

In conversation with Erwin Wurm

Erwin Wurm, *Untitled (P90)*, 2018

Erwin Wurm is a Austrian artist whose work plays at the boundaries between form and formlessness, sense and nonsense. Wurm is perhaps best known for his “one minute sculptures” – sculptural performances in which participants follow a set of instructions

to arrange themselves in absurd poses with everyday objects. More recently, his experiments have expanded to include sculptures of bloated cars, scratchy pencil drawings and ceramic sculptures of plasticky human figures.

Erwin Wurm: New Work at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London marks the artist's largest UK solo exhibition to date. In partnership with TANK, the gallery will be hosting "Look Up", an on-site conversation between the artist and Hans-Ulrich Obrist on 4 March 2019. Visit our site for an exclusive live video of the event.

Ahead of the event, Guy Mackinnon-Little spoke with the artist about comedy, eternity and everyday abstraction.

To begin, I wanted to ask about your one minute sculptures. After 20 years, what does this technique continue to offer you?

When I started to do the one-minutes, I realised they are very ephemeral. When I invite a person to do a performative piece, it sits there for ten seconds, one minute or two minutes, then it disappears. I thought if you do a piece that disappears immediately it's better to make a snapshot, to keep it in memory of the participant and existing in that snapshot. So, I made these snapshots. The first series I did was I think 35–45 centimetres.

At the very beginning when I made a performance, I asked people to make a Polaroid. I invited the public to follow my instructions and realise a piece of mine but I would sign it as an original. It was very much a game with authorship. But what happened then was that the people saw all these photographs on social media and would create their own. This was something I didn't like that. So I stopped this.

But then for some reason, I don't know why, I got access to this huge Polaroid camera from a guy living close to my house and things changed. I thought it was fantastic. It's in a way, a very refined technique, all these problematic elements related to the chemistry, related to the realisation of the image.

You were talking about the sculptural quality of photography. There's an interesting relation there between the intense material process of these polaroids and the very ephemeral subject matter they portray.

Exactly, this attracted me very much. This complicated, old-fashioned way of doing photographs and not knowing what's coming out. I mean everybody knows that visually with digital photography you can basically do everything you want. But I found this much more interesting. There are a lot of mistakes within the photographs that happened coincidentally, through the material chemistry of the camera. I had to order these mistakes, which sometimes got on my nerves, but the process, the result, I liked.

That interest in failure or mistakes relates to to the absurd humour that's present across all your work. I read somewhere that you're not interested in making jokes. What else are you doing with comedy if you're not making jokes?

You said a word which I like very much – the absurd. No, I'm not making jokes, but the absurd is very important to me. When you look into our world from an angle of paradoxes and the absurd you see something else, and that's interesting. You see the embarrassment, the ridiculousness. You see our constant failure and our longing to be good and great when we are all not. This is what I like about it

we are all here. This is what I like about it.

Looking at your work, I keep thinking of the philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of comedy. Bergson says comedy happens when there's a misfit between the automatic, mechanical nature of our motions and a world that's dynamic and always elusive. It feels like what a lot of your work is doing is moving us towards that space where there's a misfit and we have to readjust and recalibrate in some way.

And we have to do this all the time, constantly. And nobody wants to show this to others. Everyone is hiding this. And I think that's the most important part. Not the big questions, the little mute questions are the most important questions.

This tension is also present in your fat car sculptures.

When we gain or we lose weight we deal with sculptural issues. One could say that gaining or losing weight is a sculptural work. The absurdity of something so ordinary, like gaining or losing weight, is interesting for me. So that is the reason I combined these two systems, the technical system of the car and the biological system of the body. It evokes how when people have dogs, they slowly look like their dogs and the dogs come to look like their owners. It's the same with the cars, they take on the property of their owners.

I was born in 1954, so 1968 was an important time for me. We were insulting rich men's cars by saying they are fat cars. Fat cars was an insult. So when I did this series, I used only so called fat cars – Porsche, Maserati and Ferrari. The one on display here is a little different, it's a tiny original Mini from 1967.



Erwin Wurm, *Fat Mini*, 2018

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What's common between the cars and the one minute sculptures is the sense of duration, of a process unfolding over time.

Yes, Time is very important. The one minute sculpture reflects our time. Michelangelo said when he does a sculpture, the sculpture could be rolled down the mountain and should still survive for 500 years more. He's talking about eternity. But our time doesn't speak to eternity. Everything is too short.

And could you tell me a little about the newer series of drawings?

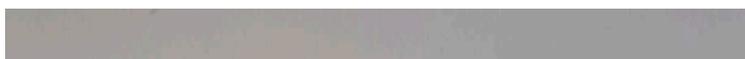
I started drawing in the past few years after being invited to do a series for a show. They are about what my life means to me personally, but also my history of reading, of enjoying music and friends and art. It's all connected. Some of them are self-portraits. One I like very much is a *Blue Glasses* as it's doing exactly what I think an artist does - look at the world and reflect. In the drawing, you see the world and you see the reflection. Then there are others of different artists, colleagues and writers. I'm walking around in my head, that's basically it.

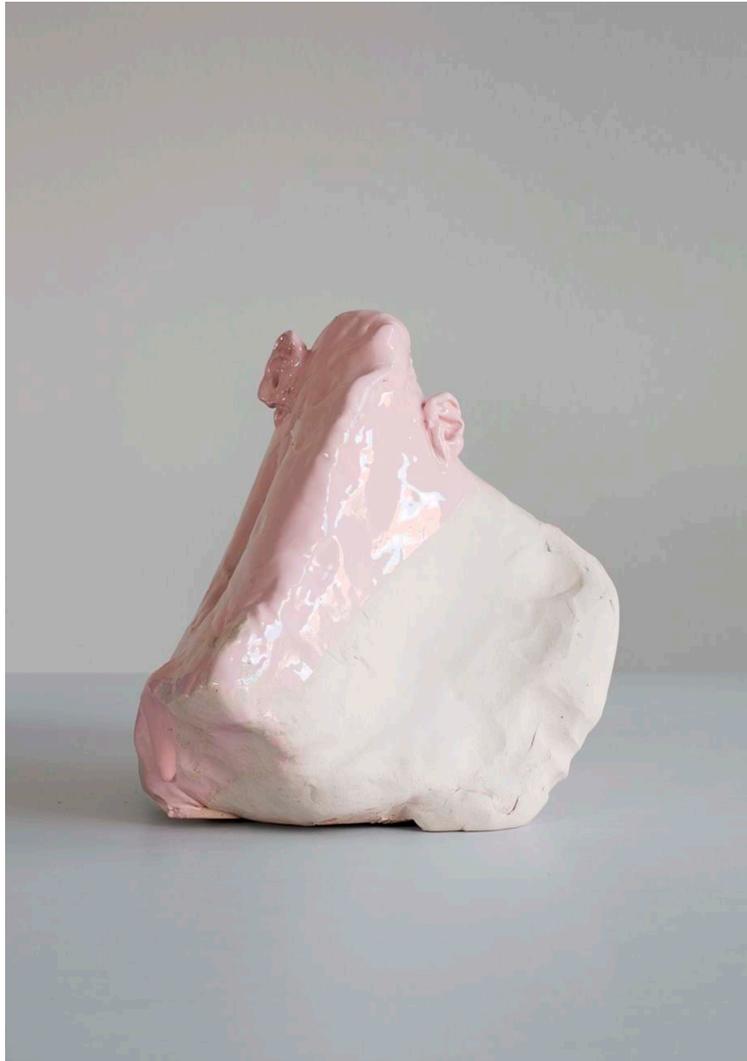


Erwin Wurm, *Blue Glasses*, 2016–2017

How do you arrive at these figures?

It's hard to say, it's a concentrated work. I start in the morning and it takes up to ten hours to do eight drawings. It's a concentration on a person, a face. I'm more interested in psychology and process than personal recognition. I destroy the form and then I come back a little. I strongly believe that when you destroy something you create something new. I draw something as an abstract entity and then all of a sudden it happens to have a face. And then it reminds me of Kevin Spacey. And then it's Kevin Spacey's father.





Erwin Wurm, *Eavesdropper*, 2018

There's a similar kind of defamiliarization in your new ceramic sculptures. They're a kind of inversion of the car sculptures, where you approach human anatomy in a very mechanical way.

Like many artists in the last years or decades, I lost track of my pieces because they were made by someone else. I realised after a certain time that this was a big loss for me. I lose too much. It's one of the reasons I started to draw and its one the reasons I make polaroids. And here, all of these pieces are created by myself.

With these sculptures, I continued what I started to do many years ago - to destroy forms. Because when you make a fat car - when you make anything fat - you destroy the form and then something else comes out. For this series, I made many figures which are cut apart and destroyed. Here, this process is at its most radical because there is a movement between abstract forms and the human body. It's hard to talk about. I've realised that when I am strict in following my concept, the pieces are weak. Instead when I allow myself to be lead by the pieces they get much better. I read once a quote of Gerhard Richter, "My paintings are smarter than me." For a long time I didn't understand this, but now I think I know what he means. ●



[\[x\] Back](#)