

Will Butler and Marcel Dzama Episode 5 Transcript

[SOUNDBITE; WILL BUTLER: Good afternoon, hello. My name is Will Butler. I am a person who plays in a band called Arcade Fire and also does other music and things like that. I live down in old Brooklyn halfway to Coney Island. MARCEL DZAMA: I'm Marcel Dzama. I'm an artist and I also live near Will.]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is Dialogues—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; MARCEL DZAMA: I listen to a lot of news and then that just finds its way into the drawings. I almost feel as an exorcism to get it out of me so I can go to sleep.]

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, Editorial Director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

LZ: Today's pairing: the artist Marcel Dzama and the musician Will Butler. Marcel was born and raised in Winnipeg, Canada, and he's best known for his fantastical pen-and-ink drawings. From bears to soldiers and talking trees, his figures inhabit a surreal universe entirely of his own invention. Marcel also makes art films, theater and dance sets, dioramas, and album cover art for acts like Beck and They Might Be Giants. His work has been exhibited at MoMA, the Whitney, and the Kunsthalle Mannheim in Germany, among many others. Marcel also loves collaborating with artists in other genres, and you can see his production design and costumes in Amy Sedaris's TV show. He's collaborated in a few different ways with our other guest today: Will Butler of Arcade Fire.

Will grew up outside Houston, and his path took him to a New England boarding school and the Midwest for college, before landing him in Montreal where he joined his brother's band, Arcade Fire. After several albums, movie scores, and some solo work, Will keeps exploring new paths. In 2016, he put touring on hold for a year, while he completed a master's degree at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

We're so lucky to have them here today to speak about the intersection of music, visual arts, politics, and beyond. Marcel and Will, welcome to Dialogues.

WILL BUTLER: Pleasure.

MARCEL DZAMA: Thanks a lot.

LZ: How did you guys first meet? I mean it was kind of your idea, Marcel, to set this up when we were talking. I was curious.

WB: Oh, I see.

MD: Let's see, probably through Spike Jonze, I imagine.

WB: I'm sure we just met at a show or something.

MD: I think it was at Where the Wild Things Are opening.

WB: Oh.

MD: I think, if memory serves me right.

WB: Yeah, I think that's actually right. We met at the premiere for Where the Wild Things Are at the Lincoln Center.

MD: The New York premiere.

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LZ: Will, when did you get into music? Did you grow up playing instruments? Is your family musical? How did those interests come about?

WB: My great-grandfather was a man named King Driggs, William King Driggs, who was the last son of the second wife of a polygamist homesteader in Utah in the late nineteenth century, and he always wanted to be a musician. He went to Chicago and got six months of music school, but his wife was pregnant and went home and he was very disappointed. And then he had this big brood of children and he made them all play instruments and none of them wanted to, but for Christmas he'd be like, I got you all instruments, and then he would make them be like—it was kind of a pre-vaudeville . . . They drove around the Old West playing shows at churches and literally getting run out of town with pitchforks. He would get arrested. They were at a show, and these men showed up and took away all their instruments because they hadn't—they were on layaway and they hadn't made any payments. And then my grandma was writing about it and she said, Oh, and after the men took our instruments that's when we learned how to sing harmony. Of course, Daddy was in jail that night so ten-year-old Carlton had to drive the car through the desert. That was before they had roads, of course. So it was that. They were like a family band and then they had a variety show on TV in the '60s called The King Family Show.

LZ: Oh, wow.

WB: That's what my mom grew up doing and playing shows and casinos in Lake Tahoe.

LZ: But a variety show, doesn't that mean it was sort of like all sorts of things would happen on the show. I mean different—

WB: Yeah, like comedy and skits and dancing and Top 20. But it was my mom and forty of her cousins and her six aunts and uncles.

LZ: So that's the context in which you grew up basically. I mean you weren't on the variety show but you were directly, you were variety adjacent.

WB: Yeah, variety adjacent. Being in a band was not a negative, it was normal. So when I was a sophomore in college in Chicago, I took off a semester to go up to Montreal to play in Arcade Fire with my brother. And my parents weren't like, That's crazy. I cast you out of the family. They were like, Okay, great. Just make sure that you graduate from college.

LZ: But your brother also wanted you to finish university? Because you then went back to school after playing for, I guess, a semester or?

WB: Yeah, I went. So my sophomore year I went for six months to Montreal, and we kind of started recording Funeral and then Funeral came out in fall of 2004, which was the fall of my senior year of college. And at that point, I knew my professors and was doing independent studies and stuff, so I'd be like, Can I skip school on Tuesday to go play on Conan, and they'd be like, Yes, you can go play on Conan.

LZ: And Marcel, maybe you would talk a little bit about your background. I mean what your parents did and how you came to what you are doing?

MD: Well, my parents were kind of, I guess, working class. So my dad was a baker. He worked at—I think Safeway still exists in Canada and US, a little bit—so he worked at Safeway. And my mom was a part-time nurse. My dad was a biker before he was married and everything, so he had some interesting rebel stories, I guess. And so maybe that's where the creativity came from, that side.

LZ: Like a gang, like in a biker—

MD: He had his own little gang, but they were fighting with this other—

WB: A collective, a biker collective.

MD: Yeah, maybe that's why I like collaborations so much.

LZ: Not a gang, a collective.

MD: Exactly. But they were fighting with this other gang, the Los Bravos.

LZ: Another collective.

MD: Yeah, another collective.

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LZ: Wait, they were called the what?

MD: The Los Bravos in Winnipeg. I don't know if they exist anymore. I think they took over the Winnipeg scene. Yeah, they had stolen my dad's motorcycle and so my dad went down to the clubhouse and he had taken his father's, I guess, a shotgun and sawed it down and had it in his coat and was like, I'm taking my bike back. And there was just the mechanic that was working there and he was like, Okay. There were these weird kind of stories in my family. He was obsessed with Vikings and things like that. And so he had made like battle axes and morning stars and things like this. So I'd seen him working on weird things in the garage and they were basically sculptures. He'd be welding and melting metal down and stuff like this.

LZ: But functional. I mean you could—

MD: But yeah, all functional.

LZ: You could use the morning star.

MD: He used to make weapons for me and my neighbors, and we'd play knights and things like that. And then, of course, someone would come back injured.

LZ: Get hurt.

MD: Usually the neighbors thankfully. Yeah, but he also did paintings. He had paint-by-number-type things. But he wouldn't use the chart. We had this giant Last Supper over our kitchen table that was kind of interesting because he painted their faces all differently. Like it doesn't have the same look as Leonardo's, like they kind of look more—

LZ: More Canadian.

MD: Yeah, more Canadian. Yes, outsider art feeling to it. My mom used to draw. I actually had a few of her drawing books like How to Draw Horses and things like that. I used to draw from those and yeah. Mainly I kind of, I basically ran out of coloring books and so I started drawing my own. And that was, I guess, out of poverty. And so I'd draw from these coloring books and re-color that image and then eventually I just drew my own images and not based off of what was in there. And then I had dyslexia or I have dyslexia. I wasn't very good at school. So the one thing I was good at was art, and I had teachers that were . . .

LZ: They encouraged you.

MD: They encouraged me. I'd be drawing in class, and they'd take them away. There was one teacher that would kind of hang them up by his desk after though, and it kind of was just a positive reinforcement in one direction at least. I padded everything else, I knew I had to go in one—

LZ: I guess that's good, it sort of clarifies the path, yeah.

MD: Okay, here's my path. It was kind of made for me.

LZ: Will, when did you start experimenting with different instruments? I mean early on or?

WB: Yeah, I mean I'm not particularly good at any instrument. I guess I am now, twenty years later or however long. I took piano lessons as a kid, played clarinet in middle school. I never practiced because I was naturally good, so I never quite practiced enough to be excellent. But I was naturally quite good. I didn't listen to rock 'n' roll or anything until well into my teens. I just listened to classical music or nothing, for a long time. Yeah, kind of getting into The Clash and punk music where it's just a bunch of idiots trying things out. It's like, Oh, I'm an idiot and I can try things out.

MD: They kind of freed me up—kind of discovering punk. And then it was also the political views were all in the same direction where I was, whereas the other music was just kind of, you know, sexist macho stuff. It was kind of more political. This is all in high school so I was kind of lost at that point. And then I felt like, Oh, these are my people. I also started up a lot of bands back in those days too.

LZ: Oh, really? What were you playing?

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MD: I was guitar and I sang. We had a ridiculous, we were The Boredoms. And then later I found out there's a Japanese band called The Boredoms. That one was very—

LZ: Like a deadly punk Japanese band.

MD: You know, we're talking about great gems. It's very stereotypical punk.

LZ: So Marcel, does the music come first when you guys have worked together, you and Will? Or is it something that emerges sort of over the process of the collaboration? I'm thinking really of that music video with the polka-dotted dancers. How did that collaboration come about?

MD: I had done this ballet movie called A Game of Chess and so I had these costumes that were the pawns. There were these polka-dot costumes that I based off of a Picabia drawing that I think he did it for a ballet in Stockholm.

WB: But yeah. But then Marcel had a show up at Zwirner and it was coming down. He was like, Oh, yeah, we can do a video, like I've got a whole bank of TVs of these polka-dotted dancers that they could be in the film.

MD: But I made an art film called Death Disco. So when I was making this film, A Game of Chess, we actually wrapped early and I had all these dancers and the sun was going down and all of a sudden it was that golden moment. And so I was like let's do a disco song really fast. We'll just have like, I'll handclap and then you can dance to that. It was quite short, so when I was editing it I just flipped it. Or no, I reversed the dance. So that part of it's like backwards. And so it has a real surreal feeling to it as well. And if you look into the background you can see buses going backwards and forwards and things like that. And so I had all these monitors set up and so I had Will sing in front of it because it was also the day before the show was going to come down so we kept everyone late at the gallery.

WB: Did we do nine to midnight?

MD: Yeah, it was quite late.

WB: After midnight to three? We had like, you know, a certain number of minutes in the Zwirner gallery.

LZ: But Alvin, your son, was filmed at the same time? You had to bring him in whenever those hours were, midnight to three, to put on the drum set?

WB: The tears were real.

LZ: The tears were real. That's right because everyone's crying at the end.

MD: Yeah, yeah, he is crying at the end. He's an amazing drummer actually.

LZ: Both of you have that too, that's another shared thing. I mean you've been now, you and Willem, your son, are kind of making work. I mean, is that—it's sort of a weird question—but do you think about wanting that to be part of your relationship with your child, that the creative process is something that you share?

MD: Yeah, he really enjoys it and you could see he zeroes in on certain things, like he really loves doing sculpture. So we do a lot of collage, like kind of weird installation pieces and things like that. We were kind of making scrap art, I guess, and my studio had like pieces of—I'm a bit of a hoarder. So there's all these things and we started breaking them and turning them into other—we made these bottle knights. We would take old wine bottles or something and make, take heads from puppets and then paint them. And then we started just making our own papier-mâché heads and plaster. So we got a little more sophisticated.

LZ: Maybe you'd talk about some of the other collaborative work you've done. I mean scoring Her. I mean that was something the band did, but really it felt like you were leading the charge on that. What was that like?

WB: Yeah, so Arcade Fire did the soundtrack to Her, which is a Spike Jonze film. We were in it kind of from the ground up. Win and Régine stayed at Spike's house and read a really early draft before it was way in preproduction. He would call us and say, Oh, we're filming this kind of scene. Can you send some music that might go with this kind of scene? And then we would send them some stuff. Yeah, it was like a back and forth through the whole process. I mean I think I forget how long they filmed for three months but then edited for ten or twelve or fifteen

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months afterwards and back and forth the whole time. I ended up directing the end of it, I mean shepherding the Arcade Fire side of things because it was such a long process and it's hard. It's hard collaborating and getting into the mind of someone else. When you're making music and then getting into the mind of Spike who isn't a music maker, he's a filmmaker so he would say, That's too sad, and we would be like, What do you mean by sad? Oh! You mean it has a piano in it and piano means sad to you. Which is great. But then when you're trying to work, it took me about nine months to really understand what he was talking about. And then I understood what he was talking about.

MD: Did you use a ukulele instead?

LZ: And what about you, you've also worked with Spike before?

MD: Yeah, we've done drawings together actually. When he was working on *Where the Wild Things Are*, we'd go up to Connecticut and do drawings with Maurice Sendak. And that was probably my favorite collaboration because it was like having nostalgia in the moment of actually drawing with the hero that you know since memory, really.

LZ: And what was that—what would happen?

MD: We would try to out dirty each other, like make the most dirty drawings that we could possibly make. And so there was this weird competition. And we'd leave like with our faces hurting from the smiles on our faces because it got pretty raunchy, these drawings. But you wouldn't expect it from—well, I guess in some ways you might expect it from Maurice.

LZ: It's funny actually. It's one of the things that people, I think unless they look at your work very carefully they might not see that there is a lot of—to put it in radio terms—erotic subject matter. But how did you, how has that made its way into your work? I mean, is that almost like you're just letting like fantasies emerge or dreams?

MD: I try not to censor myself so I just try it whatever. Like a lot of the early work for sure was, I would just have a blank piece of paper and start drawing. And I kept ridiculous hours. I'd be drawing from twelve at night maybe till noon or something like that. So the subject matter just flowed like in a dream sense.

WB: Yeah. My solo work has been much more in that spirit like Marcel's talking. It's like a little more free form and when we made a great disco song together it was like let's do this. This is more moonshine than fancy scotch. But moonshine is really great sometimes.

LZ: It has its place. In the last couple of conversations a theme that's come up among artists, how do you cope with kind of like the alone time in the studio? Can you talk about that a little?

MD: Yeah, I actually really like it for, I don't know, maybe about two weeks or something and then at that point I just need to socialize. I also become very antisocial because of it. There was an art group that we started in university, that was really helpful because then I could do solo work but I could be next to someone and talk to them. We were all antisocial so it was this great way to get together.

LZ: A lot of people sitting quietly drawing.

MD: We had easels and comedy albums that made up the conversation.

LZ: Will, I read recently that you went back to school and that you're getting a master's degree, I believe. That certainly sounds like looking for something whether it's inspiration or energy or influence from elsewhere. What was that decision-making process like?

WB: Yeah, so I went back to school last year. I graduated a year and a bit ago from the Harvard Kennedy School, it's the government school. They have a one-year midcareer master's in public administration, a public policy degree. This degree was a bit like an American studies degree almost. Not only how do humans live individually, but how do we live in government, and how do we live in the aggregate, and how do you save lives, and how are we ending lives, and what are we doing? Though it's also tied up with caring about how people live their lives. I started there in the fall of 2016 so I was there through the whole election and then it's definitely important to learn where we are going wrong and how we got there. So there's both a very practical element of like there are people dying that don't actually need to die. And I mean I have access and power and money in ways that not everyone has and it's like, Oh, I should probably learn how to make less people die if I can.

LZ: Right. Because Arcade Fire has had philanthropic, I mean a sort of philanthropic mission, if not explicit mission at least an impetus for it seems like from the beginning basically.

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WB: Yeah, as soon as we could quit our day jobs. I mean before that we were doing things always. But as soon as we could quit our day jobs, we were very explicitly like we need to support people who are doing work. And for a long time we've had a partnership with this group Partners In Health, who do amazing work who've been in Haiti for thirty-five years, in Rwanda, the Russian prison system, in Lima, Peru, Mexico, and the Navajo Nation. They're very thorough and they're very moral and very effective. That's been a real inspiration. Once again more on the saving lives front but also artistically, like there's an honest morality and there's a real punk-rock spirit.

LZ: Speaking of that punk-rock spirit in the work, I find your work has really become more political, Marcel, you've really built that in. The critiques seem really intense in your recent work. Is that something you want to do more of? Is that even a change you're aware of?

MD: Well, I guess as an influence I listen to a lot of news and then that just finds its way into the drawings. I almost feel as an exorcism to get it out of me so I can go to sleep. Hearing about kids being taken away and all this other stuff that's going on, I just need it as this exorcism, to feel like I just have to voice something.

WB: For a long time I feel like your work has had a lot of women with knives and women with guns.

MD: Always that feminist—

WB: It reads very differently now, like it actually, there's an arc to it, whereas before it had a different character and now the same work, it's like, Yes! Let's get all these women guns. There's a read to it that is very natural. But that I see in that history that kind of surprised me.

MD: Yeah, yeah. It's interesting how time changes, what the meaning of an actual piece of artwork is.

LZ: There is an interview where you said—I think that was after Sandy Hook—that you weren't going to draw guns anymore.

MD: Yeah. So I stopped . . . till Trump got in. And then I drew guns again. So I did this poster called The revolution will be female and then the proceeds were for spousal abuse. It's for women to be able to get lawyers to pay for their court cases and things like that. It's like a rigged system for people of white privilege, men in general. Maybe it's a little bit inspiration from like the Black Panther movement and things like that. I've seen some show maybe at the New Museum or something like that. I'm still very antiguns but just as a metaphor.

WB: Antigun, pro-revolution.

MD: Yeah, exactly.

LZ: But it's interesting because you know one thing I think about, or at least you hear when you talk to artists, is that bringing politics into the work can be complicated because, of course, one thing you do is you shut down interpretive possibilities the moment there's a clear message in the actual work. You know, people feel like they're dealing with propaganda. And so one of the things that an artist has to navigate is this issue of how much can you bring in and how much do you actually have to position the work as opposed to actually defining positions within the work.

MD: Well, I find with Trump it's basically surrealism. I feel like we're just living in this badly written B movie. So it's very easy for me to go in that realm because it doesn't make sense.

LZ: Right. Your work is already surreal. Yeah, totally right. How did you develop the style that you're known for? I mean this sort of intricate drawing, often animal forms, sort of again surrealism which we've talked about. How did that develop?

MD: Well, I think it was probably growing up in Winnipeg. It was in the winters. It almost looks like a blank canvas where like the horizon and the sky and the land would just meet and disappear like it was this white background. So I would just place characters in that and now a lot of the animals had some origin story based on just seeing them in nature going to the garbage dump and they'd be full of bears. And then actually one of the bats I became obsessed with, it was almost like a story out of Batman where this friend and I, our school expanded quite large and so they had to build all these trailers for other classrooms. And so they put this meshing underneath the trailers. And me and my friend, we ripped it off and all these bats came flying out of the bottom of it in the daytime, and it was like, Oh, okay. I didn't know that was going on there. Since then I was always quite obsessed with them. I didn't even, I don't think I'd even seen a bat before that and then all of a sudden there's just a lot of bats. The style that I kind of, I always looked at children's books because you could find them very affordable at garage sales. And so I would just buy these old kids' books. Anything that looked like it was prewar or from like the '40s or something and I just always really connected that with that illustration style. I used to draw kind of, they were like zines, I guess, more than a comic, but they're kind of comics and I used to trade them to this comic store for books. I couldn't afford anything so I would just make these comics because the

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guy that ran it, he would just keep them. Later on, I found out he'd sold them all at a garage sale or something, but they were original—this was before, I couldn't even afford to xerox anything. And then the Winnipeg Art Gallery had a lot of Inuit art and Native American art, so they had very simplistic style and I really liked that and a lot of it was these creatures that would morph into humans. And so I think a lot of that came from there. This is all like looking back later on.

LZ: Anything coming up? I know you talked a little bit about your exhibition coming up. What are you most excited about that's—

MD: I'm talking with Justin Peck, the New York City Ballet choreographer, and we're maybe developing another ballet together so that's been in the back of my mind a lot. Yeah, so it was a great collaboration last time. Just seeing what he's able to do with these crazy costumes they come up with, and then you can make these dances based on them. Maybe that's the thing I'm most excited about. Oh, I guess, also finishing this film with Amy Sedaris and working with Will on the soundtrack, so that's also very . . . I have a lot of exciting things.

WB: Last time Marcel did a ballet, he asked if I would do something for one of the parties and we kind of started a band called Sister Squares with my wife and her sister and this woman, Sara Dobbs, who's also in my solo band. Kind of a girl group dressed all in polka dots. I wrote an album with them in a couple of weeks, and we performed it in the Lincoln Square auditorium.

MD: It was pretty amazing.

WB: And then Marcel named them Sister Squares after.

MD: It's after a Marcel Duchamp book about an end game of chess that comes up maybe once in a million times.

WB: So I'd like to get to work on Sister Squares some.

MD: Well, that's another project that I'm excited about.

LZ: Maybe you guys can each give one tip or piece of advice that you would give to a young artist and really a young creative person in any field. I think it should be as open as possible. But what's something that you would tell them to do?

WB: My advice to every human is to never trust anyone, but in a positive, in a positive way. To like know . . . to recognize if you're putting your art in the hands of someone else, just to be very conscious of that moment. It's hard because you're an artist and you should just focus on making art. It's hard when someone's like, I'm going to help you. Recognize when you're putting the art, your art in the hands of someone else, what that will do both to the art and to yourself.

MD: And I guess for artists, just go with what you're kind of obsessed with at the moment because it will kind of come out in the art. People can see it somehow, it just kind of shows up if you're really passionate about something. I mean that's with anything really. I think if you're just really passionate, you should just go for it. Unless you're like a criminal, I guess.

LZ: On that note to all the criminals out there, do not follow your obsessions, but if you're an artist, follow your obsessions all the way.

Marcel and Will, thank you so much for doing this today. This was a lot of fun.

MD: Thank you.

WB: Yeah, thanks so much.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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I'm Lucas Zwirner, and thanks so much for listening. I hope you'll join us next time.

David Zwirner

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