

# METRO PICTURES

Sam, Sherman. "B. Wurtz: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art," *Artforum* (February 2016): 250.

## ARTFORUM



View of "B. Wurtz," 2015–16. From left: *Untitled (Autobiographical Sculpture)*, 1972; *Untitled (Lampshade)*, 1986; *Untitled*, 2012. Photo: John McKenzie.

GATESHEAD, UK

### B. Wurtz

BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

KNOW THYSELF, reads a 1992 B. Wurtz assemblage, *Untitled (sock piece #7)*. The Delphic maxim is scrawled on a piece of canvas flanked by a pair of mauve tube socks. Is the artist talking to us? Or to the artwork itself? It might well be a question of the work's own self-examination, for this quality is evident throughout the more than three hundred pieces—eighty-two objects, eight early videos, and 216 paintings on the bottoms of aluminum pans—on view in this first B. Wurtz retrospective, "Selected Works: 1970–2015," curated by BALTIC chief curator Laurence Sillars.

Wurtz says that he chooses materials based on three things: sleeping, eating, and keeping warm. That is, the bare necessities. Or as the New York–based artist put it to me: "What else do you need to be happy?" Yet, ironically, day-to-day survival provides the platform for Wurtz's real interest: celebrating the quotidian through the structure of sculpture. His earliest pieces are to some extent documentary in form, for instance *Untitled (today I cut my hair)*, 1973—the artist's shorn locks collected in a bottle—or the video *Paintings*, 1980, in which the artist chooses "the best" of two flat, colorful objects that resemble paintings. The work is kind of like *Sesame Street* for art lovers. Next to the monitor on which we see the video hangs a plastic checkered object with holes. Perhaps it's the base of a board game? This piece highlights the fact that Wurtz always foregrounds qualities already inherent in the elements he chooses for display. However, the earlier works are often endowed with a trace of his own autobiography. For example, *Relics*, 1974, consists of a group of simple wooden blocks—his childhood building blocks, each stamped RELIC—glued together in architectural configuration, while *Untitled (Autobiographical Sculpture)*, 1972, looks like a four-legged trestle with a symmetrical T-shape structure and matchstick-like protuberances. The anthropomorphic structure is both formal and funny, suggesting at once an AT-AT walker from *Star Wars* and a four-legged plinth with a grouping of mini-monuments poised on top of it. In fact, Wurtz says, "It represents my age at its making (twenty-four)."

Wurtz's instinct for miniaturization, wit, and whimsy has blossomed as his work has evolved. The more recent *Untitled*, 2012, consists of three plastic bags, two of them held up by wooden sticks that spread them flat while a third bag is held up by a single stick in the middle that allows the plastic to crumple a bit. With the blue, white, and pink sacks at varying heights, the piece suggests celebratory flags, banners, and pennants, and plays with hierarchies of height and scale, as quite a number of the pieces here do. Such works feel like large monuments shrunk to room or table size. Ultimately, Wurtz advocates a domestic-scale art and the use of bricolage to make something out of not very much. Rather than referring to their former functions, Wurtz's chosen objects are used as neutral materials—it's the way they add up together, rather than what they are in themselves, that makes them. His is a kind of small-scale revolution: humble, whimsical at times, but always meaningful.

—Sherman Sam