

B. Wurtz "I don't want to get obsessive"

Interview by Ross Simonini

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B. Wurtz, *Untitled (Know Thyself)*, 2012, canvas, thread, string, socks, 45×46×1cm. Courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

My introduction to B. Wurtz was a modest square of raw canvas, barely clinging to a wall with the help of two loops of thread. Stitched to its surface, hanging from it, were only a pair of blue socks, which flanked the embroidered Ancient Greek maxim 'Know thyself'. As with most of Wurtz's art, the object was untitled (albeit subtitled 'Know Thyself', and dating from 1992) and one of a series of variations. Its materials were unassuming and ephemeral, and yet its affect was provocative and lasting.

Wurtz's work can usually be described in a sentence or two (see above), and this fact has always given his objects the whiff of conceptual art, but when a viewer is confronted by the artworks themselves, theory feels utterly impotent. All of the humour, references, debris and whimsical adornment that the artist invests in the work seem to deflect any possibility of reduction, leaving the viewer standing before nothing more than a naked object.

Wurtz began exhibiting his art during the early 1980s, immediately after graduating from Cal Arts at the age of thirty-two. Since then, he has worked with a consistent and somewhat narrow vocabulary of around-the-house items: the sock, the plastic bag, the coupon, the shoelace. As modest as these objects are, he cares about them, and as time has gone on, the artworld seems to care about them too, with significant shows and critical commentaries growing more frequent each year.

A while back, I met Wurtz in Lower Manhattan at his home and studio. For several hours he toured me through a collection of his artworks, which had been spread over the house's four storeys, tucked away among tools, closets, bookshelves and knickknacks.

Ross Simonini Why is most of your work untitled?

B. Wurtz I just rarely give titles. I like the pieces to be more open-ended for the viewer. But they usually end up with nicknames. So the nickname for this one is 'The Monument Sculpture'. That's a big theme in my work – monumental attitude. Not necessarily in size but in attitude.

RS I see the monument, but I also see the details. The brand names, the product designs. Do these matter to you? Like the can of beans in this work, which, to describe it, is a sock atop a tin can atop a small wooden pedestal. In this case. Does it matter what kind of beans were once in there?

BW It's certainly something I've thought about. Like, 'Is it important that the found objects be things I use?' Because I've made works where I painted the backs of aluminium trays, those things that takeout food or delivery food came in. And I thought, 'Well, is it important that they all be things that I ate out of?' I decided, 'No, it's not important. It's a mixture.' And, so I think that's where I tend to be. I kind of liked the idea that those cans were organic beans, which I ate – actually ate. But people give me stuff, too. Like I use a lot of plastic bags, and I thought, 'Oh, should they all be bags I came across?' And I decided, 'Nope, I'm gonna mix it up.' I didn't want to get obsessive about that.

RS Do the objects ever look like other things to you? A face or body or landscape? Or do you mostly want them to simply look like the thing that they are?

BW I don't like to obscure what a thing is. I like that it has a use value and that it keeps that little history with it. I don't relate to the

approach of some other artists who use found objects. I'm not interested in taking thousands of things so that the art becomes a spectacle where you don't really think about the thing itself any more. I'm more interested in really keeping the found object's integrity, and then adding my formal arrangement. That's where I hope that something else comes into it. But I love what people see. If people see animals, I love it.

RS Do you purposely choose modest objects?

BW Yeah, because an object's ordinariness gives me more of an opportunity to add something formally. There are a lot of found things that you could just put on a shelf and that would then be an objet d'art in itself. I can't really do much with that. It's already got too much of its own personality. I would rather go for just a tin can, because it's generic. I can move it around and juxtapose it. I'm also not so into sculpture made out of kind of trashy, junky stuff and it still kind of looks trashy-junky. I know that's kind of an aesthetic now, but that's not what I want to do. I want to put the junky stuff together more selectively. I want the outcome to be very serious and hopefully elegant.

RS I see some drawing on a canvas here. Do you do much drawing and painting?

BW I do. This is actually a painting on stretcher bars! But, uh, when I was moving my storeroom, a pole from a bookshelf fell and tore it. And I was really bummed, and I thought: 'Well, do I really like that piece any more?' I tried to rationalise. I'm a bit obsessive, and I don't like things to get damaged. But someone said, 'Well, that's kind of an interesting rip.' And with a situation like this, I always think of Marcel Duchamp and The Large Glass breaking. His patron/collector, Katherine Dreier, was moving it in her car and it broke. She informed him and he [later] said, 'Well, what could I say? She was so distressed. I had to just pretend it was nothing. You know, to try to save her anxiety.' But as we know, he ended up thinking those cracks were pretty great. Here's another canvas. This is from a series I call 'The Bread Paintings'. It's another nickname – they're untitled – and I ate all this bread and I started saving the bags.

RS Healthful bread.

BW It is. I'm a health nut, definitely. I don't eat sugar. I like to eat organic things.

RS And once you decided on bread bags as a material, did you choose each individual bag and colour at random for the work?

BW It's randomly chosen. I think I did some sketches for some of these, about how I might compose them. But once I had this formal structure with the bread bags and the fasteners, anything else that happened here was my freedom. I could pick whatever colours I wanted.

RS Is that how you usually work with materials?

BW Yeah, so, another example is my pan paintings. Someone designed the bottoms of all those pans. Those patterns were already there. So I just got to choose whatever colours I wanted. That was where I got to play. I think, to me, play – the idea of play – is an interesting aspect of art. I feel this connection with making art to playing as a child. It's not that it's totally fun. There are decisions. There's agonising over things that don't go right. But if it's not ultimately about having fun, then, to my mind, why do it? And I really like when something fails, because then I have an opportunity to play around with it. I have something to work off of. Which is in a way why I think some people prefer to be a designer. Design is great because you're given a challenge to figure out.

RS Does this approach make you fear failure less?

BW Well, I wouldn't put a work in a gallery and then decide it was a failure. I hope I wouldn't get that far. But I like failures in the studio. Sometimes I have to stare at it for weeks, months. I even worked on a piece for at least a year. It was on the wall and I finally changed one small thing and it worked. My wife, Ann, is a really good critic for me. I always listen to what she says – but she hated these pieces. Hated them. She said: 'If those things came in the Sunday paper I'd throw them out.' So I really thought about that. I stared at it and I finally decided that I disagreed with her. And I thought, 'It's great that I got that reaction out of her.' It made me think about what it must have been like for those people that freaked out at the Warhol soup cans.

RS Has B. Wurtz always been the way that you've signed your work?

BW It's been that way for a long time. I liked it, because I felt like it was more important to see the work than to get caught up with a particular personality. The name makes it a bit confusing as to whether the artist was a male or female. Years ago some people

came in to see my show, and the gallery assistant overheard them say, 'All she did was go to the hardware store!' which was a criticism. Well, it was interesting that I was considered female, of course, but also, to me, it's not an insult [laughs]. It's, like, 'Yeah, I go to the hardware store. That's where the good stuff is.' Who doesn't like hardware stores?

RS Is it an 'R. Mutt' reference?

BW I think that was another influence.

RS You talked about being health-minded a second ago. And when someone sees this work, it's organic, whole-grain bread, and there's a lot of it, which means that you're probably eating this food regularly. And that in itself tells the viewer something about the artist, even if the name is mysterious.

BW It does. And that, to me, is an interesting way to find out about the personality behind the work. Because art is about someone making it. I always use Donald Judd as an example, because I totally see a personality in that work. It's completely genuine. He needs to make that work. It's who he is. But I'm trying also to not mythologise myself, like Joseph Beuys.

RS Why not?

BW The work should speak for itself.

RS You want to keep the whole enterprise as modest as possible. Everybody of all classes eats bread, wears socks, and these are your materials. But there's no denying that there's a lot of personality in that organic-hummus lid. It points to the food-conscious consumer lifestyle.

BW I just pulled that out of my bag of lids and I thought, 'That's, like, really real.' It's very much of the present moment.

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RS Would that change it for you, in ten years, when someone is looking at it?

BW It will be funny in the future. Especially when plastic bags are illegal, which they should be. I'm hoarding plastic bags now [laughs].

RS You're celebrating the bag.

BW I am recycling it, in a sense.

RS But you're also treating it with respect, even though it's a conflicted object.

BW Maybe there's a better way to package stuff, but in the meantime, it exists and everybody has to eat, and there's something kind of noble about that. It sustains us. I also just like plastic as a material. I remember when I was really young I was thinking plastic is just the most amazing invention. Like, who is to say that plastic isn't more valuable than diamond? It's certainly more useful.

RS It doesn't seem as if your approach has changed very much over the last 40 years.

BW I've been fairly consistent, right? [laughs] Luckily when I look back at the whole span of stuff, I don't feel like I just repeated myself. That's nice.

RS How long have you been working professionally, showing and living somewhat off your art?

BW I never lived off my art. I've had various freelance day jobs all my life. I always thought it would be better to keep the day jobs clearly separate from my art. I think it was probably good that I had to go out and work, because I was around people. It's kind of healthy, right, to be around people?

RS Have you always shown your work?

"I'M NOT INTERESTED IN TAKING THOUSANDS OF THINGS SO THAT THE ART BECOMES A SPECTACLE WHERE YOU DON'T REALLY THINK ABOUT THE THING ITSELF ANY MORE."

BW I've shown pretty regularly over the years, but a lot of people never knew about it. I worked for many years kind of outside of what was really being done. And so, in a way, I wasn't paid much attention. I think I was just a little out of step with a lot of what was being done, like, in the 80s and 90s. I mean, I don't want to complain too much, because I did exhibit and I had people interested in my work who I really respected, really smart people. And so I knew I was doing something right, but I just couldn't seem to get things going. It was frustrating, because I wasn't one of those people that thought, 'Well, I'm going to make my work and I won't have anything to do with that corrupt gallery system and those museums.' But even then, it was still fun to make art. I was always getting something out of it. I just learned to live modestly and got used to things being a certain way.

RS But now there is interest. Do you think there's some sort of new relevance for what you do?

BW Yeah, a lot of young artists relate to my work, and in the last few years I seem to be getting more attention, which is actually really, really nice. Though it's funny, when things change, even if for the better – it always throws us a little. Don't you think?

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