Smith, Roberta. "An Artist Who Makes Much Out of Very Little," *NYTimes.com* (June 30, 2011).

The New York Times

B. Wurtz's "Untitled, 1981" includes old records and wooden dowels.

The less-is-more tradition in American art is rich and varied. It stretches from the glorious frugalities of Shaker furniture and Amish quilts to the sleek orthodox Minimalism of Donald Judd's box sculptures and Agnes Martin's horizontal-stripe paintings. And it also accommodates the modest, plain-spoken sculptures and wall pieces of the artist B. Wurtz.

Cobbled together from carefully selected common objects and materials — scraps of wood and wire, plastic grocery bags, food packaging, buttons, shoelaces and the occasional porcelain sink leg — Mr. Wurtz's efforts are currently the subject of a wryly beautiful, morally invigorating retrospective at Metro Pictures in Chelsea.

The show has been organized with Feature Inc., Mr. Wurtz's longtime New York gallery, and expertly chosen and installed by Matthew Higgs, the ever-catalytic director of the alternative space White Columns in Greenwich Village. Covering more than four decades, with 64 works, Mr. Wurtz's show may be, in its own quiet and eccentric way, one of the high points of the summer, if not the entire year. It is at least a refreshing palate cleanser after a season distinguished by ever more alarming varieties of conspicuous consumption: skyrocketing prices for newbie artists, look-alike blue-chip collections and artworks relying with increasing ostentation on large-scale, expensive materials and costly techniques. (When in doubt, cast it in bronze.)

At Metro the visitor is confronted by something completely different: an example of an artist making much out of very little, committing acts of ingenious recycling in which existing materials and artistic thought are brought into an unusual kind of mutually enhancing alignment.

An untitled work from 1981 consists of a series of old records (45, LP and 10-inch) teetering on thin wood dowels stuck into wonderful pinwheel-like bases, also made of wood. The piece is at once flatfooted and magical, something like a juggling act without a juggler. Nearby, "Bunch #2," from 1995, implies a small, leafy tree by festooning wire branches with dozens of plastic shopping bags. The inverted bags, filled with air, have a gentle, plumelike softness.

These works belong to the crowded category of assemblage or found-object art, but also transcend it by means of a clarity best described as classical. We never lose sight of what they're made of, even while being seduced by the larger, always suggestive effect. And Mr. Wurtz's efforts constantly question the way expensive materials and bravura skills affect our experience of art objects by effortlessly demonstrating how to hold our interest while doing without both.

With this retrospective, Metro Pictures is having something of an anti-Gagosian Gagosian moment. It is a gallery acting like a museum, but rather than featuring Picasso, Lichtenstein or another artist whom most museums would kill to show, it is casting the spotlight on Mr. Wurtz, who is unknown beyond the precincts of the art world and does not even loom large within them.

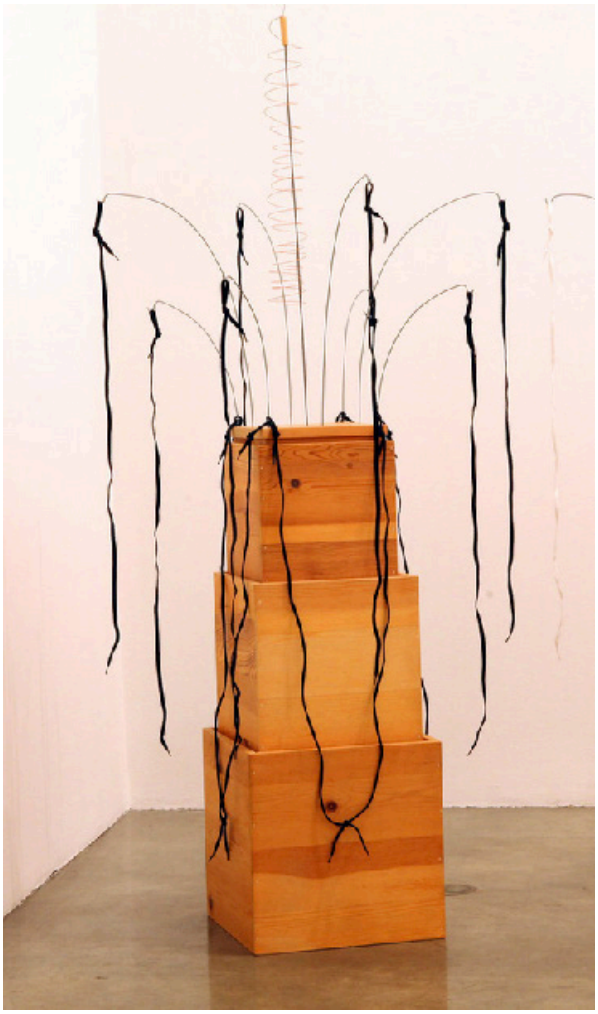
Born in Pasadena, Calif., in 1948 and educated at the University of California, Berkeley, and the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia, Mr. Wurtz has exhibited steadily since the 1980s. But he has never had a solo show in a museum or been included in a Whitney Biennial.

His very name is cryptic and a little baffling — less rather than more — and almost a kind of joke. (It swerves enticingly close to "R. Mutt," the name with which Marcel Duchamp, whose ready-mades figure in Mr. Wurtz's artistic DNA, signed his famous urinal.) I assumed for years that B. Wurtz was a woman rather than a man — a man who, it turns out, likes manifesting his feminist sympathies with a name that avoids gender specificity. Mr. Wurtz's given name is William; he goes by Bill and also answers to B.

The earlier works at Metro are endearing, Fluxus-flavored art jokes. A 1973 piece consists of two small wood boxes, each labeled in the artist's slightly awkward cursive: "Unpleasant Private Thoughts" and "Secret Words." It might be a bit of juvenilia by the punning, woodworking sculptor H. C. Westermann. In a piece from the same period, a block of wood has been enfolded in canvas, provided with a sturdy wire handle worthy of a bucket, sparsely adorned with patches of red, blue, yellow and green paint and labeled "Painting." It could easily be by the cartoonist and sculptor Saul Steinberg.

But soon wordplay gives way to works that delicately balance the aesthetic experience of abstract form against the easy familiarity of everyday things. This is exemplified by a series of small tabletop pieces from 1976 that suspend delicate sheets of plastic printed with red or yellow grids or green leaves from little goal posts of wire embedded in wood bases. The pieces of plastic have been cut from things like carrot bags, but their presentation invites — and sustains — intense appreciation; they might be precious bits of ancient papyrus or textile.

This balancing, which continues in different forms throughout the remainder of the show, is the result of the utter transparency with which Mr. Wurtz structures his pieces. Every detail in a Wurtz — every knot of string or thread, every kink in a wire or a shoestring, every wood base or pedestal — figures in its final effect. He hints as much in a boatlike tabletop sculpture from 1994 built of small cubes and slabs of wood that is titled "Twenty-Four Screws." The work's multiple layers make it difficult to keep track of all this hardware, which may explain the full-disclosure title.

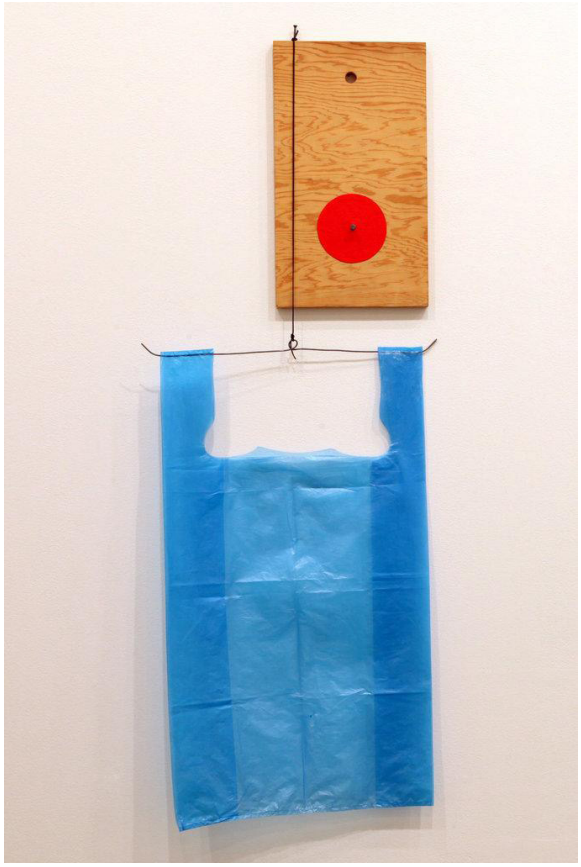


"Untitled, 2001," includes shoe buttons and laces.

Mr. Wurtz plays on the endless suggestiveness of existing forms. In one wall piece, a blue grocery bag hangs, in flattened, unused condition, from a horizontal length of wire, evoking a tank top and thus a human torso. Several recent works imaginatively reuse the red or green plastic net sleeves that normally encase tomatoes and other vegetables. Hung from strings attached to wires that sprout from low-lying wood pedestals, the nets simultaneously evoke lampshades and flowers closing up for the night, an overlap of human and natural design that is typical of Mr. Wurtz's art. The skidlike pedestals are themselves small wonders of layering and proportion; they have an Egyptian economy and, in their bare-bones, unembellished way, echo Cy Twombly's sculptures.

Against the profligacy of so much of today's art world, Mr. Wurtz's work reads as a quiet refusal, a rebellious act of abstinence that results in its own kind of fullness. His precedents include Alexander Calder's wood-and-wire sculptures; the collages of Arthur Dove, Anne Ryan and Ray Johnson; the visionary refinement of the painter Myron Stout — all exemplars of modest but resonant understatement.

Again and again, Mr. Wurtz's work invites us to think about what we look at, and moreover what we look for, when we look at art. Then it gives us something slightly different, something equally visual, gratifying and, above all, charged with the deliberation and focus that are the essence of art.

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