

Art Now LA  
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B. Wurtz: 'This Has No Name'  
A Purveyor of Cultural Artifacts

The ICA LA  
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by Jody Zellen



**B. (Bill) Wurtz's** sculptures and wall works are created from basic things like mesh sacks, disposable broiler pans, 35mm slides, table and chair legs, shoe laces, buttons, socks, as well as plastic bags. Made from recognizable but discarded materials, his on point artworks have a lyrical quality. While descriptive and critical terms as diverse as pedestrian, stupid, simple, fun, comical, idiosyncratic, not art, charming and poetic might be used to characterize these pieces, Wurtz has the ability to transform the banal into something transcendent. The exhibition, ***This Has No Name***, is a visual rather than chronologically choreographed showcase where over 150 works of diverse shapes and sizes, created between 1980 and 2018, are on view.

***Making Strange***, a concept associated with **Russian Formalism**, refers to the idea of seeing anew. **Viktor Shklovsky** (who coined the term *defamiliarization*) describes it as *"the technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception."* In Wurtz's art, ordinary objects are presented in a new light: They become humorous, as well as insightful. His process and steadfast approach are all about transformation. He is not only a collector of refuse, but a purveyor of cultural artifacts. Obsolete items (35 mm transparencies and plastic bags from stores that have closed like **Michael's Art Supplies**), are used to trigger memories and associations about outmoded places, customs or processes, mass production and consumerism.

Wurtz does not create ready-mades as he rarely presents an unadulterated found object. His genius is in both the formal and associative relationships that occur through juxtaposition and combination. The resulting artworks are sensual, architectural and playful simultaneously. Wurtz is also not afraid to reference the obvious. ***Untitled (Container)***, 1987 is a two-part work consisting of a perforated metal container perched atop a small wooden box situated on the floor. On the wall above the container is a black and white photograph, shot from below in plain air, depicting the object against the sky. ***Untitled (Tie Rack and Portraits)*** 1987, presents a similar type of doubling.

Here, Wurtz displays a plastic sunburst-shaped tie rack on a wooden pedestal. On the wall is a painted diagram of the object in addition to an abstracted interpretation— in this instance, two paintings of orange suns that parallel the shape of the original tie rack. **Here** (2006), is a large (96 x 75 inch) flat piece of unprimed canvas on which Wurtz has sewn post-it-note sized square fragments cut from a wide range of plastic bags to spell out the word “HERE.” Seven uncut bags hang from the bottom edge — a reference point for the fragments. This is a portrait of **New York City**, a composite created from iconic throwaways.

While the majority of Wurtz’s pieces include mass produced objects and reference consumer culture, some also allude to nature. In **Bunch #2** (1995), plastic bags from myriad sources cover a metal armature suggesting the shape of a tree. **Collection #5** (1999), is also a tree-like sculpture in which lines of strung together 35 mm transparencies hang off of wires that extend up from a central wooden base. This whimsical artwork presents dangling pieces of cut film— photographs of fashion models— that do not cohere into a narrative, but rather reinforce the discontinuous aspects of photographic representation.

Wurtz paints and draws in addition to making assemblages. In **Untitled (Life Painting)**, 1990, the letters that spell out the word *life* are hand drawn into an oval suggesting the form of a face. Both sides of **Untitled** (diptych), 1982, display black and white paintings of crudely drawn icons with the words ‘*know thyself*’ in the center of the composition. On the left, Wurtz includes corporate logos for **Arco**, **Mercedes Benz**, **Visa**, **Ford** and **Coca-Cola**, as well as male and female symbols and religious icons. On the right are doodles of spirals, circles and ribbon shapes. The work offers two opposing ways of identifying— one cultural and the other more personal.

One of the highlights of the show is a grid of painted disposable aluminum broiler pans in varying shapes and sizes. These pieces (created between 1992 and 2018) have often been grouped together and presented in different configurations according to the given wall. Wurtz paints the embossed shapes on the bottom of the oval, rectangular, square and circular pans with bold primary colors. Carefully following the contours, Wurtz creates ready-made abstractions.

It is a joy to wander through *This Has No Name*, and to contemplate the numerous ways Wurtz can delight viewers with his elegant combinations of what some might consider junk or detritus. For Wurtz, discarded objects are treasures offering unending aesthetic possibilities.

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