

METRO PICTURES

Michael Wilson, "B. Wurtz and Peter Nadin Prove It's Easy Being Green," **New York Observer**, July 5, 2011

B. Wurtz and Peter Nadin Prove It's Easy Being Green



B. Wurtz: Works 1970–2011 at Metro Pictures

Recycle, reuse, conserve, go green, go organic—all the exhortations of today's pop-environmentalism—have been anticipated by artists, as two current exhibitions prove.

1. SLEEPING 2. EATING 3. KEEPING WARM. As declarations of priority go, B. Wurtz's handwritten list *Three Important Things* (1973) is disarmingly modest, and emblematic of his down-home style. While numerous artists have salvaged inspiration and materials from the mess of thrown-away products and packaging that surrounds us, few have done so with this Californian's light touch, or with his consistency (in an exhibition spanning four decades, it's nearly impossible to distinguish old work from new). Guest curator Matthew Higgs—director of respected not-for-profit gallery White Columns and a long-time Wurtz fan—has crammed the sleek and spacious interior of Metro Pictures with several dozen sculptural assemblages made from string, socks, buttons, household implements and plastic bags.

At first look, it seems as though Mr. Higgs might have overdone it, diluting the works' effect by packing in too much. But once the show's organizational principles take hold, it is the opposite impression that persists. In the first room, an array of variously sized and tinted vinyl records impaled on wooden poles, dated 1981, stands adjacent to the following year's *Hula Hoop*, in which Mr. Wurtz pays winking homage to Marcel Duchamp's epochal ready-made sculpture *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). Ranged along a shelf nearby is a set of tiny, delicate hanging banners made from bits of timber and food wrappers. And on the walls to either side of the entrance to the next room are *Three Orange Mops* and *Three Blue Mops* (both 1986), in which collections of clean-up gear become three-dimensional paintings.

The critic Bruce Hainley once identified Mr. Wurtz's capacity for allowing banal materials to remain "so close to their use value—even seeming to revel in it—that many people would blush with embarrassment." And the pieces at Metro can elicit just such a red-faced reaction. How often have you seen the lid of a pot of supermarket hummus take center stage in an artwork, as it does here? Or observed an aluminum can topped with a white tube sock and presented not as a one-off experiment but in an edition of 12, no less? Such works have a confrontational awkwardness even for audiences accustomed to the prosaic as medium and subject matter. They prompt us to re-examine where the boundaries between the mundane and the beautiful, the pathetic and the endearing might truly lie.

While Mr. Wurtz could be dubbed a poet of plastic, Peter Nadin, whose showing at Gavin Brown's Enterprise is his first in New York since 1992, is steeped in the organic and the earthy. "First Mark," an expanded version of an exhibition previously seen in Cuba and Ecuador, features five paintings and two vast installations. All are the products of Mr.

Nadin's upstate studio at Old Field Farm in Cornwallville, Greene County, and make pointed use of back-to-the-land materials. Mr. Nadin, who moved to New York from his native England in 1976, is serious about his agriculture; he maintains a wild bee pasture, a goat habitat and a 150-acre forest alongside his workspace, and he has persuaded the gallery to host a "Bootleg Buying Club" offering for sale everything from head cheese to musk melons. In Mr. Nadin's art, wool, fur, ham and honey (some 6,000 pounds of it) are combined with more conventional materials in a rich and sometimes pungent mix.

The paintings that line the gallery's first room, all from 2010, are large abstractions on coarse brown linen framed in black walnut. Gestural daubs and splatters reminiscent of Cy Twombly or Julian Schnabel at their most hands-on share the surface with crusty accretions of wax and cashmere, each textural passage emerging from a sparser field of raw or lightly tinted canvas. Smears of pink and white punctuate the mostly indigo- and earth-tone surfaces, suggesting a push-and-pull between cultural or personal identity and the physical realities of the environment. And while Mr. Nadin's reliance on a well-worn AbEx aesthetic does soften the works' initial impact, the particularities of their physical makeup ultimately distinguish them from retread or pastiche.

The second space is fully occupied by *The Bo'sun's Chair* (2011), a thicket of 57 hemlock logs boasting a variety of curious embellishments, many held in place by alarmingly oversize nails. The fetishistic decorations include several roughly modeled figures, a scattering of houselike structures and a large number of giant disembodied noses, many of which are tied on with twine like Halloween masks. It's difficult to know quite how to contextualize this project; Joseph Beuys comes to mind, but the reference is less to that late German sculptor's neo-shamanic persona than to his predilection for tactile and edible materials. *The Bo'sun's Chair* does have something of a ritualistic feel however; its forms evoke totem poles, hinting at the re-emergence of ancient earth gods and goddesses.

The air in gallery three is heavy with the scent of honey, which fills the 24-foot-square pool of *Raft* (2011). The liquid's surface is broken by, on one side, a cluster of pagodalike white model huts that sits atop an island of soil. Facing this is a group of terra-cotta pots, some with small figures crawling from their tops. And steering a course between the two is a makeshift wooden raft piloted by two ghostly wax oarsmen. Mr. Nadin has compared honey to glia, the cellular "glue" of the nervous system; here he sets us adrift on an ocean of the stuff, sticky-sweet with strange ideas.