were more in the world of making quite straightforward documentaries. I think Kris Malkiewicz probably was doing National Geographic stuff…

00:18:02 MARK TOSCANO
Don [Levy] was doing pretty out there stuff.

00:18:05 DAVID WILSON

Yeah, Don was an odd guy. [mutual laghter] And Sandy Mackendrick, who was a very real-world narrative director. But those people were over there some place. Then apart from that were all these other people that didn't have a home, really, and Jules was sort of the closest thing to home for those people. But there wasn't even a place to go. Jules had a room that was—everybody had their own, like little studio, essentially an editing room, where you could go and work, and then Jules had a large classroom where he taught animation. But I had gone specifically to work with Pat—and I started to say this but must have got blown off track—

00:19:20 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So Pat was on sabbatical, and then at the end of his sabbatical, he was going to come back in January of that first year. I had gotten to know him, and I remember he and Bev [O'Neill] asked Diana and I to come down to their house. We came down to their house and showed some films that we had made, and Pat showed some work, and we had a great time. Then just a few days after that, we got a call that Pat had just had a cerebral hemorrhage, which was really potentially life threatening. He was working in his garden, and he said all of a sudden everything got three stops darker, and he knew something was up so Bev took him to the hospital, and while he was in the hospital, he had a congenitally defective artery in his temple.

00:20:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

A secondary artery that wasn't as strong as it should've been, and it burst and under any rightful circumstance, that would kill you. But since he was in the hospital, they immediately took him in to the OR and saved him. He was a wreck for a long time. He had to re-learn lots of things, including speech, but things came back. Most things came back. By the end of my time there, he was actually coming in and doing some bits of instruction. But he was still pretty weak.

00:21:33 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So I had gone to work with him and he wasn't there, but then instead, I fell into this— and Jules didn't really have much specifically to offer for the direction that I seemed to feel like I needed to go. But all these other people did, and so it just became this user group of Richard Bailey, David Berry, Chris Casady, Adam, Beth Block… there are many, many more people. Tom Barron, and John Shelley. It was a great community, and people were really supportive of one another. I don't think I ever took a class the whole time I was at CalArts.

00:22:43 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

You weren't required to as an M.A. student. I sat in on classes…

00:22:49 MARK TOSCANO
You worked on Kitchen Sink still?

00:22:52 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, you had to take classes that were related to the equipment, so I did take those. In other words, you had to get checked out, and I think Kitchen Sink came from one of those classes. I don't know, maybe the optical printer class, I guess, right? It was essentially a class project, but everybody knew this was more than just a regular class project. We were making a movie.

00:23:21 MARK TOSCANO
You want to talk about Adam [Beckett] actually?

00:23:22 DAVID WILSON
Sure. Adam was basically one of the first people Diana and I met when we went to CalArts. I remember him saying, oh, so we're smoking people like you out of the woods. Because he had had a lot of those same sorts of roots with the Hog Farm and people in New Mexico. So he could recognize us for what we were and where we were coming from and all, and he was really sympathetic. We became friends, and really it was Adam that taught me how to use—I don't know if I learned how to shoot Oxberry from him, I think I probably did—I definitely learned optical printer from him and from David Berry.

00:24:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Some of it in the way you're supposed to from a class of somebody teaching you how to use it, but then also a lot of times you just grab somebody and say, okay, wait a minute, how do I do this? How do you sync bi-packs? How do you whatever.

00:25:02 MARK TOSCANO
So was he a particular influence to you, do you think?

00:25:05 DAVID WILSON
I feel like people didn't influence each other so much in terms of aesthetics. But I think people were inspiring to one another by their dedication and devotion to what they were doing. Adam was enormously dedicated and devoted to what he did, and just would spend hours and hours and hours and hours doing [it], but really so did everybody else. There wasn't anybody there that wasn't. I mean. there were, but the people that you really wanted to be with, everybody was working constantly. That's all you did. That and a bunch of other crazy stuff, but people really took work very, very seriously.

00:26:08 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
They were all just practicing. I guess you'd call those people artists. They're just all practicing artists, and Adam was. But everybody in animation is. If you're doing animation, it's like doing stop-motion or something. It takes forever. Kathy Rose was doing beautiful work and undertaking really, as people say, ambitious projects. Like a lot, lot, lot of work, and turning out completely beautiful results.

00:26:47 MARK TOSCANO
So do you remember things that you were—once you got to Los Angeles, and at CalArts—other work you started to see that had an effect on you, whether it was in school or outside…?

00:27:04 DAVID WILSON
Well I finally—and probably not until like we got here—I finally really saw all of Pat's work, and that completely knocked me out. It was just the Holy Grail. Which is curious because I never ended up really doing work like that, but I loved the work. I loved the sensibility of it, and still do. I think he's just a brilliant visual artist, and there's been a moderate amount of recognition of his work. It's amazing to me that he's not better recognized. Actually, not until the end of our era at CalArts, there started to be this group that formed partly out of CalArts, but then partly out of other— It was also during that time at CalArts that I remember being in the halls in one of the sub-basements at CalArts.

00:28:12 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
And this strange woman that I thought must have been 70 years old came up in an overcoat. It was probably 70 degrees and she had this big overcoat on, and it was Roberta [Friedman]. , [laugh] I was like, WHO ARE YOU? So we became friends because it was obvious people that had common interests. We were all just really hungry to see this kind of work, which at the time was still extremely difficult to see. It was so difficult to see that we got together as a group and said, because there wasn't so much going on in terms of screening possibilities in Los Angeles at the time. I think Doug Edwards was doing Encounter Cinema and we would go. Everybody would pile into some vehicle or other and drive down to see Hollis Frampton.

00:29:20 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
That was really good, but it was pretty rare. I think Doug was having a hard time in Encounter. Anyway, there was an impulse then to set up a screening organization of our own, and this was like '70...

00:29:52 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA
Late '70s.

00:29:54 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, '78.

00:29:55 MARK TOSCANO
Could it have been '77, '78?

00:29:57 DAVID WILSON
My memory is that it was just as I was leaving CalArts. I think it was, really, which would've been the end of '76. I think it was within that time. [non-interview dialogue; camera off]

00:30:34 MARK TOSCANO
So '77 or '78. What was it that you started?

00:30:41 DAVID WILSON
The Independent film Oasis.

00:30:52 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I remember, I guess it must have been in '77, a group of us got together at Pat and Bev's when they were on Lookout Mountain. The group was Roberta [Friedman] and Grahame [Weinbren], Pat [O'Neill] and Bev [O'Neill], Diana and myself, Amy Halpern… I'm probably going to miss people. Another woman, who I didn't know, who was a Sikh…

00:31:24 MARK TOSCANO
Was Beth [Block] or Morgan [Fischer]?

00:31:26 DAVID WILSON
Morgan definitely not. I don't know about Beth. It's possible Beth was there, I'm not sure. It wasn't everybody that was interested, but it was just that day that group got together and said, we can do this. Very quickly thereafter, we did. We said, okay, we're an organization, and we have to come up with a name, and Amy Halpern came up with Independent Film Oasis, and we just started doing it. Someone had a connection to Bob Smith at LAICA, Los Angeles [Institute of] Contemporary [Art], Which was actually very close to here, on Robertson. 2020 South Robertson. It was this crazy modernist building that was a contemporary art exhibition space.

00:32:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So we made arrangements with them to be able to screen there when possible, depending on their exhibitions, and we just started this weekly screening series. It was weekly from the very beginning, I'm pretty sure, yeah. Which is really a big undertaking. It was always Sunday night, so it got a lot to be like going to church. [interviewer laughs] You'd go there and it was great, because all of a sudden we were seeing all this stuff on a very regular basis that we all wanted to see and had read about or heard about, or that some of us had seen in other places. We started bringing in filmmakers. We got a national endowment grant. None of us had done this stuff.

00:33:36 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

A lot of this was centered around Pat and Bev's place. Beverly was great about it, because she was very enthusiastic and she said what we're doing is important, we've got to keep doing this. So we'd go off and we'd drink—I forgot what we'd drink, some form of alcohol—sit and jam out these grants, and we'd get them. So we had some money. Oh, actually, I got to back up because what I said wasn't true in terms of where we began the screenings because at the very beginning… Have people gone over this 20 times already?

00:34:20 MARK TOSCANO

We haven't talked to anybody else about Oasis film screenings.

00:34:23 DAVID WILSON

On just the origins of Oasis. Okay I got you. The first show that we did was we programmed Jonas Mekas' REMINISCENCES OF A JOURNEY TO LITHUANIA. We didn't do it at LAICA because we weren't set up with them yet . Somebody knew of the Haymarket. Do you know what the Haymarket is? It's a venerable, political house on MacArthur Park. It was a great space, and they had a meeting hall, so we rented their space, and they were happy to have us because they were weird people, we were weird people. We somehow publicized this, and we got this huge audience of all Lithuanians, and so for years and years, on our mailing list, we had this huge body of Lithuanians, who never came back, of course.

00:35:30 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But it was a great, great screening and the energy was very high, and it was a beautiful film. So we just started doing it. I'd have to go back, I have all the information some place. So we screened at the Haymarket probably for like six months or something, maybe not that long. Then there were complications in that because there would be scheduling conflicts, and it felt in a certain way like it really was primary a political organization, and they weren't as enthusiastic about this kind of work. So we made this arrangement with Bob Smith at LAICA, and started screening there, and screened there really for a very long time. During this time, more people came to join Oasis.

00:36:29 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Morgan [Fischer] joined. Beth Block. You know better than I, but a lot of great people. It wasn't quite all filmmakers. Dennis Phillips, who was a poet, loved independent film and he joined or was instrumental.

00:37:01 MARK TOSCANO
Was David James around?

00:37:03 DAVID WILSON
I don't know if David James was in town yet. It was sometime after that that David started to kind of come to meetings and stuff, but at the beginning, I don't think he was there. I guess actually it only went on until the early '80s? It felt like an eternity. It just feels like unbelievable...

00:37:25 MARK TOSCANO
So how did the organization function? Who did what and all that?

00:37:27 DAVID WILSON
Just very organically, which was great. Somebody would be elected president, but it didn't really mean anything in particular. All the decisions were made very collectively in terms of what we screened, and everything was just really consensus reality. It worked great. It worked really, really, really well. There would be some contention, but just amazingly little for a group like that. It was really a great, golden moment because that's a mish-mash of people and personalities and aesthetics. Morgan is like total opposite of somebody like Beth Block in terms of aesthetics. It's just completely oil and water incompatible, yet there was really remarkable respect for one another.

00:38:45 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
As a result, a really wide range of things got screened, which was good. We had basically almost everything that was being done during that time. It was really exactly at that time that Terry and Mary started Filmforum, so Terry and Mary were really good friends already.

00:39:18 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA
Can you say that their names in full please?

00:39:21 DAVID WILSON
Terry Cannon and Mary Rose Cannon. And so we did a lot. It wasn't as if we were in constant contact or coordination, but we did lots that was shared. It was a good situation in that we would be able to share expense in bringing somebody out. So we would do a lot of what we call dog and ponies, where you get the filmmaker, and it would give the filmmaker an opportunity to do two venues. Pasadena and Los Angeles were different enough that we could do that. It was great. We didn't do it really so much with Doug, because Doug Edwards was moving at that point from the Theatre Vanguard on Melrose to UCLA.

00:40:42 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But we didn't really coordinate so much with Doug for some reason. I don't know why. But it was great. It was really, really good. I mean, everybody got fried on it because it was a lot of work to do forever. Not only was there every Sunday, but then there was all of the organization that had to go on in between in terms of curation, and then contact of all these people, and then there were always problems, like would have some Donald Judd thing in the middle of the screening room and we couldn't screen. It was just constant chaos, but it was great. We had just some completely memorable nights, and wonderful people.

00:41:34 MARK TOSCANO
What kind of audiences?

00:41:36 DAVID WILSON
Audiences were remarkably good for that genre of film. We'd have some shows where we'd have six people, but usually we'd have 30, 40, to 120 people. At 2020 South Robertson, I think we could get 60 people in there. They had folding chairs. We'd bring out the folding chairs. After a period of time, we moved from 2020 until LAICA took on a space downtown on Traction Avenue and we screened down there, which was somehow hipper. That actually worked pretty well. We could get bigger audiences, which we didn't always need that space, but we screened the Maya Deren film DIVINE HORSEMEN.

00:42:37 DAVID WILSON

We got a huge turnout for that, so it was really nice to be able to have that big space. I can't remember how long we were at LAICA downtown, but the better part of a year. I think after LAICA downtown we maybe moved to USC, and that was a little deadening because of the academic overtone. We had some great screenings there, but it didn't feel as good. I don't know why we had to leave LAICA downtown, maybe they were even closing that facility. I can't recall. I think USC was the last placed we screened. Other people might do better with this history, and I think all that stuff is archived.

00:43:50 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Filmforum had a screening that Oasis members curated within a group so they chose one of the films, [unintelligible] person.

00:44:00 MARK TOSCANO

And David did one of them?

00:44:02 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I'm not sure.

00:44:02 DAVID WILSON

I guess I remember that event where Filmforum screened Oasis, but we would very regularly—maybe once a year—have an Oasis screening at any rate. Also we would curate people from the group. I remember even back as far as the Haymarket, there was a wonderful night of Pat's films where he showed a bunch of films and then he put together this great slideshow that became a film. It was just beautiful. It was impromptu and for that event. I don't remember specifically. I vaguely remember this, that we also then did that show with Terry and Mary where each one of us curated somebody else's work within Oasis.

00:45:16 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Actually, then in the long run in terms of going back to my work, my relationship with Terry and Mary was so important because in 1980—which I guess that Oasis was still going on, I can't recall—but in 1980, Filmforum would always—I think Oasis did too—go dark for the summer because all the facilities were too hot really to screen in and it's harder to get an audience in the summer. But during that time when Filmforum was in this wonderful bank building— I can't remember, was that the original space of theirs?

00:46:06 MARK TOSCANO

No.

00:46:06 DAVID WILSON

It wasn't. What was the original?

00:46:09 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA
It was a church on Pico-Union. The bank was the second place.

00:46:17 DAVID WILSON
Was the second place, yeah. Anyway, this was when Filmforum was at the bank and Terry just called and said, so we're going dark for the summer, do you want to do something within the space during that time. It was just perfect for me. This is skipping, jumping a lot of stuff.

00:46:42 MARK TOSCANO
We'll come back.

00:46:42 DAVID WILSON
Yeah. I had just finished making DEAD RECKONING and was kind of bankrupt on doing film in that way, and was having these visions of another kind of work that was based in film, but was also of something else. So Terry asked if I wanted the space to set up as an insulation space, and I really loved the idea and I just started working frantically. I can't remember when he asked, but I started working frantically on this big project that became this set of four installations called TYING DOG'S FEET that were four separate film installations, Super 8 film installations that were all done in 3-D with these viewing devices that involved Pepper's ghosts that you know was really the direct precedent. I guess an antecedent. The Museum [of Jurassic Technology] really grew directly out of this project.

00:48:14 MARK TOSCANO
Your museum.

00:48:13 DAVID WILSON
Yes. It's not really my museum, but this museum.

00:48:19 MARK TOSCANO
This museum.

00:48:21 DAVID WILSON
This museum that we're in grew directly out of that. That changed my life, that opportunity that Terry offered, and as a result, I've been forever devoted to—I mean, I was already devoted to Terry and Mary, but that just like sealed the deal. Terry's still the President of the Board of Directors of the museum, and I think I'm president of the Board of the Baseball Reliquary, but that really was a bonding experience, and it really opened up a whole world for me to do that.

00:49:17 MARK TOSCANO
Should we maybe back up and talk about some of the other film work. Because you had made a bunch of work before CalArts. You didn't require film school for you to make films obviously, so yeah. Well you know a lot of people [unintelligible] ...

00:49:34 DAVID WILSON
I guess yeah.

00:49:35 MARK TOSCANO
But in effect, SATURN CYCLE and STASIS.

00:49:39 DAVID WILSON
Basically came out of CalArts. More or less, yeah.

00:49:42 MARK TOSCANO
But do you want to talk about what you mentioned about how those works are different and STASIS was in a way a turning point,? Maybe you would talk a little bit about that shift in interest.

00:49:52 DAVID WILSON
Sure. I think of SATURN CYCLE as an extension of that film, the dot film [……]. SATURN CYCLE felt to me also as if it were everything including the kitchen sink, but too much so. It was bothering me. I just wasn't comfortable with it, and I was interested in doing something that had a more of a laser-like focus. Wanted something that was like really clear. It wasn't the visual collage quality that was bothersome, it was more the content of conceptual mish-mash… Like a lot of people, I would say a lot of Stan Brakhage—not that that these films had anything to do with Stan Brakhage—but in the same sense that Brakhage's early work drew on many sources and threw lots of things together.

00:51:33 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It felt like these films—that that film especially—but other films that I'd been doing felt that way too, and I just started to really feel like it would feel much better to be more focused. So I had this notion, and during that time, conceived of a lot of films that I wished that I had made, but didn't. But this one film I was really focused on, and that film actually probably related or came out of WAVELENGTH from the point of view that WAVELENGTH was a single shot film. It was one of the really early single shot films, I think. I guess that's right.

00:52:12 MARK TOSCANO
Technically it wasn't single shot.

00:52:13 DAVID WILSON
No, no that's true. That's true. But I mean the impact of it is the same.

00:52:17 MARK TOSCANO
It gives the illusion.

00:52:17 DAVID WILSON
Yeah, right. Should I try and just describe these films?

00:52:30 MARK TOSCANO
Sure, if you want.

00:52:30 DAVID WILSON
Okay. So that film [STASIS], going back to Dallas Creek and rural western Colorado, was a shot that is a 400 foot load of film, which is I guess 12 minutes.

00:52:47 MARK TOSCANO
Because the finished film is about eight.

00:52:49 DAVID WILSON
How does that work? Maybe if you're shooting… I should know these things.

00:52:55 MARK TOSCANO
400 feet is 11 minutes.

00:52:57 DAVID WILSON
Is 11 minutes? Even at 24 frames a second? Oh… But I shot a load of probably ECO, which was a mistake. During that whole load of film, with probably Angenieux 12-120, did a zoom-in— no, it was zoom-out.

00:53:36 MARK TOSCANO
You started telephoto.

00:53:37 DAVID WILSON
I started telephoto. Started telephoto, I guess that's right. So I started at the long end of the lens and had just clocked out, given the amount of time that I had to what speed to essentially back it out, so that if you're to process—which I did the film at that point—and project it, it would be from a close up— you're right, it had to be a telephoto. It would start at a close-up of this stream, until you reveal the whole of the environment, or around the center part that I had zoomed in on. Then with the optical printer, I essentially reversed that motion. I took the framing of the zoomed-in portion, made—I suspect—a low-contrast black-and-white of it, put it in the pins of the viewfinder of the optical printer and used that as a reference clip, and then made all the necessary adjustments—which at this point was really only a zoom-in focus—to keep that framing consistent.

00:55:09 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So had the film been physically pure as well as conceptually pure, it would have been a constant image that over the course of the eight minutes of the film, the grain structure would just become more and more pronounced until it was pure grain. That was the goal of the film in the first place. That was the thing that drove me to make the film, is wanting to see the film essentially turn into grain. Which it didn't do that, but it did something else that was interesting enough I guess. In practice, that was enormously complicated because it was all done by hand, and so the experiential effect of it was much more an attempt to do this. The framing does remain relatively consistent, but I wasn't making frame-by-frame zoom adjustments.

00:56:13 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

I was making probably eight frame or so zoom adjustments and focused adjustments, so it's quite imprecise, but that's just texture. But that film was great. That film, for some reason that I never fully understood, created a stir. It was interesting to enough people that that film got screened a whole lot. Actually, from that film, I went off and did a number of things that were not really related to that.

end of tape 2

TAPE 3: DAVID WILSON

00:00:22 DAVID WILSON

Terry Cannon, the founder of Filmforum's installation he was going to do, it was— where was it? It was downtown someplace and I can't even remember what it was for. I think it was a Filmforum event. Maybe there was a closing of Filmforum…? Or not a closing, but a retirement party for Terry. I think maybe it was that. He got his gold watch and turned Filmforum over to others.

00:00:58 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

As part of that, I did this—or we, because Terry had to be very participatory—did this reliquary for him, which was making a mask, a wax mask. and then filming him and then projecting his image. I can't remember if he was speaking or exactly what he was doing, and if there was a sound element, I can't remember. I remember that there were then his hair in these little viewers that you had to look into.

00:01:35 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was great. It was actually a really nice. Remembering along those lines, one of the earliest museum exhibits was this thing called CT, "Cyclopean Twilight." This actually predated the museum. It was a table out of the Southwest Museum, this beautiful oak display case in which we built these two glass vitrines, and in the glass vitrines were actually wax cast faces that my father had made.

00:02:20 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

My father did ear, nose and throat work. For many, many years, a lot of what he did was set people's noses, and before he would set a person's nose, for some reason they would make a mask of them. Which always seemed brutal to me, to come in with a broken nose and you'd have to have this mask made. So the cellar of our house was full of these masks, of these carnauba wax masks of all these people with broken noses.

00:02:56 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Most of those somehow sadly got away, but I ended up with a few, and from those I made what became an early museum exhibit that was a mask and then a pair of hands and a bunch of velvet so that it looked as if a person were lying there. Then using that Pepper's ghost technology that I was so crazy about at the time, this was done in video not in film.

00:03:31 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
There were hands doing sign language. This happened after TYING DOGS' FEET. There were hands doing sign language, that was Mary Rose Cannon's hands doing sign language and the sign language was telling the tale of these dreams that as a viewer you had to look in through these viewing prisms at two ends of this long table.

00:04:07 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
And there were speakers right there, almost like earphones, but speakers that we were hearing these dreams whispered, and then suspended deep into this case were Mary Cannon's hands someplace over the head, I think. It was like it was in a dream. That was in that same era as the reliquary thing.

00:04:31 MARK TOSCANO
That sounds beautiful.

00:04:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Yeah, it was great. That was really nice. That came at the same time as the fox. The fox and that traveled together for a period of time just before the museum and it was kind of out of those two things.

00:04:50 MARK TOSCANO
The fox that's downstairs?

00:04:53 DAVID WILSON
Yeah.

00:05:58 MARK TOSCANO
So, you said you had made STASIS and it was very particular and then you kind of moved away from that mode of working..

00:06:06 DAVID WILSON
Well, yeah, I guess it is moving away because about the same time—and I suspect, actually, I don't know if I was still at CalArts, but I have a feeling I must have been at CalArts when I shot PRESENCE OF MIND because I know I shot it with an Arri B, one of those really nice little Arriflex sync sound cameras. They're really beautiful. I wouldn't have had access to that if I wasn't at CalArts. Maybe I did have access after CalArts, I can't recall.

00:06:39 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But I took that camera to Colorado and just shot mostly in the home. This was after our house had burned. My younger brother Bill had built a house about a mile away from ours, and I think most of that film was shot there in that house. It's really essentially just footage of the family, the sync footage of the family just in very quiet domestic conditions. I remember a year and half ago, you—Mark Toscano, the archivist at the Academy of Motion Picture of Arts and Sciences—invited Dan Rae—my daughter—and myself over to see some of the films that he had so lovingly and painstakingly archived.

00:07:50 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Among those films was this film, PRESENCE OF MIND, and I remember being so impressed with how that film looked and still it just really stuck with me. I think that film received absolutely no interest in the independent film world at the time. It probably got screened, but just barely. But now as I look back on it, that film feels like such a right direction, such a correct direction.

00:08:27 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was interesting that in the drive back from the Academy when Dan Rae and I were coming probably back to the museum, Dan Rae just completely independently had the same reaction, that out of all those films, the one that really she had responded to the most, that spoke to her the most was that film, PRESENCE OF MIND. It was less rigorous, or it was made from a different part of mind, I think.

00:09:02 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Because the film that followed that was, to a certain extent, a reversion back to— no, it wasn't a reversion, but the next film, which was CASTING SHADOWS, is very architectonic… It was a very pattered film. There were some very specific parameters that I laid out for myself in terms of the making of this film.

00:09:32 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I don't remember what they all were. That film then received, again, much greater attention and people wrote about it. For me it was much less, and especially now at this point, it's much less interesting. But I don't know, maybe it was more a film of that time. There was a lot of interest at that time in films that were structured, so to speak, in a specific kind of way.

00:10:03 MARK TOSCANO
People have responded to Stasis [unintelligible] .

00:10:08 DAVID WILSON
It didn't fit in the flow.

00:10:15 MARK TOSCANO

But when we did do that screening, when we watched those, you talked a lot about those two films, and I remember you said something really interesting… We had talked about how those two films have an interesting inverse relationship to one another… There's almost this feeling like one is the inside-out of the other.

00:10:47 DAVID WILSON

Well, inside-out in the sense of there's such discreetly different parts of mind that went into the making of those films, and then really the parts of mind that are engaged by them. CASTING SHADOWS, you become very conscious, maybe painfully conscious of the structure of the film and of the patterning that went into the making of the film, whereas PRESENCE OF MIND—and I don't know to what it drew on at the time—

00:11:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

The name Presence has to do with the use of the word presence in sound because that film was very much for me about sound. Which is much less of an issue now, since we're all so used to using high definition video recorders. But at the time, synchronous sound very much had an impact and had an impact of a particular quality that in terms of independent film was interesting.

00:12:21 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It gave a film a particular kind of tone that other films that weren't sync sound—which were very common—had. So I was really interested in sound, in the relationship of sound to picture at the time. Presence refers to the sound term. Like, presence is the same thing essentially as room tone. Those are synonymous words to describe just ambience and the ambient sound.

00:12:58 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

But I think that film is very subtle in that nothing happens in the film. And it's psychological. A lot of times you're not even really seeing people's faces, as I recall, but you see hand gestures and it's something that happens on a very subtle and quiet way. In the long run, that's what I'm really interested in.

00:13:43 MARK TOSCANO

CASTING SHADOWS was also sync sound, wasn't it?

00:13:45 DAVID WILSON

CASTING SHADOWS was also sync sound.

00:13:52 MARK TOSCANO

But it's the opposite in that you're very aware.

00:13:53 DAVID WILSON

You're very, very aware of the structure. It was the sound of my walking in various environments… I think they were probably shot at the same time, I'm not positive.

00:14:09 MARK TOSCANO

Then did DEAD RECKONING follow that?

00:14:14 DAVID WILSON

I guess the next film was DEAD RECKONING. DEAD RECKONING was then made in about 1980. I don't know to what extent I was aware that that was going to close a cycle, but it definitely did, and it was referencing or completing an effort that was made with STASIS in the beginning, but yet was then incorporating these other interests that I had been developing having to do with sound and the relationship of sound to picture.

00:15:01 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

To describe it briefly, I had made a cross—and this grew directly out of that experience of doing STASIS, It was quite tall, it was probably seven feet tall and whatever that aspect ratio is in four to three, like ten feet wide or something. It was made to fold up and it was covered in mirror. We took it out to El Mirage, I think. The dry lake bed.

00:15:47 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

[We] set it up at night such that the mirrored cross was reflecting the sunrise. So it was essentially just bright, but yet you had all of the beautiful graduation of dawn. The thought was to use that as a locating device in the post-production. I forget how I determined this, but I guess I began with the cross not filling the screen by a certain percentage and then carrying that same Arriflex camera, walked towards the cross until it just filled—east, west, north, south—the frame.

00:16:55 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was just shoulder mount. I couldn't carry it well. It wasn't a Steadicam, it wasn't a smooth shot. It had every step and the image projected at that point moved all over the screen, and then the project I defined for myself was to as much as possible then remove all of that motion and keep the cross in the crosshairs, which are in the retical of the optical printer.

00:17:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So that, like STASIS, involved changing zoom and focus every few frames. But it also in this case involved then manipulating or articulating the north, south, and east, west of the camera head of the printer to keep the image north, south, east, west. I think because of the nature of the printer, I couldn't deal with rotation.

00:18:06 MARK TOSCANO
At least what you had told me before is that you used Pat O'Neill's printer because you could do that, whereas the CalArts' printer you couldn't.

00:18:15 DAVID WILSON
Maybe that's true. Yeah. But as I recall, there is this motion that was never taken out. But the intention was to take out all artifacts of motion.

00:18:37 MARK TOSCANO
I think it does allow for that...

00:18:38 DAVID WILSON
It does take it out.

00:18:40 MARK TOSCANO
There's a certain perfection anyway because it was still done by hand.

00:18:43 DAVID WILSON
It was all very much done by hand.

00:18:46 MARK TOSCANO
But I'm pretty sure you have tilt there, too.

00:18:47 DAVID WILSON
I was taking tilt out. I may well have, I forget that. But the thing that I do remember with excruciating clarity was how arduous the night was, because unlike STASIS, which was hard enough articulating zoom and focus, this was articulating all of these channels. I remember I did it over an entire night, and by the end of the night, I was getting blood on the printer, and then I taped up my hands.

00:19:23 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was actually a really, really hard, hard night. But it worked and at the same time, I had probably a Bolex that was looking at the printer and I was recording for every— I would set all the parameters and then take a shot with the Bolex because the Bolex has dial indicators so that you could do repeat moves or animate motion. In this case, it was showing the amount of adjustment necessary to keep the crosshairs in the proper place.

00:20:07 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Then the finished film included first the raw footage with this very particular sound that is first the sync sound. I think Diana went into the frame and clapped, and then you could hear this particular set of steps over a three minute, probably 100 foot load. So that plays first. The second set, if I recall right, is then you look at the dials, is that right?

00:20:52 DAVID WILSON

Yeah, the whole printer, exactly. A side shot of the optical printer which shows the dials articulating to the same sound that you just heard, so you understand that that sound is relating to but not probably fully understanding why you're seeing what you're seeing and hearing what you're hearing. Then the third section is the resulting footage, which then is the justified, articulated image. I somehow felt that that film was successful. I really liked that film.

00:21:35 MARK TOSCANO

So that ended up being your last completed film. You told me then during that time, you [unintelligible]

00:21:41 DAVID WILSON

During that time, I actually bought an Éclair NPR because I was sensing that these films, that a good audience was not that many people. It got to feeling like it was too arcane. It was work that was intended for too small an audience, and I felt in a certain way like I wasn't living up to this understanding that I had of the potential of imagination in the larger picture, the human project.

00:22:31 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It also wasn't somehow incorporating enough of what I what I experienced was inspirational to me, which included music. So I was going to undertake to do an entirely different kind of film. It was going to be a film based on Irish and Celtic mythology and Irish and Celtic music, went to Ireland to shoot the film and just had a miserable time.

00:23:09 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Well, I loved Ireland, but the filming wasn't successful. It didn't do what I had expected, and I think it was a three-week trip, by the end of the trip, I realized that this is a disaster. This is not working, it's not going to go anywhere. I was depressed. I went with Diana and we were going to fly out from Dublin, and we had a day in Dublin before our plane left...

00:23:52 MARK TOSCANO

[non-interview dialogue]

00:24:02 DAVID WILSON

It's interesting whether or not that happened after making DEAD RECKONING or before because I was going to say it was '78, but certainly that wouldn't make sense, but it could've been. We had hours to kill, so we went to the botanical garden—which really we should've gone to Dublin Museum of Natural History, but I'm glad we didn't because that's an amazing place, but I didn't know about it then.

00:24:36 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Instead we went to the botanical garden and somehow it was so airing for me to go into that space. The plants and just the quality of air and space. I just wondered for a long time and during that time I came to understand why this didn't work, this whole effort, which really had been long and laborious, and I spent all this money buying this camera.

00:25:15 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I just realized, oh wait, what I need to do is this other smaller more—I don't know how to describe it—projects that grow more out of imagination really is what it comes down to it. So this probably was '78. So I came back and I somehow understood at that time that 3D, which I had been interested in.

00:25:55 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Other than being a kid and with my collection of View-Masters, I came to understand at CalArts that people, like Chris Casady I know was doing 3D. I can't remember who all, but I was very intrigued. I don't think I started doing 3D then, but I could see there's something here that's interesting. Somewhere in those years, I got a View-Master camera and started doing 3D.

00:26:23 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
This vision that was the understanding that came at the botanical garden was also somehow involved around stereopsis and apparitions and spatial illusion. I understood that somehow that quality of space is directly related to the space of imagination. So I came back when it could've just been a nightmare.

00:26:56 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I came back really energized and understanding that this is what I wanted to be doing and I basically just started doing this right after that I met Susan Pinsky and David Starkman and got a View-Master 3D camera, started doing that work. It was shortly after that—this is how I know it was pre-1980—because Terry called and said, do you want to do this project?

00:27:26 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
While doing that project, I had begun making miniatures, and this was an expansive moment for me. I was doing one miniature, I was making a miniature crypt, and I wanted the roof of this to be so you could look through it, but only partially. So at this wonderful place that existed here called C & H Sales in Pasadena.

00:28:11 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Fifty percent reflective glass, which I had never really seen before or understood what it was for, which is a beam splitter. I remember after Terry called, I was working with these tests and Super 8 projectors. I think that I had already begun to shoot these in 3D. I had two Nizos. I was trying to project onto the wall of a miniature I had made, a three-dimensional image, to make it appear in space in front of the miniature.

00:28:54 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was only modestly successful. Then at some point, I just by accident was holding this beam splitter in such a way that it projected an image of a person into the space of this miniature, and I was just completely gone. That was one of the best days of my life. I really understood that this had potential.

00:29:28 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So for Terry's show, that was the thrust. That was the thing that I really focused on, this ability to shoot these stereoscopic images and then project them so that they appeared in dimensional space in relation to the miniatures. All that somehow grew directly out of that experience in Dublin. [technical; camera off]

00:31:11 DAVID WILSON

Right. On leaving CalArts… Actually, I was kind of groomed to get a job teaching at CalArts. I don't remember what the job was, some position that the film school needed. But just as I was about to take my place in that position, this person that was a prior graduate of CalArts, a person named Myron Emery, returned from South Carolina or someplace where he had been working in a television studio doing news work or something.

00:31:53 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So somehow he got the job. I was dismayed, but not horribly dismayed. Like everybody—like my daughter's going to face this year—on getting out of school. I didn't have a clue how we were going to support ourselves. Not a clue. All of a sudden this job went away. Myron's a wonderful guy, and I think he felt badly because he understood that in a way that job was really supposed to have been sent my way.

00:32:26 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So, when he came back, he heard from some people he had known from CalArts a few years before, like a year or two before. This fellow named Randy Akers, another guy named Gary Katona, who both went through CalArts. Gary in film and Randy probably in art. They had gone off and were working in the film industry.

00:32:53 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
They called Myron when they heard he was back, asked if he wanted to work with them. They had taken over this longstanding commercial animation studio called Spunbuggy [Works].

00:33:09 MARK TOSCANO
Spungbuggy?

00:33:11 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Spunbuggy, which I think it's an escape car for if you're going to rob a bank, the car that you escape in is called a Spunbuggy, something like that. But it was a longstanding and respected animation studio and they inherited essentially this studio and they were in over their heads and they were looking.

00:33:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
They really needed technical help. Randy was a really, really good designer but didn't really have any technical skills at all, so they were asking Myron because they knew he had technical skills. Myron had just taken this job, so he said, I can't take it but I know this guy. So he recommended me and I went down and they asked me if I knew how to do all this stuff and I said, oh, yeah.

00:34:04 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
I didn't know a clue. Not even a clue what this stuff was. So I just studied real hard real fast and started working in the film industry doing what they call technical direction. At that point, it was just making exposure sheets for these animation shoots. It was the time when all of a sudden there was a hybrid that was animation and visual effects.

00:34:40 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So that was just beginning to come on and I was equipped to do this stuff because of the work I'd been doing at CalArts, just my proclivities anyway. So that went really well. I started making real money, like $10 an hour, which was unthinkable to be able to make that much money. Diana started to take jobs. She got a job right away.

00:35:12 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
This goes back to all these people. Adam [Beckett] had a lot of people from this crazy contingents at CalArts got involved at Industrial Light & Magic, which had a small facility on Valjean. This goofy company, Industrial Light & Magic, they were doing a science fiction movie, and we looked at the script for it and it's like, oh, this is going to be a clunker.

00:35:48 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But Adam signed onto this movie and then had asked Diane if she would come down and work with them, and she did. Then Adam really ran into trouble on the movie in terms of the acceptance of his work. So after that film was done and released, it spurred interest in special effects or visual effects.

00:36:30 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
There was a company that had existed a couple of years before that called Robert Abelman Associates. It was over on Highland, and they had begun doing this kind of hybrid visual effect animation work. There was a person there named Richard Taylor who was really a gifted designer, and he had done this beautiful television commercial for people at the Seven-Up Bottling Company that really had a pretty major effect culturally.

00:37:14 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So a lot of the people that had been working at this Light & Magic place when that film was completed, went over to Robert Ableman and Associates, including Diana, who went and worked there. I was held up at this place Spunbuggy. I ended up working at Robert Abelman's for a spell as well, but not so much. Basically the film industry hit us like it did many people in the Los Angeles independent film community.

00:37:52 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
It was a mixed blessing. It was a double-edged sword. But it definitely did support people. Obviously Pat O'Neill did Lookout Mountain Films and he was involved with a lot of the same projects. He worked for Industrial Light & Magic on a number of their movies, plus a lot of other movies and a lot of television commercials, and it basically kept everybody afloat.

00:38:16 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
The film industry became the funding mechanism for this museum for many years, for the first decade probably. It had a similar effect for a lot of people. Also, I saw many, many, many talented people—including, as I remember now, Chris Regan, who we were speaking of earlier—who became subsumed, who oftentimes stopped working doing their own independent work. [technical, camera off]

00:39:34 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So I've worked for various studios doing what became very much special effects work for a lot of years. Really, until 1993. Somewhere in there, probably in 1984, '85, about the same time that the museum really began, I began a company because it became unseemly in a certain sense to continue to be a freelance person at a certain time. It wasn't the right thing to do.

00:40:21 DAVID WILSON

So, these two friends—actually the people that called me into the film industry in the first place, Randy Akers and Gary Katona—we started a company together just a few blocks from here and did animation and then built a whole motion control rig and did lots of motion control work for shots for movies, title sequences, that kind of thing.

00:41:01 MARK TOSCANO

Did the WAR OF THE WORLDS thing come out of that?

00:41:02 DAVID WILSON

WAR OF THE WORLDS came out of that, and the countless things. I did a whole bunch of work for National Geographic doing their bumpers, the underwriter tags and all of this stuff. Some of it was great, some of it was horrible. It was all always just an economic venture, but it worked.

00:41:31 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

In many ways, the work was interesting. It was developing these very sophisticated, computer-controlled, to-the-thousandths--of-an-inch machines, robots to shoot film. That stuff was interesting. People like Pat and many other people in the Los Angeles independent film scene were usually involved in that aspect of the film industry.

00:41:59 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was most often in special effects for some reason. It wasn't that those people became DPs for movies or grips or gaffers. It was much more that those people were involved in this whole realm of special effects, which involved optical printing but then also involved model miniature motion control work. That kind of thing.

00:42:30 MARK TOSCANO

I was wondering if you wanted to talk about making your film KITSCH IN SYNCH, which I thought was an interesting story, but then also how film and your work in film and your realizations that pure filmmaking wasn't what you wanted to do.

00:43:09 DAVID WILSON

Well, KITSCH IN SYNCH is easy. It was a film that really began as a class project that Adam was teaching. As I said earlier, what constituted a class was pretty much up in the air, but there were a group of people that at that time were getting what was called "checked out" on the optical printer which meant that you had to be instructed on its proper use.

00:43:37 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So there was that aspect, but then beyond that, there usually was some kind of class project. Then Adam had this idea of actually really making a movie, and as I recall, everybody was given a task to do some part of it. It all began with our being together in a very ad hoc way to say, well, the thing we need to do at first is have a soundtrack.

00:44:20 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So people had various kind of instruments and we all just sat in a circle with a Nagra in the middle and started to basically make noise, and that led to Oop Oop Pah Doo, which then led to this whole crazy soundtrack that was a really pretty wonderful soundtrack that the film is based on because it was a teaching mechanism for sync for being able to animate to a sync track, taking this totally goofy track and then making marks on an exposure reading on the soundtrack, making marks on the exposure sheet and then animating to that. It was a great. Everybody enjoyed it.

00:45:15 MARK TOSCANO
Then regarding the genesis of the museum…

00:45:17 DAVID WILSON
Really, it was Terry Cannon at the Pasadena Filmforum. That work hybridized with the botanical gardens in Dublin led to this understanding of a need to make these essentially imaginary spaces. I began the project through Terry's of trying to create those spaces that were hybrid film and world, projecting images into miniature worlds.

00:46:04 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
That led to two other projects shortly after Terry's that then became exhibited on their own at the Exploratorium and a number of other places. That's an exhibit that still remains downstairs, the fox and the other exhibit "Cyclopean Twilight" that we talked about earlier.

00:46:36 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Diane and I had a studio or a shop a few blocks from our house in Silver Lake, and one Saturday while sitting in the shop and having these components that created those two exhibits, it was a funny experience where I had made a dust shield for the electronics that went into one of the exhibits. I placed that—which is an acrylic box—I placed the box over part of the "Cyclopean Twilight" exhibit, and it was just this realization, that looks like an exhibit case.

00:47:23 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Then following from that came this just flood of inspiration that included the idea of making a museum, the name of the museum, really. It was just like automatic writing. I was writing as fast as I could write for an hour and half, and someplace I still got these pages. There was enough work there to keep me busy for five years having to do with exhibit ideas.

00:47:55 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was just a culmination of all this stuff I'd been doing, but it just all of a sudden really fell into place and made sense. I had started to mention earlier, I had loved museums since absolute childhood. It was a perfect merger. I had done natural sciences in college along with other things, and it was just a perfect merger of all these things that I loved.

00:48:19 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

So I began making some of the exhibits that came in that flood of ideas. There was a place in San Francisco called 80 Langton Street. It was just an exhibition space and they had offered me some space, so I made a concerted effort and jammed to put together enough exhibits in a relatively short time to take up there. I opened the first manifestation of the exhibit under its name up there.

00:49:03 MARK TOSCANO

Which is?

00:49:05 DAVID WILSON

The Museum of Jurassic Technology. That was in 1984. The museum traveled as an institution like that for about four years. On Diana's 40th birthday, we went to a small sushi restaurant that Sam Francis used to frequent, and we knew Sam peripherally. He had introduced us to this little sushi restaurant and we went there to celebrate her birthday.

00:49:44 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was on that day that, really, thanks to Diana's devotion, she said we just really have to make the leap and start spending the money to make the museum a permanent institution. So we started looking for a place. We found this place a couple of blocks from where I was working in the film industry.

00:50:15 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

We could get a one-year lease on this place because they were going to tear the buildings down. It took us over nine months to prepare the space and get the exhibits in. We thought that we would have to take a month to clean up, so we were going to be able to be open for a couple of weeks in there. So we opened and obviously nobody came. Some friends, although most of our friends when they heard that we were undertaking this project, fled from us like we had leprosy. It's flat out the truth.

00:50:54 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So very few people came, but somehow we were able to stay. We got a lease for another year because they didn't have the money to tear it down and build a strip mall. That led to five years, and in the five years we kept adding exhibits and we were bursting at the seams, found like a panel on the wall—actually we had hung the panel there, but we had forgotten there was a door.

00:51:29 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
One day I took the panel down, found this door, and so I called this wonderful guy that managed the buildings, this guy Phil Lomiar and said, what's behind this door? He said, funny you should ask. It's another 1600 square feet. We were paying $1000 a month, which was just unthinkable to us for this space, for this first building downstairs floor, and he said, do you want to rent it?

00:51:56 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
They were a forensic laboratory and the department of the forensic laboratory had just outsourced their building. It was actually that exact same month that I stopped working in the film industry. Basically my company went bankrupt because of not keeping up technologically. In other words, during the change to CG, we didn't invest in that, so we closed the company.

00:52:29 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
So all of a sudden we had no money coming in. The second space opened up for another $1,000 a month. They said, so, you going to take this? So we said, sure. So we took it and we went into this complete economic freefall where we had to come up with $2,000 a month with totally no income. Diana was in graduate school, we just had Dan Rae, so we had this two-year-old kid—no, by then she was older—but we had this little kid, no income. It was just crazy. It was nuts. But somehow we managed month to month to be able to do it.

00:53:11 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Then about five years after that, Phil came to us and said, you got to move because they're going to sell the buildings now. Then we said we can't move because it was not our exhibits were just set up inside these rooms, we had totally redone the building from absolute scratch. So he said, well, they're a million dollars, and to us that sounded like a billion dollars.

00:53:38 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
But we started this process of raising money, and raised enough money that they couldn't throw us out. So now we've really almost paid for the building. It's great.

00:53:52 MARK TOSCANO
What was the name of your company?

00:54:03 DAVID WILSON
It's West Indigo. The company that we stared over here was West Indigo.

00:54:09 MARK TOSCANO
And just because it's a fun bit of trivia, do you want to mention the young male stars in PRESENCE OF MIND?

00:54:34 DAVID WILSON
PRESENCE OF MIND, as I said, was shot in rural western Colorado where my younger brother lived, Bill. My older brother was at the time living here, living out in Malibu, and he had married a woman that had three kids. He married when all the kids were real young. I think the oldest was maybe seven or something. By the time that then we had all gathered in Colorado to shoot— not gather to shoot the film, but I was shooting film when we gathered.

00:55:13 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
They were older. I think they were probably about 15. But I think the thing was that these guys then went on to become actual film stars. A guy named Rob Lowe and Chad Lowe who was married for a long time, but I guess no longer is, to Hilary Swank. Is that right? The woman in BOYS DON'T CRY. But at any rate, they were great. They grew up with us. I'm still vaguely sometimes in touch with Chad. Their mom has since died.

00:55:56 STEPHANIE SAPIENZA
Do you want to briefly mention [unintelligible]

00:56:05 DAVID WILSON
Maybe the way to think about that is that the economics [of the Museum of Jurassic Technology] have always felt that, as much as anything of what this project, this institution has been about, has been an assertion of economic imagination because it seems by any normal way of thinking that there's no logical economic validity to this effort.

00:56:46 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
Because there isn't. But in a certain way for me—and this is not just in retrospect, I realized it at the time—doing the museum was for me in a hubric way a testing of the universe. I felt like, well, what if I truly devoted everything—everything I am, all of my energy, all of my being—to a project that I believed in, what is the response of the universe to that?

00:57:25 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)
In thinking that thought, which is kind of a bold thought to think—or stupid thought from the other way of looking at it—it reminded me of the scene in ANDREI RUBLEV—which they're showing tonight—of the casting of the bell where the kid, who knows nothing of what he's doing, undertakes this gargantuan project of casting a bell, an enormous bell.

00:58:08 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

Then there's a moment of ringing to see whether or not the bell will actually ring. It does and the kid decomposes, but it's a beautiful, beautiful section of that beautiful film. That's in a certain way what this felt like. I had no idea what would happen if you just laid everything on the line.

00:58:37 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

The ringing was to see, does the universe support this kind of effort? I just felt like, yeah, it does. One aspect of that was that—and not even such a major aspect, really—but an aspect was the receiving of—in 2001 or something—of this MacArthur grant, which was absolutely essential to us at the time in terms of the finances of the place.

00:59:16 DAVID WILSON (CONTINUED)

It was validation. But more than that, really, has been the response of the worlds, both economically in the fact that even though we still exist on an absolute shoestring, that people will support as they can an endeavor like this that doesn't really make much sense. There isn't really any real perceivable need for this place—or material need maybe—but that people respond is just remarkable to us.

end of tape 3