

IMPERFECT LIST

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a person's back and shoulder, with a hand resting on the shoulder. The image has a grainy, artistic quality.

JESSE WINE

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JESSE WINE

Jesse Wine: Imperfect List
Kyle Dancewicz

When a truck idles, its engine burns gas but it doesn't go anywhere. In New York, you can log on to the city's Idling Complaint System to report an offense, and you potentially can take home a quarter of the fine you help to levy against a vehicle brazenly releasing chemicals into the air. City language refers to this as "an award for your enforcement efforts."¹ In 2018, someone made about \$5,000 for their enforcement efforts, rooting out idleness with a zealous attitude both puritanical and entrepreneurial.² Can you imagine anything more spiritedly late capitalist? You give up your own downtime and "volunteer" to police what appears to be someone else's downtime but is actually probably their job. They are on call, they're waiting, they're not allowed to park anywhere; they look, sound, and smell like they're ready to move whenever their dispatcher summons them.

Trucks idled constantly outside Jesse Wine's former studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Their engine purrs and radio jazz provided the soundtrack to much of his production for his SculptureCenter show. (He didn't collect any "awards.") *Imperfect List*, the artist's first solo institutional exhibition in the United States, stages an anxious relationship between rest and activity. It brings together a wide variety

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1. "Citizens Air Compliant System," New York City website, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dep/environment/idling-citizens-air-complaint-program.page>.
 2. Julia Marsh, "How New Yorkers are making bank ratting out idling drivers," *New York Post* online, April 28, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/04/28/how-new-yorkers-are-making-bank-ratting-out-idling-drivers/>.

of new works, primarily made in ceramic and largely figurative—the basis of Wine’s sculptural practice for the last fifteen or so years. The subjects of these works range from a fleet of small trucks to modernist buildings, monolithic limbs, floor-bound works sprouting arms and legs, and living-room furniture. Together they are installed in a kind of mise-en-scène in SculptureCenter’s lower level, complete with a few blacklights for effect. Surrealist painting, especially Giorgio di Chirico’s empty, semi-classical settings littered with enigmatic objects ripe for enigmatic interpretation, has inflected Wine’s work for a long time.

The sculptures in Wine’s *Imperfect List* are idling, but they are not idle. Perhaps there is a moral or social distinction between those two states that has something to do with how ready one is to spring into action or to perform, or, conversely, how irredeemably far off into reverie one has drifted. To idle is to rest. Idling is waiting in anticipation. What physical positions does idling take? When time and space open up, we grow into them uncomfortably, like when we bury our faces in our phones if our friends are more than fifteen minutes late for dinner, or when we’re half-dressed and “on call” in one way or another, or when we need to stay home for months because of a public health crisis that only idling can assuredly (if partially) resolve.

Accordingly, Wine’s sculptures grow uncomfortably into themselves, and are often assembled of visually competing parts. If one foundation of Wine’s work is his engagement with the reclining figure, an

iconic art-historical convention conveying everything from leisure to sexual availability, his recent sculptures envision this figure of repose opening its folded limbs into a sleepless late capitalist nightmare, similar to our own as described by art historian Jonathan Crary in his book *24/7*: “Sleep is an irrational and intolerable affirmation that there might be limits to the compatibility of living beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernization.”³ In one resonant Wine work titled *Calcium*, 2018–20, a rectangular apartment tower sits on top of a giant head with its eyes closed. Nearby, *The IRS* and *Imperfect List*, both 2020, are two monumental sculptures of single legs that casually convene as delivery trucks pass between them, as if they were on break while their missing left or right counterparts took over a shift, each leg responsible for earning its own keep. Throughout the exhibition, limbs and objects that seem to be spent, submissive, or otherwise idle evoke a churning matrix of stifled aspirations: to move from one’s childhood home to the city, to couple up, to reconcile productive efforts with un(re)productive sexuality, to be available should an opportunity at success arise.

Two works in the exhibition use a segmental arrangement to host the disentangled limbs of a reclining figure. *11:10 am / 15.10.1983 / 75 Heath Lane / Chester / United Kingdom / CH3 5SY*, 2020, is

3. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013), 13. Relatedly, Crary also notes: “One seemingly inconsequential but prevalent linguistic feature is the machine-based designation of ‘sleep mode.’ The notion of an apparatus in a state of low-powered readiness... supersedes an on/off logic, so that nothing is ever fundamentally ‘off’ and there is never an actual state of rest” (13). We idle alongside our phones and computers.

a large, floor-bound sculpture titled for the date, time, and place of Wine's birth. The work as a whole is a platform for its own disparate components: five discrete but tightly assembled units each act as a support growing different sculptural articulations. A sculpture of the rowhouse in which Wine was born, still his mother's home, sits directly on the floor. In front of it, a bent arm reaches toward the chimney, a second set of fingers resting prayerfully on its palm. Beside this arm are hill-ocks holding dried flowers (or in this case, weeds from SculptureCenter's courtyard, sprouted during our months-long closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic), and then a second arm, cut off below the elbow, its hand pressing hard into a mattress. Finally, there is a kneeling leg, topped with a deflated soccer ball, that appears to be lifting the absent body out of bed. Though the sculpture appears to be made of patinated cast bronze, the classic material of outdoor sculpture, it is in fact simply ceramic coated with a mixture of graphite and paint. It is a domestic departure seen from all angles, assembled as sentimental scene with a setting (the house) and some stage directions (fold hands, lift yourself up, rise), faking it until it's taken as seriously as bronze.

Conspicuous throughout the show are Wine's flexing, reaching arms, attenuated legs with pointed feet, long, flexible toes, and hands with fingers arranged in semi-religious, semi-sexual gestures. In particular, *11:10 am / 15.10.1983 / 75 Heath Lane / Chester / United Kingdom / CH3 5SY, The Ecstasy of Saint Tokig*, and *The Pauses*, 2020 (in which two

right hands emerge from the right arm of a small glow-in-the-dark figure), seem to have multiple, interchangeable gestural "options" or "settings"—Wine's nod to seventeenth-century religious sculptures like Francisco Antonio Gijón's *Saint John of the Cross*, whose proto-modular wooden hands pop on and off, preparing the saint for his multiple didactic and expressive duties at the front of the church.⁴ Similarly, the extremities of Wine's sculptures are doing all the work, for there is often no torso. His work envisions the body as a set of leggy, arm-y, expressive signals. With no core to attach them to, where do these floating positions come from, and how are they legible?

Though not a direct reference for Wine, a particular moment in the work of Scottish artist Bruce McLean bridges related territories, delivering the language of excised and isolated postures and poses into the somewhat dogmatic realm of public sculpture and, in the context of 1970s Britain, the already canonized expressive and/or bodily forms of the work of Henry Moore and Anthony Caro. In 1972, after McLean was already known for establishing Nice Style (a "pose band" of three artists who performed as various 1970s cultural archetypes) and for an event at London's Situation Gallery that resulted in a photograph of McLean tumbling around on three white pedestals titled *Pose Work for Plinths*, 1971, he was invited

4. Francisco Antonio Gijón, *San Juan de la Cruz (Saint John of the Cross)*, 1675. Polychromed and gilded wood with sgraffito decoration. 66 1/8 x 36 3/4 x 29 1/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

to mount a solo show at the Tate.⁵ The exhibition, *King for a Day* (1972) comprised a set of publications detailing one thousand sculpture proposals squarely arranged across the gallery floor.

While many of McLean's instructions resonate with well-known conceptual artworks of the time (some plans take the form of concrete poetry), amidst the artist's many prompts are a few hints at the pervasive, unsettled legacy of modernist sculpture in public space in Britain.⁶ With these directives he strains to make use of the ubiquitous sculptural legacy of Moore and Caro. "16. Caro revisited work... 19. A fresh look at Henry Moore (piece)... 95. Another look at Henry Moore Piece... 122. Remember Anthony Caro (piece work)... 447. Another look at Henry Moore (piece) 3rd version... 448. Early one morning, after 'Caro' work... 794. Another look at Henry Moore, piece... 978. Henry Moore revisited for the 10th time, piece.," and so on.⁷ Like Wine's work, McLean's *King for a Day* project together with his "pose" works shifts attention between personal objectives and an acute awareness of the subliminal public ("official") roots of our aesthetic convictions and our circumscribed expressions of

5. On Nice Style, see John Wood, "Nice Style: The World's First Pose Band," Henry Moore Institute website, December 14, 2011, <https://www.henry-moore.org/assets/research/online-papers/2011/jon-wood/jon-wood.pdf>. An extract from the Nice Style performance *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo*, Garage Gallery, London, November 1974, is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/IKl0X-rxjDM>. On the Tate show, see gallery label, September 2016, in "Bruce McLean: Pose Works for Plinths I, 1971," Tate website, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mclean-pose-work-for-plinths-i-t03273>.

6. See "Bruce McLean: King for a Day," on Tanya Leighton Gallery website, <https://tanyaleighton.com/library/bruce-mclean-king-for-a-day#9>, accessed February 19, 2021.

7. Bruce McLean, "King for a Day and 999 other pieces/works/thing/etc.," *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Ubuweb website, https://www.ubu.com/concept/mclean_king.html.

desire. If you are taking a "fresh look" at a reclining Henry Moore figure ten times, how far is that from stalking? Wine's long engagement with British sculpture parallels McLean's compulsive backward glances at these artists, who, of course, are perhaps the closest thing to a lingua franca of civic sculpture: abstracted, sublimated, ideologically mobilized public modernism—the expression of culture as the expression of something that is not quite leisure.

For this reason, I always think about Wine's sculpture in relation to public sculpture, in particular to the enviable affect of languorous, leisurely reclining shapes (not quite human) plopped down in such a frenzied environment as midtown Manhattan. For *Local Vocals*, 2017, a public commission at Battersea Park in London, Wine made something that looks like a gigantic bright orange recumbent Moore figure, its stomach littered with sculptures of picnic detritus, like a lost-and-found box. I imagine that Wine's work registers the gestures, postures, intimacy, feelings of overexposure, and expressive possibilities of public space by reanimating, or re-anthropomorphizing, the tasteful, urbane modernism that hides the embodied psychology and specificity of the figure in the reduced, relaxed forms of Henry Moore or the upright but still reticent pillars of Barbara Hepworth.

As art historian David Getsy proposes in his book *Abstract Bodies*, we read gender, sexuality, and other contingent human traits into abstract sculpture, almost as a precondition for beginning

to understand it.⁸ Wine's work similarly seems to indulge this habitual, impressionistic, and open way of understanding the sculptural forms endemic to public space, or to the public imagination of sculpture. The forms in *The IRS* or *Lifelong friends*, also 2020, could be emulating the figures of Hepworth and Moore, respectively—the first sinking into a heavy contrapposto, one leg overdeveloped from too-frequent sliding into this pose, and the second settling a hand on a hip balanced atop a “leg” that looks more like a rectangular tube of metal. In these 6' 7" ceramic sculptures, structure and surface grind together like bone touching bone. They are overgrown, given a bit too much space that they stretch to occupy, perhaps striving but unsure if they want to escape the influence of works like Hepworth's *The Bride*, 1970. In any case, they seem to say that we take and internalize the sculpture we're given, even if we don't feel very modern ourselves.

Looking at these works and feeling like I can't quite place their references, I think of the term “mondegreen,” which describes the misinterpretation of one phrase as something else which still makes sense. It was coined in the 1950s by an American writer who, as a child, heard a line from a Scottish ballad as “Lady Mondegreen,” when the lyric is actually “layd him on the green,” transforming a funerary act into an imagined noblewoman. Similarly, Wine's sculpture catalogues what is in

8. David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

the public domain and transforms it into something sensical and satisfying, even if it is misheard or misunderstood. It recalls something the poet Anne Boyer recently wrote in a series of texts collected under the title *Erotology*: “This is like sometimes how you are in the city you now live in and forget and think you are in a city you used to live in or one you have visited a lot. Then sometimes you feel like you are in all cities at once, or that all cities are basically just one, or that you are driving or walking in a city that makes each city the same like the dream city you have the one-person in. So, too, your longing has both an enlarging and flattening effect: now that you have been alive for some time, it's clear all this longing is a kind of cosmopolitanism... You hold a face in your eyes a lot and say ‘I am a citizen of longing for that one person,’ but what you really mean is that you are a citizen of longing for the world.”⁹

Through its thematic idling and its riffs on certain outmoded yet pervasive civic dimensions of art, Wine's work, and his SculptureCenter show especially, registers a fuzzy desiring in our relationship to the past and its purchase on our current state. Wine surveys both the recent sociopolitical history of his home country (Wine was born in Britain in 1983) and, as an artist, observes the larger, longer history of our relationships to the forms that have marked public life there, and our arrival now, in 2021. What looked bad before looks worse now, feels

9. Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), 85.

more personal, and is marked by a waning belief in the neoliberal economic policies solidified in the U.K. and the U.S. through the 1970s and 1980s that have left so many alienated, precariously employed, and without a sense of society—longing for the world as supply chains deliver the world to our doorsteps.

I listen to “Imperfect List,” the circa-1989 song for which Jesse Wine’s show at SculptureCenter is named, and I try to look up the lyrics online.¹⁰ I find a post on a blog for a U.K. music podcast called Radio Clash from 2015. “Really only posting Imperfect List by Big Hard Excellent Fish here for two reasons 1) it’s ace, and has been played twice on Radio Clash, and still is the best thing both Robin Guthrie and Pete Dinklage has done—yes including their ‘day jobs’ and 2) all the lyrics for this track on the Net are fucking wrong. I mean REALLY wrong, like someone who wasn’t alive then has tried to decipher them, badly. That’s why I’m posting this really—this is a good antidote to all of this misplaced fake (i.e. wasn’t there) late 80’s-90’s nostalgia.”¹¹

I think about who wasn’t there but is online and trying to transcribe this song, which inventories figures, conditions, events, and feelings antagonistic to human dignity in the last years of Margaret

10. The song was originally commissioned for *WRONG*, a dance-for-television performance by Michael Clark and Stephen Petronio. There are a few versions.

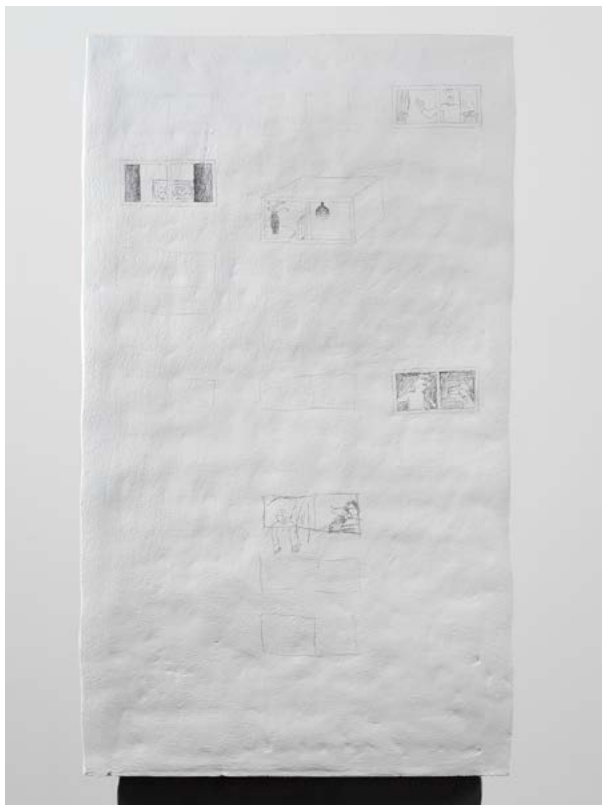
11. Radio Clash continues: “You know all this I <3 Britpop rubbish from those who hated it, or weren’t even alive then, and the neon 1980’s freaks that think it was all dayglo and sweat bands, that it all looked like a Taylor Swift video. No, it was really really shit. 1990 interestingly was when it started to turn—mass raves and baggy/Madchester... and the Poll Tax riots later than year. Then Thatcher went, but up to then it was mostly a grim Yuppie decade. As much as this is a time capsule of 1989, it reminds me a lot of today, actually, especially the line ‘the Tory invention of the non-working class’ which still rings true.” <https://www.radioclash.com/archives/2015/07/07where-were-you-an-imperfect-list-for-misplaced-fake-nostalgia/>.

Thatcher’s reign: “Heartbreaking, lying friend,” “acid rain,” “gut-wrenching disappointment,” “the Tory invention of the non-working class,” and “Mister Jesse Helms.” (Another good one: “Evil, gossiping fashion bastard.”) There are a lot of words, and a lot to mishear or misremember, and a lot to get confused or blurred politically, especially within the mix of the Andy Weatherall version of the song that was released in 1990, which you can dance to. An idling truck turns fuel into carbon dioxide; this song makes the last thirty years feel like the constant churn of a combustion engine, transforming evil from one form to another.

If the disgruntled music blogger quoted above wants more precision in our discontent, Wine’s work instead posits sculpture as a place that registers what is public, and intimates that what he produces, or inadvertently reproduces, expresses anxiety around what is universal experience and what we feel as personal, atomized, and individual. It practices a kind of receptivity that only a state of idling can afford—super-attuned to details and parts, while a greater, more ambiguous focus lies semi-conscious elsewhere, a backdrop of social conditions perceived symptomatically, as in the ways his figurative sculptures place their hands or sink into their contorted feet. In alignment with the tragic excess of the song, Wine’s artistic practice is an overproductive yet ruminative activity where capitalistic desires are cyclically constructed, then run on empty. *Imperfect List* is its own sculptural litany: exhausted, producing exhaust, and inexhaustive. ♦

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



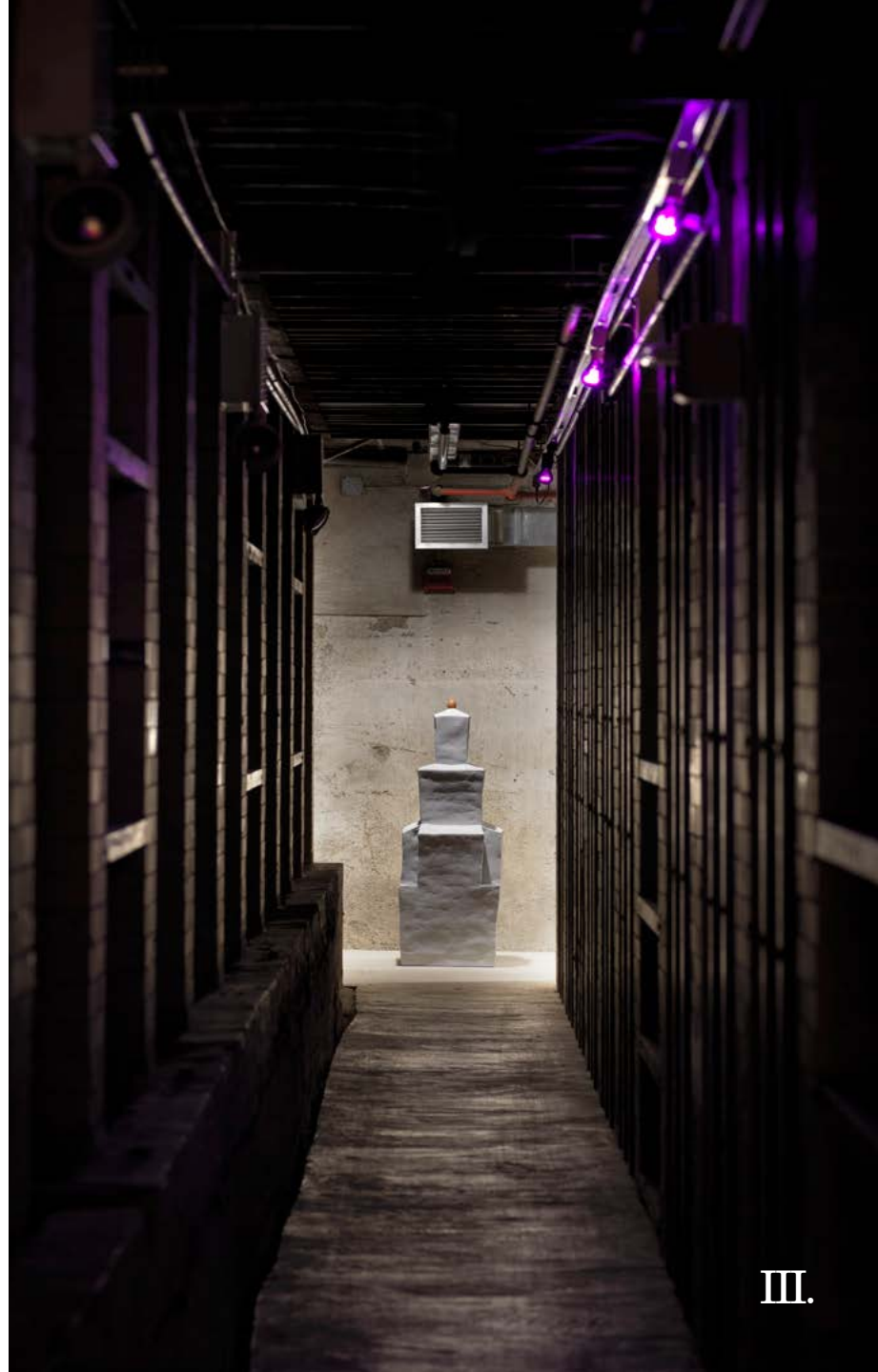
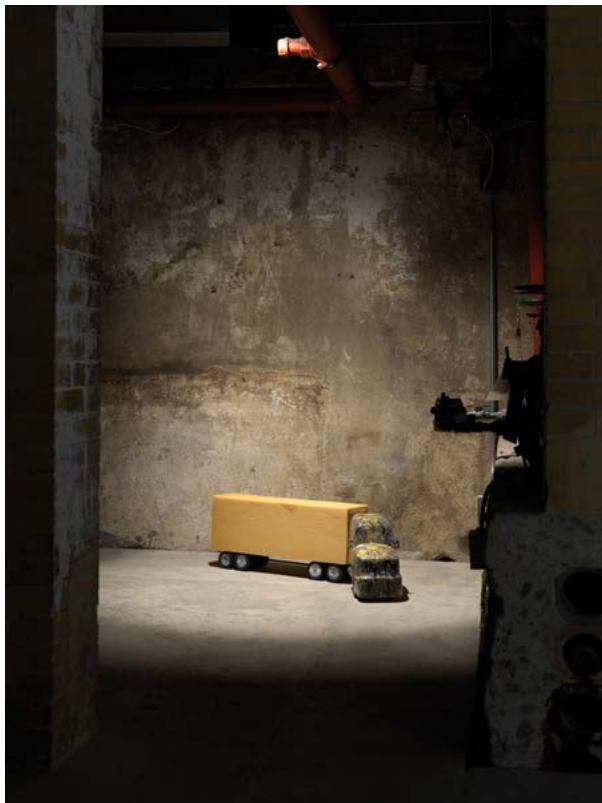


I.



VIII., VI.

V.



III.



XI., VI., XIII.



I.





VI., XI., VIII.

II.





VIII., XIV.

IX.



II.



X.



XIV.



IX.



XII.



VII., IV.



IV.

II.





- I. CALCIUM, 2018–20. CERAMIC, GRAPHITE, PAINT. $7 \times 31 \times 61$ IN.
- II. 11:10 AM / 15.10.1983 / 75 HEATH LANE / CHESTER / UNITED KINGDOM / CH3 5SY, 2020. CERAMIC, PAINT. GRAPHITE, WEEDS. $67 \times 31 \times 46$ IN.
- III. ABSOLUTELY-NOTHING-IS-WRITTEN-IN-STONE, 2020. CERAMIC, SAND, PAINT, EGG. $19 \times 19 \times 54$ IN.
- IV. CHESSPIECE, 2020. CERAMIC, PAINT, SAND. $26 \times 22 \times 77$ IN.
- V. I WENT OUTSIDE MOURNFUL, AND I HIT PURE AIR, 2020. GLAZED CERAMIC, GRAPHITE, FOAM. DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.
- VI. IMPERFECT LIST, 2020. CERAMIC, SAND, PAINT, $18 \times 12 \times 85$ IN.
- VII. LIFE LONG FRIENDS 2020. CERAMIC, PAINT, IRON. $25 \times 23 \times 79$ IN.
- VIII. MEMORY AND RESPONSIBILITY ARE STRANGERS, 2020. GLAZED CERAMIC, MOTHER OF PEARL LUSTER. $15 \times 7 \times 9$ IN.

- IX. NESTSEEKERS INTERNATIONAL, 2020. FORGED STEEL.
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE
- X. THE ECSTASY OF SAINT TOKIG, 2020. CERAMIC, GRAPHITE,
PAINT. $37 \times 56 \times 47$ IN.
- XI. THE IRS, 2020. CERAMIC, PAINT, COPPER. $30 \times 12 \times 80$ IN.
- XII. THE PAUSES, 2020. CERAMIC, SAND, PAINT, STEEL, WOOD.
 $27 \times 17 \times 31$ IN.
- XIII. TO BE NOTICED IS TO BE LOVED, 2020. CERAMIC, MDF,
SAND, GAFFER TAPE, PAINT. $54 \times 10 \times 13.5$ IN.
- XIV. WE HAVE TO HOPE THAT THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE US AND
WHO KNOW US A LITTLE BIT WILL IN THE END HAVE
SEEN US, TRULY. IN THE END, NOT MUCH ELSE MATTERS.
2020. CERAMIC, SAND, PAINT, IRON, GLAZED CERAMIC,
STEEL, \$2.50. $28.5 \times 5 \times 9.5$ IN.

Jesse Wine: Imperfect List

SculptureCenter, New York
September 24, 2020 — January 25, 2021

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