

ERWIN WURM BIEDERMEIER'S ALLURE | KEY WEST

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ERWIN WURM

THE AUSTRIAN SCULPTOR
INJECTS FORMALISM WITH A
DOSE OF THE ABSURD

BY STEPHANIE MURG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELSA OKAZAKI

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AN HOUR FROM BUSTLING VIENNA, Erwin Wurm's home and studio sit in the scenic Austrian countryside, behind a locked gate and down a gravel path lined with young elms that give way to topiaries trimmed into perfect cubes. Only when one peers out from the allée does it become apparent that this is no ordinary *schloss*. On one side of the lawn stands a headless figure in a pastel-pink suit. Opposite him, a giant pickle perches on a pedestal.

The train ride between Vienna and Limberg, in Lower Austria, is an illuminating Wurm primer. Elements of his work that may seem arbitrary to foreign eyes are revealed to be rooted in his native country. The connections begin with an onboard snack of *Punschkrapfen*, an Austrian pastry shop staple. "It's a sugary thing, rum-flavored, over a chocolate and marzipan cake, and it's exactly the color of pink that I use so often," says Wurm, dapper and charismatic at 58, who titled one of his recent "sculptural furniture" objects after the dessert. "I grew up with all of these cakes, all of these creamy things. The two small houses that I just made, they look like melted ice cream."

Houses big and small, grossly fat and impossibly narrow, appear frequently in his work but they rarely stray from the simple, gable-roof cottages that some critics have likened to fairy-tale dwellings. In fact, houses like these are ubiquitous in Austria. Wurm grew up in one. "Every time and place has its specific architecture, and I've found that it is extremely important because it creates our world. It creates the cities. It creates the countryside," he says. "My interest in architecture is part of a broader interest in designing our world, and designing not only in terms of form but also in terms of social issues and many other aspects."

Wurm's own primary residence dates from the 12th century. He shares the art-filled space with his wife, graphic designer Elise Mougin, and their toddler daughter (he has two older sons from a previous marriage) and dog. The lushly landscaped grounds—ample enough for him to keep sheep and a couple of horses—are bordered on one side by a sudden swell of land. "That's artificial," says Wurm with a chuckle, pointing to the man-made, vista-perfecting ridge before heading to the outbuildings that house his workshop and a suite of storage spaces.

Most fabrication at the studio takes place during the warmer months. (The onset of colder weather and shorter days sends the family traveling



The bucolic setting of Erwin Wurm's country house and studio in Limberg, Austria, only heightens the oddness of sculptures such as *Fat House*, 2003.



A superficial humor is often what draws viewers to Wurm's more deeply unsettling blend of formalism and the figurative in works such as *Me on LSD*, 2010, right, and *Big Kastenmann*, 2012, below, which was unveiled last summer outside the Standard hotel in New York's Meat-packing District.

abroad or spending time in Vienna, where they have another home, and where Wurm can conceive work and plan exhibitions in his office space.) "For a typical day at the studio I get up at half past seven or eight, and then I'm in the studio by nine, trying to make decisions, trying to think things over, but always things that I have prepared in some ways before in my head." He may work with as many as six studio assistants on large projects. For monumental sculptures, such as the warped sailboat that was recently mounted atop Vienna's Daniel hotel, he'll call in a local team of fabricators. A lunch break is the only interruption, after which he returns to work until evening. "At that point, I'm desperate and exhausted," says Wurm. "And then I go and swim."

He strides over to a work in progress: a small figure whose oversize, carefully rendered head is immediately recognizable as that of Vladimir Lenin. "This will be the lid," he says, making a slicing motion just above the revolutionary's arched eyebrows. "We'll cut it here. And you can open it and take sugar or cocaine out of it or something." The inspiration for the work came during a trip to Paris, where Wurm spotted a dome on the lawn in front of the Oscar Niemeyer-designed headquarters of the French Communist Party. "I thought, 'They buried Lenin. That's his bald head.'"

"Erwin is always looking out for new forms," says gallerist Thaddaeus Ropac, who last year showed Wurm's new series of building models at one of his two Salzburg locations and on March 3 opens a solo show at his space in Pantin, just outside Paris. "He is interested in overacting,



destroying, distorting, extending volumes to the limit, anything that sets the everyday off balance."

In the 18 recent building models, Wurm explored the act of destruction more vividly—and violently—than ever before. He began by making clay models of various buildings, including prisons, warehouses, bunkers, and his own former homes. "And then came the most important part: I had to work on the houses to attack them," Wurm says of the series, which he dubbed "Samurai & Zorro" in an allusion to slashing and ritualized aggression. The process was nerve-racking. "We only made one example of each form, so I had to find a balance between being willing to try

everything that I wanted to do and not wanting to try something for fear of destroying the building," he says. "This was a nightmare, basically." The final part of the process was preserving the scarred and smashed buildings by casting them in bronze, acrylic, or polyester.

The little flip-top Lenin in his studio will eventually be part of a table that Wurm is making for a group show taking place this summer at Carpenters Workshop Gallery in Paris. Although he has long been interested in furniture and has amassed a personal collection that includes Prouvés and Perriands, this is his first real foray into design. He traces the new interest to fatigue from ordinary design. "When you open a magazine such as *Architectural Digest*, you see the same things. I really got tired of design," he says. "So I started to do my own." In addition to the table, he has created a lamp that resembles a blob of adipose tissue. It's a smaller version of his 2010 polyester and concrete sculpture *Me on LSD*, with the »





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unstable-looking human arm support swapped out for a silver metal base and the addition of a faceted white lampshade that contrasts strikingly with the doughy central mass. The prototype sits amid framed family photos in Wurm's dining room, where his young daughter delights in turning it on and off.

Next door to his workshop, Wurm has turned a large room into an exhibition space in preparation for a visit from a group of Russian collectors. He taps a pink trouser leg on a pedestal. "We put plaster in the fabric trousers, but then it started to get moldy, so we had to cast it in aluminum," he says. He moves to a rectangular block that is covered in a trench coat and propped on its side. "This is actually a wall piece. It's very much related to Minimalism." Like a Donald Judd, a visitor observes. "Exactly. Just with a coat," Wurm says.

Surveying his studio, where more of his disembodied yet personality-laden sculptures stand in various stages of completion, Wurm notes, "What I use and what I like to use is cynicism—I call it critical cynicism—to speak about certain truths in our world and our reality from a certain aspect, a cynical aspect."

Wurm kneels to flip through a stack of large photographs that have been partially painted over. This new series was destined for his first solo show at Vienna's Albertina museum

The bronze *Cucumbers*, 2012, above, outside Wurm's studio. A few years ago the artist showed 36 carefully modeled, naturalistically painted acrylic pickles as a self-portrait. Wurm, below with an assistant, fabricates all but the largest works in studio space on the grounds of his home in Limberg.



(on view through February 17). He pulls out one photo that features artist Hermann Nitsch confronting the camera wearing only a pair of paint-spattered pants and suspenders, his head largely obscured in painted swirls but his belly spilling over the top of his pants. Other photos show Wurm's friends and colleagues wearing much less.

"The idea was to picture them in a very fragile way and standing in gestures that do not exist nowadays, gestures from the past," he says, laying out a row of larger photos. "The paint, in a way, is a sculptural tool. It destroys the emotion and creates character." Thick outlines of muddy purple and green shape naked flesh into eccentric yet unmistakably alive forms that echo those of Wurm's stuffed clothing sculptures. He likens the Nitsch image to a "meat bag."

In this new series Wurm continues to push the boundaries of sculpture while returning to painting, his first love. "Growing up in Graz I was extremely attracted to painting," he says. "Sculpture was gray and brown and dark. It had no color. It just didn't interest me." He applied to art school with the intention of studying painting but was placed in the sculpture class. "Out of this kind of catastrophe, I started to think about and research sculpture," Wurm explains. "What does it mean to make a sculpture? What is it? I thought about two dimensions, three dimensions, time, mass, volume, surface, skin."

After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, he had some success with sculptures made from salvaged materials such as wood scraps and sheet metal, but a breakthrough came in the late 1990s with ephemeral works

that often included a participatory component. "It was a trick to concentrate myself and a decision to call everything that I do a sculpture," he says. "Even the drawings that I made, everything was related to the notion of sculpture. I think for a minimum of 10 years everything I did was totally under this idea." Schematic sketches for a 1990s show at San Francisco's Jack Hanley

Gallery developed into the instructional drawings and later the "One-Minute Sculptures," in which Wurm places himself or a model in unusual juxtapositions with common objects. The quirky works have achieved pop culture status, appearing in venues such as a Red Hot Chili Peppers music video and a shoot for *Vogue Deutschland* with Claudia Schiffer.

Wurm's diverse body of work—from the new painted photos and design objects to his bulbous *Fat Car*, 2001, and *Fat House*, 2003, to his "One-Minute Sculpture" performance pieces—is consistent in its ability to provoke a reaction that hovers between bemusement and amusement, often accompanied by a smile. But humor is not Wurm's goal. "I do not make my work funny. That's very important for me, really," he says.

"When I first realized that people were laughing at my work, I was shocked. I was angry. I thought, 'What's going on here? There's been a big mistake.' Because I mean it seriously. To me, the work has to do with catastrophe." Later, however, he points to a small 2009 sculpture in his home. It's a silvery »



man wearing a light-pink collared shirt that covers his torso like a straitjacket. “That’s *Telekinetischer Masturbator*,” says Wurm, unable to suppress a chuckle.

The traveling “Beauty Business” exhibition, which opened at Miami’s Bass Museum of Art during Art Basel Miami Beach in 2011, included Wurm’s “Drinking Sculptures” series. For these works, the artist altered cabinets, credenzas, and other furniture that had been designed to dispense alcoholic beverages. “For the opening and first day of the show, they actually contained spirits, hard liquor, where anybody could open a cabinet and partake, have some tequila, some whiskey, some Campari, and be part of the performance process,” says Peter Doroshenko, who curated the show.

“The works have this level of black humor to them, but they’re also kind of serious, because each piece is named after an artist—such as de Kooning, Kippenberger, Munch—who had drinking problems or were literally killed by alcohol.”

While he continues to produce works for several shows a year, public commissions increasingly occupy Wurm’s time. He is creating a large, wavy bus to accompany a new concert hall in Denmark designed by the Austrian architecture firm Coop Himmelb(l)au. The city of Lille, France, has commissioned him to design a *friterie*, a fast-food stand. “I found

it so kinky that I said yes,” he says. “I’m going to make a big dumpling, a melted dumpling.” And this past summer and fall, *Big Kastenmann*—a boxy suit jacket dripping in Wurm’s signature pink atop a pair of shapely legs—loomed over the plaza outside the Standard hotel in New York’s Meatpacking District. (His New York gallery, Lehmann Maupin, is planning a major show for early 2014.)

“The architecture of the Standard is a little bit anthropomorphic in feeling; it looks like this big figure stepping over the High Line,” says Claire Darrow Mosier, creative director of the Standard’s parent company, André Balazs Properties. “*Big Kastenmann* took that one step further, because it’s architectural and human at the same time.”

Wurm’s collaboration with the Standard also extended to magazines, where the hotel chain used its advertising space to feature photos from his “One-Minute Sculptures” and another series, “How to Be Politically Incorrect,” that features models acting out title tasks such as spitting in someone’s soup. “In the past, you had artwork, public art, on the streets or in churches. Now the place for public art is also the media,” he says. “I think that that’s a contemporary public space. And I find that very interesting.”

“Wurm’s work has evolved from the ephemeral to finely crafted and theatrical, and now it is moving back to the ephemeral again,” Doroshenko says. “It’s an artist’s cycle that is going back to his early roots, and he is not afraid to go there.” ■

The 10-foot-tall *Big Suit (Psychos)*, 2010, above, installed outside the artist’s home. *Narrow House*, 2010, right, as seen last year at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Málaga.



FROM TOP: ELSA OKAZAKI AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC; SALZBURG; ERWIN WURM AND LEHMANN MAUPIN