

frieze

B. Wurtz

Gallery 400, University of Illinois

Does B. Wurtz make art out of the things he finds or does he make the things he finds into art? This might not seem like a question worthy of debate if you were discussing Richard Tuttle or Tom Friedman, or even Robert Rauschenberg for that matter, but in Wurtz's case it is central. It has to do with value: art's value; the value of stuff in a vernacular context; and of course the value of the artist who makes these decisions.

Wurtz often uses junk. He puts plastic grocery bags, coat hangers and socks through various calisthenics, but as sculptures they are not always elegant or even transformed or recontextualized enough to pass into the realm of metaphor or critique. Tuna tins, buttons, shoelaces and pressed cardboard packing corners are often simply arranged on the floor, looped over wire or sewn onto unstretched canvas. Wurtz is not afraid to employ the material artefacts that are overtly associated with art and its distribution. He dangles strings of 35mm transparencies off a wire armature like colourful garlands, for example. With six cardboard mounted slides he made perfect little cubes hinged on all sides with Sellotape. Even painting is dislocated from its ideological traditions, serving superfluous and clumsy decorative functions, such as creating faux-gestural borders.

Wurtz's exhibition '70 +30 =2000' at Gallery 400 represented a selection of work made over a 30-year period. The button paintings - large raw canvases judiciously dotted with buttons radiating coloured acrylic circles like homespun Robert Delaunay paintings - are his most recent works. The earliest works emphasised concept over aesthetics. The result was intentionally, albeit spectacular, emasculated objects. For example, tiny and pseudo-Duchampian are Unpleasant Private Thoughts (1973) and Secret Words (1973). Little unfinished pine boxes are inscribed with their title, date and Wurtz's customary printed signature. The implied intimacy of 'private thoughts' or 'secret words' contained in these boxes transforms what appears to be an obvious Dada subversion technique into nothing more than a discreet personal gesture incapable of any political agitation. You'd also be hard pressed to find any false dignity in Three Important Things (1973), a text drawing that simply lists in numbered order the words 'sleeping', 'eating' and 'keeping warm'.

The same could be said for his series of 'Pan Paintings' (1990-91). Painting the bottom side of inexpensive disposable aluminium baking pans, Wurtz highlighted the embossed patterns and designs that give these objects their roasting and baking abilities. From small bread containers to round and rectangular cake pans, these brightly coloured abstractions are individually iconic but when hung salon-style on the wall they keep pace with the best of contemporary painting and graphic design.

With some general knowledge of art history any viewer of Untitled (Prototype for a Multiple) (1993) could spot Wurtz's riff on Brancusi's many versions of his Bird in Space. Comprising an erect white athletics sock emerging from a soup can that rests on a tiered plywood base, this table-top sculpture is more indebted to the glories of material culture than to the cultural constructs of a Western masterpiece. Brancusi simply provided Wurtz with the form, which irony and appropriation gave him the excuse to use. But Wurtz's intentions are more honest and profound than taking shots at famous sculptors - he is actually celebrating both the shape of the sock and the shininess of the can.

This exhibition was a reminder that the creative experience can bring some measure of happiness and discovery to the maker as well as the viewer. Wurtz is a true humanist - his agenda is to seek secular and temporal values in art and life.

Michelle Grabner

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