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ON HIS TERMS



# THE HOUSES OF ERWIN WURM

A stylish visual trickster, the Austrian artist has redefined the possibilities of sculpture while designing one-of-a-kind homes across Greece and Austria.

BY JOSHUA LEVINE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIEN MULDER

**F**IRST ERWIN WURM made a fat house. Then he made a narrow house. Then he made a house that was just right—several houses, actually. *Fat House* (2003) and *Narrow House* (2010) are two of the sculptures that have brought the Austrian artist fame and fortune as a kind of Till Eulenspiegel of the art world—a visual trickster who messes with your mind in ways both playful and oddly unsettling. The just-right houses are the ones he made for himself to live in.

One of his fat house pieces is sitting on a hill when Wurm, 67, pulls into the compound of large sheds where he fabricates his sculptures, a short drive from Vienna in the village of Limberg. Its white walls bulge and sag under a red-tiled roof, like jowls on a pudgy face. Wurm made his first fat house in 2003 to skewer society's insatiable appetites, but it's more funny than angry. Wurm is a showman, not a prophet, which is partly why museum crowds love him. You can find his work in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, the Centre Pompidou and the Guggenheim, among a long list of museums. (The fat house on the hill in Limberg is waiting to be packed up and shipped off for an exhibition.)

There's another side of Wurm on view off to the left of the fat house. It's a 12th-century castle Wurm bought in 2005 and has been fixing up since. This is not the austere castle of a warrior. Wurm bought it

AN ARTIST AT SEA  
Austrian artist Erwin  
Wurm at his house on the  
Greek island of Hydra.

from a prosperous Benedictine monastery nearby. The high-ceilinged rooms are enormous. Wurm has taken to heart Gustave Flaubert's famous advice to aspiring artists to "be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work." You can tell this at a glance from his houses in Limberg, in Vienna and lately on the Greek island of Hydra. All three homes are as suave and mannerly as his sculptures are boisterous and sometimes rude. Wurm himself comes off much the same way: trim and stylish and as carefully groomed as Cary Grant. Any subversive streak is hidden inside his head.

Though Wurm and his family spent much of the Covid lockdown in Limberg—and he sometimes stays the night there when he works late—these days, Wurm is mostly with his wife, Élise Mougin-Wurm, and their 10-year-old daughter, Estée, in a sprawling industrial loft in Vienna's Leopoldstadt neighborhood. This is where he now directs his white Tesla sedan after punching out at the art factory in Limberg. Wurm met Élise 19 years ago, after a wrenching breakup with his first wife left him unable to work for a year and a half, and he speaks freely about needing a well-ordered home life to create. (One of Wurm's sons from his first marriage, Michael, 29, runs his studio.)

Wurm bought the loft in 2010 and turned to a famous architect he knew to shape the raw space that occupies an entire floor of the building. He won't mention the architect's name. It was a disaster, Wurm says. The plan sealed the master bedroom off from the light and the view and left a cavernous void at the heart of the apartment, like a "subway station!" Wurm says. Élise wanted to fire the architect midway through. Wurm disagreed. "I said, 'I want to trust him—let him finish,'" he says. "Élise was smart." The architect finished, and two years later Wurm went searching for a different apartment.

Finally, instead of moving, Erwin and Élise decided to redo the house themselves—"mostly Élise," says Erwin. What emerged is a graceful balance between open space and glass-walled rooms that channel every passing ray of sunlight through the whole apartment. Slender industrial columns punctuate the open space and give the place a whiff of Tribeca in the baroque Habsburg capital.

The big walls cry out for big art, and they get it. A splashy abstract by Georg Baselitz, titled *Licht wie raum mecht hern*, sprays bright yellow and pink and blue into the muted salon. Wurm wanted a Baselitz badly—the two are colleagues. He bought his Baselitz not long after he turned down one of Baselitz's "Hitler paintings," Wurm says, that another dealer offered him. ("For a certain moment, I thought, because the painting was really great, maybe I'll just paint the mustache over. Thank God I didn't do it!") The Baselitz Wurm ended up buying isn't a comment about anything except its own joyful self, and the big room is a much pleasanter place for it.

Close by is a large portrait of Élise in a squiggly-patterned dress by Francesco Clemente. "The portrait was a surprise for her," says Wurm. "I said, 'We're going to New York,' and I told her, 'Élise, take that summer dress.' I know that the pattern of the dress is important in a portrait. It was November and it was cold, and Élise was totally confused. When

Clemente saw the dress, he told me, 'You've just added two hours of work.'"

The furniture in the Vienna house—in all his houses—testifies to Wurm's love for midcentury modern style. He's collected it for years, and he checks off the big names proudly. Here's a Charlotte Perriand; the massive dining table is a rare Pierre Jeanneret; and a coffee table in the living room is by George Nakashima. He's not displeased, either, that from a financial standpoint he's collected shrewdly. "When I bought this Prouvé chair 25 years ago, it cost 2,000 euros. Now it's 10 or 20 times that. It's gone totally insane!" he says.

I asked Wurm which designer came up with an off-beat kind of half-chair, half-sofa that makes you want to plop down in it. He told me it was his own creation, which he made by taking an antique wooden armoire, flipping it on its back and fitting the plush seating into its blocky wooden frame. You can find one or two of them in all his houses.

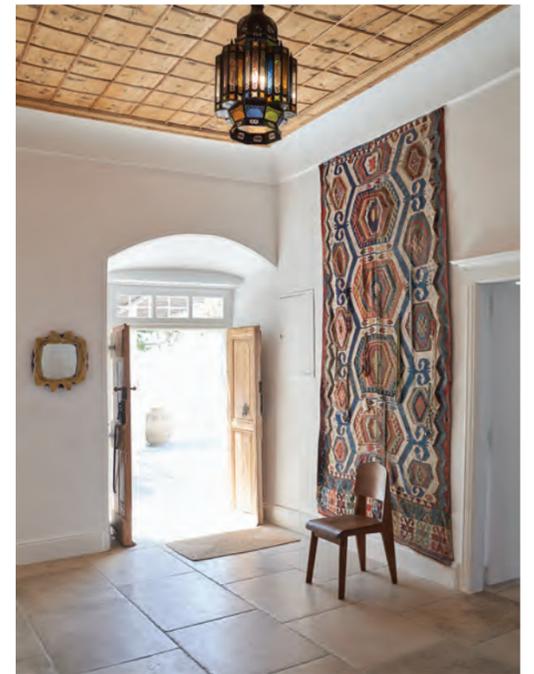
One sculpture by Wurm stands on a plinth. It's a house that thrusts upward and outward, teetering unsteadily like a little Tower of Babel. It's part of a series of house sculptures, and this one represents "the elephant tomb of an artist," explains Wurm cryptically. There's no way around it: Erwin Wurm has a thing about houses.

A psychiatrist might go back to his childhood. When Wurm was growing up near the Austrian town of Graz, his father, Johann, would bring home little houses made of wooden matchsticks. Johann Wurm was a police detective and, according to Erwin, an unusually nice one. Even the felons he arrested ended up liking him, says Erwin. "He had this kindly way of speaking with people, even when they were obviously gangsters. He would put his hands on their shoulders and say, 'Oh, come on, did you really do this again?' And they would start to cry. In prison they glued matchsticks together and made houses out of them for him. This is insane. My sister has still got them."

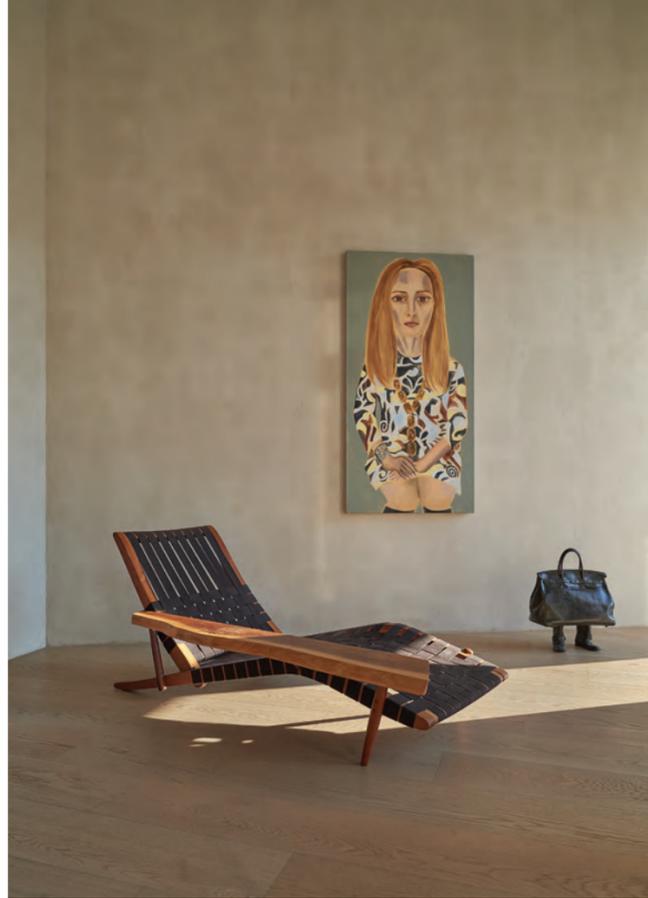
Then there's the house itself where Wurm grew up. Here his memories are less fond. For Wurm, who was born in 1954, the bland suburban cottage of his youth represented everything that was pinched and stiff and narrow-minded in postwar Austrian society. He got even in 2010 with *Narrow House*, which squeezes a near-exact replica of the family home and everything in it to a width of 3.6 feet. His sister still lives there—in the real house, that is. She was not amused. "A Swiss TV company came to film it, and she threw them out," says Wurm. "She hated *Narrow House*."

**W**URM WAS never supposed to end up a sculptor in the first place. His parents ridiculed any notion of making art for a living. When the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna declined to enroll him in its painting program, sculpture was the less appealing fallback option. The irony of Wurm's subsequent success has been embroidered into his backstory. His wife, Élise, created an illustrated biography of Wurm for children. It is titled, *L'artiste qui ne voulait pas faire de sculptures* (*The Artist Who Didn't Want to Make Sculptures*).

Perhaps because he backed into sculpture, Wurm



**ISLAND RETREAT** Designing his Hydra home was an arduous process, but worth it. One of Wurm's large gherkin statues (left) stands by the pool. Furniture by some of his beloved designers, like Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé and Pierre Jeanneret, is scattered throughout, and the walls are hung with colorful abstracts he calls "two-dimensional sculptures," which he's been making on Hydra the past few summers.



[HIS] HOMES ARE AS SUAVE AND MANNERLY AS HIS SCULPTURES ARE BOISTEROUS AND SOMETIMES RUDE.

took a terrifically broad view of what it is. The merest hint of dimensionality gets you over the line. He made an early series of pieces—if you can call them that—where he took an object, sprinkled dust over it and then removed it. The outline of the absent object in the dust is the sculpture. “This was the zero point of sculpture,” says Wurm. When a museum bought one for around \$15,000, Wurm’s dubious father finally came around. “He was laughing and telling all his colleagues, ‘My son just sold dust to a museum!’”

“I was totally fascinated by his way of reinventing the whole notion of sculpture,” says Jérôme Sans, a French art curator who has worked with Wurm for nearly 30 years. “Everything started from his own house. The dust was already there. It gave him the food for his work.”

The genre-bending pieces that made Wurm a global star are his One Minute Sculptures, which he started making in the 1990s. Wurm would take people—a model, a curator, himself—and photograph them in ungainly and embarrassing poses, with pencils up their nose, say, or flailing helplessly inside a sweater or pinning a row of plastic buckets to a wall with their head. The photos make you chuckle and cringe at the same time, which is exactly the effect Wurm is aiming for. There’s a German word for it, and that word is *fremdschämen*.

“It means you’re embarrassed for somebody else,” says Wurm. “Some of the photos are cruel, some are ridiculous, but I’m not a joke teller. You can get rid of a feeling of shame through laughter. I come at everything through the angle of the absurd, like the theater of Ionesco or Beckett.”

For their 2003 “Can’t Stop” music video, the Red Hot Chili Peppers asked Wurm if they could reenact some of his One Minute Sculptures. Wurm had turned down many similar requests. This time he said yes, provided he got credited by name in the video. Deal. “I knew this would be seen worldwide, and I was right,” says Wurm. The “Can’t Stop” video, where Flea gets writing implements inserted into his nose and ears, has been viewed on YouTube 285 million times. “This was so important,” Wurm says.

Notoriety brought fame (in 2017, Wurm represented Austria at the Venice Biennale), and fame brought riches. If anyone’s got a problem with that, Wurm doesn’t want to hear it. “In Austria, when you have a nice life, people want you to say, ‘Oh, I was lucky,’ or, ‘I am so privileged.’ There is a suspicion that if you have money, you did something wrong. But I worked *hard*.”

Three years ago, Wurm bought a house on the Greek island of Hydra. He and his wife fell in love with the island during several stays at the home of gallerist Thaddaeus Ropac, who—along with

Lehmann Maupin and Johann König—represents Wurm. (Ropac says he likes to invite his artists there but rarely has the time to go himself.) You don’t have to twist Wurm’s arm to buy another house, and before long the couple had started shopping around. They found a large place midway up the seaward end of the hills that surround the small port like an amphitheater. It’s a fine spot, away from the hubbub at the heart of the port, with commanding views out to the Greek mainland.

Hydra has long been the monied haven of rich shipbuilders, jet-set dropouts and artists on both sides of worldly success. In the mid-1960s, a then-unknown Leonard Cohen strummed his guitar in the taverna where the Wurms like to eat. Wurm feels among friends here. The house he ended up buying had been the love nest of a wealthy Norwegian and his wife, who never set foot in it again after his death. Their son sold it 10 years later to raise money for a startup.

The top-to-bottom renovation was long and arduous. They hired an architect well-versed in the rudimentary language of the local style. “The best houses here use only three materials. I would like only one material all over the house,” says Dmitri Paracharalampous, the Wurms’ architect. That material would be painted wood, traditionally employing the paint left over from building boats.

Wurm tried to do as he was told, really he did, but he often ends up going his own way. “I remember I said, ‘I would like a stone floor.’ [Paracharalampous] said, ‘No stone floor! Wood!’ I said, ‘OK, why not?’ But the pinewood was horrible—it looked like a ski chalet in Switzerland. So we made it stone.” The architect took his lumps philosophically. “At least they restored it with taste,” says Paracharalampous. “He’s an artist, not a nouveau riche.”

The result is a traditional Hydra house à la Wurm. His beloved Perriands, Prouvés and Jeannerets are scattered everywhere. One of his large gherkin statues stands by the pool (gherkins and sausages are recurring Wurm tropes). The walls are hung with the work he’s been doing on Hydra the past few summers—a series of colorful abstracts that Wurm calls “two-dimensional sculptures.” Most people who see them in January at the Lehmann Maupin gallery show in Palm Beach, Florida, will just call them paintings.

An early summer day in Hydra finds the artist in his element, surrounded by work and family. Élise has just returned from a Pilates class in town, breathing heavily after climbing the many flights of stairs leading up from the quay. Estée says she hates climbing all the stairs. “It’s good training for the will,” Wurm instructs her cheerfully.

“His family is part of his life and part of his work,” says Jérôme Sans, the curator. “Everything is part of everything. He couldn’t survive if he didn’t have it.”

Stable doesn’t mean standing still. “I’m already thinking about [buying] a riad in Marrakech—it’s so beautiful, such a different style of architecture,” says Wurm.

“No way,” says Élise. “It’s not going to happen. We’ve never ended a project without Erwin having his eyes on the next one.”

Wurm sighs. “Yes, I know. I’m going to end up with 10 houses. This is my problem. This is my problem.” ●

#### MIDCENTURY REVERIE

The furniture in Wurm’s Vienna house—in all his houses—testifies to his love for midcentury modern style. The dining table is a rare Pierre Jeanneret; a coffee table in the living room is by George Nakashima. An abstract by Georg Baselitz (top right) sprays bright yellow and pink and blue. Nearby, a portrait (top left) by Francesco Clemente of Wurm’s wife, Élise Mouglin-Wurm.