

# METRO PICTURES

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## Art in Print

EXHIBITION REVIEW

### *To Home and Back Again: B. Wurtz at Metro Pictures*

By Megan N. Liberty

*"B. Wurtz: Domestic Space"*

Metro Pictures  
New York  
6 September – 20 October 2018

*Philosophy from B to Z*

By B. Wurtz  
Paperback artist's book, 108 pages.  
Edition of 400.  
Zulu Press, Mexico City and Barcelona,  
2018.  
\$55

The first word that came to mind entering Bill Wurtz's fall exhibition "Domestic Space" was *scale*. The entry gallery was strikingly empty, a quality exaggerated by the contrasting size of the small household objects (such as a metal lampshade, colander and cheese grater) set atop wooden platforms roughly a foot high, arranged on the floor a few feet out from the walls. As backdrops to these objects, Wurtz has staged—"staged" being an especially apt term for these theatrical pairings—close-up black-and-white photographs of the objects, printed as dye sublimation prints. The grayscale prints are large—at least 28 x 40 inches each—and depict such obscure corners, angles and aspects of their subjects as to make them nearly unrecognizable, appearing instead as dramatic landscapes of distant mountain ranges or industrial scenes. This Photo/Object series, begun in 1987, is representative of Wurtz's larger body of work, which places discarded and recycled objects like plastic bags, rags and clothes into elaborate call-and-response sculptures and installations.

Wurtz is known for "whimsical" conceptual works that oscillate between Duchampian readymades and collage sculptures. *Untitled (British Design)* (1987) looks like a towering apartment complex, the holes of the cheese grater like windows in the building, and *Untitled (Beige Lampshade)* (1987) could be a flying saucer. These combinations play on our perceptions of commonplace items, usually tied to their functionality and rarely focused solely on



B. Wurtz, *Untitled (Green Dot Hand Towel)* (2018), photograph on polyester silk, wood, metal, staples, 17 1/2 x 17 x 3 1/2 inches. Edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

their colors, textures and shapes. Even in the case of a lampshade—an object type with a rich aesthetic history—Wurtz's cropped image works against its expected properties to emphasize other visual registers. He hones in on these aspects, highlighting materiality: shiny metal objects are dye-sublimation-printed on

aluminum, maintaining an aspect of the original object's sparkling surface.

Wurtz's latest prints, which were on view in the back rooms of "Domestic Space," feature photographs of yogurt tubs and bottles of vinegar printed on canvas, photographs of hand towels printed on silk that are hung on wooden



B. Wurtz, *Untitled* (2017), 35mm slide in cardboard mount, white plastic bread tie, ink, thread, wood, 8 1/4 x 3 3/8 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

racks and sway as viewers pass by, and small mobiles in which photographic slides of twist ties dangle from hooks above actual twist ties adorning wooden bases. These works demonstrate an attention to the materiality of objects illustrated *and* the textures and physicality of the images themselves. Contrary to much modern and contemporary photography, which seeks to make visible the gap between sign and signifier, Wurtz's images draw the image closer to the object represented (and vice versa) through his pointedly tactile presentations.

The most interesting of these are the photographs of hand towels printed on silk—trompe l'oeil confections of object,

image and material. In addition to silk, the list of materials for *Untitled (Green Dot Hand Towel)* (2018) includes wood, metal and staples, making the wooden rack an integral component of the work rather than an amusing method of installation. Wurtz celebrates the everyday by raising the status of household items through oversized portraits, while temporarily "lowering" the status of art object to that of a utilitarian towel, an artifice that lasts only until we realize it is actually a printed artwork. In the gallery, my desire to reach for one of these towels was overwhelming, but then I am reminded that this is not a towel, it is art. Just in case we thought we knew the joke, Wurtz includes actual towels in

his wooden assemblages in the center of the back gallery. He thus closes the gap between life and art, the everyday and the exquisite, through his plays with the materials of art and life.

Shortly before this Metro Pictures show, Wurtz published a new artist's book, *Philosophy from B to Z*, with Zulu Press. Like all his work, the book is attentive to surface and touch: floppy and oversized, like a dime-store magazine, it is "bound" by a colored elastic running down the center that holds together the otherwise loose pages, and it sports a cover of heavily textured matte plastic. Readers can engage with the work physically rather than just look at it. Inside, glossy pages of text are interspersed with cropped details of his drawings, collages, sculptures of the physical imprints of light-switch covers, and mixed media works that use newsprint pages, metal grommets and more. The essays, by Wurtz, include topics such as "Shopping at the grocery store" and "Buying a new belt." Each adds to his celebration of the mundane.

While the objects referenced in Wurtz's show are not limited to household items, the title "Domestic Space" heightens the focus on the home. It calls to mind the intimate privacy of those spaces where we cook and wash and dry dishes, usually without a thought to being observed by outsiders. This is very much at odds with the nature of galleries, purposely public and voyeuristic places. Thus we add another set of juxtaposition to Wurtz's complications of objects: removing them from their habitual sphere and literally declaring the gallery "Domestic Space," he calls attention to private spaces and activities, and to how, in public, our behaviors change alongside our relationship to objects now designated as art. They certainly are beautiful, the colored bags glistening like lampshades on the tops of his installations, and the lampshade shining on the floor under gallery lights. ■

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