

frieze

B. Wurtz

BY DAVID REISMAN

B. Wurtz's art celebrates the generally untapped artistic potential of objects and materials that are so commonplace they are usually thrown away. His sculptures and paintings demonstrate just how satisfying art made from seemingly slight, ephemeral manufactured products can be. Curated by Matthew Higgs, Wurtz's retrospective of work from 1970 to 2011 was full of pleasures. Upending expectations about the nature of what's valuable and beautiful, the exhibition showed that, for more than 40 years, Wurtz has maintained a remarkable ability to transform almost-nothing materials into something significant.



B. Wurtz, Works 1970 - 2011, Installation view, Courtesy of Artist and Metro Pictures.

These graceful compositions and constructions are updated assisted readymades that are thought-provoking without being cynical, heavily ironic or grandiose. The work is quite different from folk art, but it shares the home-grown, do-it-yourself approach to using found materials. For example, Wurtz's pieces are frequently made of things you would find around the house – shoelaces, food wrappers, coat hangers, buttons, umbrella handles, screws, mops, socks, plastic lids, metal cans,

plastic bags and odd pieces of wood. Occasionally he includes more traditional artists' materials like acrylic paint and canvas, as in *Untitled* (2009), but in a similar provisional, apparently improvised way to his work made entirely from found materials. He doesn't make any effort to disguise what the materials are, and uses them to make abstract compositions and constructions that are in the tradition of Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, Pop art and Minimalism, affectionately poking fun at them while maintaining a strongly idiosyncratic character.

Wurtz consistently makes seemingly unpromising, abject ideas – for instance, *Construction Debris*, *Coat Hanger*, and *Broccoli Net* (1993), made from plastic mesh netting used for packaging fruit or vegetables that are attached to pieces of wire on small wood platforms – into delicate, witty and memorable works of art. *Bunch #2* (1995) is a tree-like structure made partly from plastic bags, which effectively conveyed a feeling of festivity, lightness and inventiveness. Throughout his career, Wurtz has consistently used manufactured materials for their inherent qualities (for example, the translucency, colour and glossiness of plastic bags) and also for their history – what they represent through our daily contact with them. Wurtz comments on Pop and Minimalism in early wall hangings and other sculptures in a way that relates to Jeff Koons's work from the early 1980s (for example, Wurtz's 'Notebook' series from 1980), but without Koons's slickness and high gloss. While one piece was made from an old toy (*Hula Hoop*, 1982) and another incorporated old vinyl records from a variety of eras (*Untitled*, 1981), these pieces seemed to be as much about using the hula-hoop and records for their abstract properties – their sizes, shapes and the materials they are made from – as for their design elements and pop-cultural references.

In other small sculptures, Wurtz uses pocket-sized components to create a surprising feeling of monumentality. He contrasts the physical properties of different materials (wood, metal, cloth, plastic), while creating visual metaphors. For example, in *Untitled* (2002), two separated parts of a disassembled lock on a board made a kind of visual joke (the lock will never lock), as well as being a kind of model – one part of the lock almost looking like a toy cannon; in *Garden* (1983), Wurtz transforms a handful of plastic and wood elements into a little, walled-off play area.

Wurtz exemplifies an unpretentious ingenuity that is impressive in its long-term commitment to a thoughtful and accessible exploration of alternative ideas about the nature of what's valuable. Just as underground filmmaker Jack Smith once suggested that a giant garbage dump could be a city's centre of intellectual activity, Wurtz shows the aesthetic, intellectual and even political potential of junk – and, with a discerning eye, an open mind and a generous amount of chutzpah, continues to use throwaway materials to create objects that are more thought provoking and culturally significant than a lot of fancier works of art that are generally understood to be collectible.