

Gay, Malcolm. "Cambridge Artist Matt Saunders Wins Rappaport Prize." *Boston Globe*, September 4, 2015.

The Boston Globe

Cambridge artist Matt Saunders wins Rappaport Prize

By Malcolm Gay GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 04, 2015



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Matt Saunders, a Cambridge-based visual artist whose work grapples with notions of celebrity and the shifting nature of memory, has been awarded the 2015 Rappaport Prize by the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln.

Saunders is the 16th recipient of the \$25,000 award, which is given each year to an established artist with strong ties to New England.

“Matt’s work in the past year has grown and reached a point that the committee wanted to recognize and encourage him to keep working further,” said deCordova chief curator Jennifer Gross. “A prize like the Rappaport can give the gift of time.”

The open-ended cash prize, which is endowed by the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Foundation, is not tied to a particular project. Rather, recipients can spend the cash award in any manner they choose. Recent recipients include Liz Deschenes, Ann Pibal, and Suara Welitoff.

“I’m thrilled,” Saunders, 40, said when reached by Skype in Berlin. “Just as this prize comes I was trying to figure out how I was going to pay for this used machine I found in Texas, which is \$20,000, so it’s very one-to-one. I’m basically putting it into building a different studio situation.”

Saunders, who holds degrees from Harvard and Yale, is an assistant professor of visual and environmental studies at Harvard.

His work, which is often compared to that of Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter, is represented in numerous museum collections, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Working at the intersection of painting, drawing, and photography, Saunders re-creates photographs of nearly forgotten celebrities by painting “negatives” of their images on linen canvases. He then exposes the negative onto photographic paper, creating haunting images that are at once familiar and remote.

Saunders, who has spent many years working in Germany, often uses images of German film stars as his source material. He said his work is less concerned with celebrity than it is with the changing nature of memory, and how immutable objects seem to transform as we encounter them at different moments in our lives.

“The sense of something that’s fixed in its form or its time can intersect with you in different times, and cause incredible ripples that change,” said Saunders. “There’s an uncanniness between the unchanging text and our changing experience of the text.”

More recently, the artist has been working in animation, re-creating film clips by drawing each frame in the sequence. At a recent show at New York’s Marian Goodman Gallery, he projected one of his animations through several screens, creating a spatial component to the moving images as they intersected and were distorted at different points in the gallery.

“It was supposed to spatialize the image in a way, like where the image is located when it’s a beam of light,” said Saunders. “I want the viewer to have a complex encounter with an object — really what it’s trying to capture is something you’re looking at, but you’re also seeing me look at it, somehow. There’s spectatorship built into the image.”

Gross added that Saunders was “very innovative in terms of his use of media,” but had “reached a new plateau” with his video work.

“The means of making these images inherently holds the sense of time and this kind of reconstitution of memory,” said Gross. “Matt’s created a new means to personally respond to shared images and observation of historical and current culture.”

Unlike some other awards, recipients of the Rappaport Prize do not submit an application. Rather, the selection committee solicits other arts professionals for recommendations before choosing each year’s winner.

“It’s a really fun phone call to make,” said Gross, who contacted Saunders to tell him the news. “He was really incredulous. He was particularly quiet on the other end of the phone.”

Saunders, who will deliver a talk in association with the prize at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design on Nov. 4, said he was taken aback when he heard the news.

“I was quite shocked,” he said. “I thought something was wrong.”