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B Wurtz: Selected works 1970-2015 review – everyday rubbish reimaged

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead

From painted takeaway cartons to plastic bag trees, California artist B Wurtz wants us to take a close, loving look at junk



Tray chic: B Wurtz's brightly painted takeaway cartons and roasting trays at the Baltic. Photograph: John McKenzie © 2015 Baltic

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Something out of nothing – that is what the California artist B Wurtz creates. He is a conjuror and cobbler of junk. A master of balance and composition, he can turn the most unprepossessing rubbish into graceful works of art. What we might simply throw away – carrier bags, shoelaces, used plastic, old buttons – Wurtz zealously preserves in sculptures of delicate beauty and wit. He is a champion of ill-considered trifles.

Two old socks pinned like Christmas stockings at either end of a scrap of canvas become classical columns (“Know Thyself” is quietly written between them, a shy nod to the

Delphic oracle, and perhaps to the artist's own modesty of means). A mesh bag, of the kind used for lemons or tomatoes, dangles like a weeping willow from a coat hanger. Blue bottle-tops, threaded at intervals on fuse wires and suspended from a hat stand, turn fractionally in the air, giving a sense of coruscating motion. The mind immediately perceives a fountain.

But the eye still recognises the caps and wires for what they are. This is crucial to everything B Wurtz makes. The stuff of everyday existence must remain the same in his art, exactly as banal and functional as it is in life, no matter how vividly it is arranged or juxtaposed. Wurtz wants us to pay more attention to these ordinary objects. So he might hang a sequence of plastic bags upright – blue, white and yellow – one above the other so that they form a ladder. Nothing has been done to them except that they are now flattened, and slightly billowing in the warmth of the gallery. At a distance, they are ships' flags in the breeze; up close, they are simply themselves: rectangles of translucent colour. You can take it (either way) or leave it.



One of Wurtz's carrier bag trees 'that billow into bloom on the gallery air'. Photograph: John McKenzie © 2015 Baltic

Everything at the Baltic is as plain and transparent as the bags. Here are two trainer laces untied and hitched on a couple of nails, so that they ribbon down in effortless curlicues and scrolls. That's all there is to it – the means of presentation (and the appreciation of their properties in the first place). Here are two long nails partially hammered into a block of wood, one bent so that it is in tentative dialogue with the other. The parts of a lock, disassembled so that the bolt is separated from the snib, appear alternately hostile when opposed at either end of a wooden block, or humorous when one is hidden round a corner from the other. Inanimate objects are encouraged to speak.

Of B Wurtz himself, not much has been said down the years. He seems to be the original quiet American. Born in Pasadena, California in 1948, he has been making and showing these wry and softly spoken sculptures for more than 40 years, during which time many people have assumed that he was, variously, a woman, a collective, or a parody of Marcel Duchamp (with B Wurtz as a skit on R Mutt, the signature on Duchamp's urinal). But he is genuine, solo and apparently answers to the real name Bill.

Since his work is a bricolage of found objects, Wurtz has appeared to be part of that long tradition; and since his aesthetic is so frugal, it has also been associated with a strain of austerity in American art, all the way from Shaker furniture to the minimalism of Donald Judd and Agnes Martin. But Wurtz seems a loner, in fact, glorying in the manmade trivia around him. If he has an antecedent, it is surely Alexander Calder, creating a fantastical world in wire.

Wurtz finds different ways to make us look at the overlooked, to see the familiar in a new light. He builds boxes out of old-fashioned slides, piling them into architectural forms: towers with darkened windows. He makes trees out of polythene bags that billow into bloom on the gallery air. The works are so humble and modest (to the point of muteness, at times) it feels as if they are making no demands on the viewer whatsoever.

Ultimately, however, Wurtz is throwing down a gauntlet. Can you be as interested in all this junk as he is? Can you admire the circuit board as a form of found painting, or the carrier bag as a form of found sculpture to the same degree as he can? This of course depends very much on exactly what Wurtz does with them.

A gallery of the Baltic is hung floor to ceiling with disposable food containers on every scale, from the most meagre Chinese carryout to the largest tray for roasting turkeys. The pristine shape and glint of these aluminium objects are pleasing enough, and entirely familiar, but Wurtz has turned them over and painted the bottoms in brilliant colours, so that the mass effect is something like a wall of abstract paintings in some contemporary blue-chip gallery. This is not necessarily much of a thrill in itself, any more than the original cartons, which remain dumbly recognisable.

The ideal scenario, as mentioned by Wurtz in an accompanying video, would be for the viewer to appreciate the painted forms before realising that they are in fact throwaway boxes. But is there any place on earth where such a total innocent might happen to walk into a gallery?

If some of Wurtz's works are too exiguous to have much staying power, there are occasions when the object and the idea come together to haunting perfection. This is especially so with the first piece in the show. The cover of an old black address book, tiny and faded, has been balanced on the tip of a long wire prong. The pages have gone, the names are all lost, but the black cover is spread open, so that it has some affinity with a dark bird flapping in the air. A harbinger bird, suspended and waiting: the title of the work is *Death*.