



A trail of paper trash runs through twentieth-century art, from Picasso's collages to Rauschenberg's Combines. In the hands of American artist B. Wurtz, the newspaper is replaced with the now-ubiquitous indestructible plastic bag. Hummus-package lids, vegetable nets, shoelaces, coat hangers, buttons and scraps of leftover construction wood are some of the other fragments of urban detritus that appear in this museum-style retrospective.

White Columns director Matthew Higgs, acting here as guest curator, has selected a series of sculptural works from the artist's oeuvre that suggest an oblique reflection on basic human need. Although Wurtz's 1973 handwritten list *Three Important Things* ('1. sleeping 2. eating 3. keeping warm') is not on show, it is centralised in the gallery's information materials and seems to have fundamentally shaped Higgs's curatorial logic.

A series of five freestanding pictorial sculptures, *Untitled (Food Wrapper)* (1976), looks like an uncanny hoard of de-skilled miniature prototypes for Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1923). After this wry joke on the Duchamp mania that took over the New York artworld for a time, Wurtz went on to cut a very different path from that of his critical postmodern contemporaries. The whimsy of Fluxus is also evoked in two sculptures from 1973, *Secret Words* and *Unpleasant Private Thoughts*: a pair of small plywood boxes nailed shut and inscribed with handwritten titles.

Wurtz's early suggestion of a private inner world has, in his mature output, become the builder's illegible notations on scavenged fragments of construction wood. This is a shift from the hidden psyche of the artist to the anonymous traces of public labour. These cheap pine offcuts bear the secret inscriptions of their former use, with pencil markings indicating hastily drawn floor plans, mysterious holes, cuts and protruding screws. Pieced together with the other bits of contemporary trash, this selection of works evokes the resources (and resourcefulness) of the destitute. A series of eight small pictorial sculptures made of wood, paint and nails suggests that this type of found object reflects a deeper preoccupation with the idea of shelter. The straightforward title of *House* (1989) perfectly fits the simplicity of a five-sided geometric form consisting of nails hammered into wood in a pattern that takes the shape of its title, as if it were intended as a pictographic equivalent.

These fragile arrangements are made from the dreck of our material existence, the bits and pieces left over, the parts that we no longer need. Although it looks like Wurtz gets his art supplies from a ragpicker, his is not political critique, and it is all the better for it. Instead the artist turns this stuff into a mysterious sign-world. The drawn line of a limp shoelace is always still recognisably a brand-new shoelace. The cheapest plain blue plastic bag hangs flat, making an abstract field of colour, and then is puffed up into an amorphous three-dimensional form. Without nostalgia or obvious affect, these fragile poetic sculptures ask us to reflect upon material necessity and the ways it might be figured in representation.

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