

METRO PICTURES

Gerwin, Daniel. "B. Wurtz Makes Absurd, Profound Art from Overlooked Stuff," *Hyperallergic.com* (November 26, 2018).

HYPERALLERGIC



Installation view of B. Wurtz: *This Has No Name*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Taking Duchamp as a starting point, B. Wurtz performs simple operations on found objects, generating pointed rejoinders to a wide array of aesthetic movements and, along the way, teaching us something about self-knowledge. His first US museum show, *This Has No Name*, is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Los Angeles, curated by Jamillah James and focused on his work from 1980 onwards. Though Wurtz lives in New York, he is California-born, and it is fitting that his first (and overdue) US museum show should be in the Golden State.

The exhibition is filled with all manner of junk, from plastic bags to empty tissue boxes, old socks to single-use aluminum baking tins. While some of these items were found by Wurtz in the same manner Duchamp seized upon a urinal or a bottle rack, many are things Wurtz has used himself and found an artistic purpose for after their practical value was exhausted. Some of his gestures are ridiculously straightforward, such as the flattening of cardboard containers into abstractions in "Western Airlines Snack Tray" and "Untitled (Philadelphia Cream Cheese)," both made in 1980, the year he graduated from CalArts. In their sly sport with commercial product design, these works recall the more involved collages of Al Hansen, who in the 1960s and '70s cut up and reassembled Hershey bar wrappers into figures and other images filled with brilliantly comic word play.



"This Has No Name" (1990), mixed media, 37 × 22 × 9 in.

"Untitled" (2018) is an open cube fashioned crudely out of lumber, which not only delimits an interior space but also evokes, and perhaps rebukes, the famous California Light and Space cubes of Larry Bell. Bell's cubes are pristine, created through highly technical fabrication, and often suggest meteorological phenomena. Wurtz's cube is mostly notional, serving as an armature for sundry objects, including a single hanging sock. Art, Wurtz suggests, is not to be found in something polished as a new BMW, but rather in your laundry, in the prosaic mystery of how a pair of socks entered your washing machine but only one came out.



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In the incredibly silly “Pen” (1980), Wurtz manages to have a laugh at Warhol’s expense while simultaneously producing a memorable work. The camera faces Wurtz at eye level while he speaks in a deadpan solemnity reminiscent of some early Vito Acconci videos. Wurtz explains that his pen has run out of ink so he can no longer draw with it, but he has realized that it can still be used for art. The camera zooms in on the pen and a grand operatic soundtrack swells up and continues while the pen occupies the screen and nothing further happens. The piece is a wonderful send-up of Warhol’s eventless films, most famously his 1964 “Empire,” in which the camera focuses on the top of the Empire State Building for over eight hours.

Wurtz’s flotsam and jetsam can be somewhat dizzying, an endless parade of wire, safety pins, styrofoam, cardboard, string, detergent bottle tops, plastic, and odds and ends of every conceivable kind. Wurtz is one of those artists, like Ray Johnson, for whom everything he touches can, and usually does, become art. Wurtz is up to something rather unique, however, in that his surprising manipulations of ephemeral material are all directed toward self-recognition, an awareness he encourages in us as well. In this regard, he is the opposite of Jeff Koons, whose vacuum cleaners in vitrines and shiny balloon dogs strive to become iconic paeans to commerce and Pop. Wurtz, by contrast, is engaged in humility and introspection.

Two works from 1992 are called “Untitled (Know Thyself)” and each consists of a pair of socks mounted on canvas, one sock on the left side and one on the right, with the center of the canvas bearing the injunction: “know thyself.” Like the rest of Wurtz’s output, these pieces are both absurd and profound. Self-knowledge is not to be found, his work argues, on a psychoanalyst’s couch or a remote mountaintop, but rather in the things with which we surround ourselves, what passes through our hands and over our bodies, and how we use them. He brings our self-conception down to earth, while our overlooked stuff is elevated — but not too much.