

METRO PICTURES

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"How have I never heard of him?" This eavesdropped question, asked with equal measures of surprise and embarrassment by a tapped-in critic, likely typified the response to this wonder of a show. B. Wurtz—born in Pasadena, California, in 1948; educated at University of California, Berkeley, and CalArts; working in New York since the mid-'80s—has largely avoided detection by art-world radar. This solo exhibition, curated by Matthew Higgs and mounted in collaboration with Feature Inc., Wurtz's longtime gallery, went some way toward rectifying the artist's too-little-known status even as it disclosed why this wizard of household materials is not a household name. The sixty-four selections, spanning from 1970 to the present, are meager of means and seem almost willfully marginal: sculptures, assemblages, and floor- and wall-bound pieces knocked together from plastic carrier bags and food containers, netted sacks used to hold produce, buttons, shoelaces, and scraps of wood, wire, canvas, and hardware. Most are untitled, and there are no discernible phases of practice; a sculpture from 1986 might look very much like one from 2002. Even the single-initial forename, absent gender, suggests deliberate anonymity. The moniker, as is often the case with the artist, is at once obvious and perplexing: His given name is William, and "B.," short for Bill, proved "easier and quicker" to sign—but it also, he states, ensures "somewhat of a mystery."

Indeed, his art straddles the twin poles of exposure and concealment. A 1973 work comprises two petite wooden boxes, one inscribed UNPLEASANT PRIVATE THOUGHTS and the other SECRET WORDS, whose ludically hermetic presentation (they are nailed tight, and encased in a Plexiglas vitrine) leaves one with the suspicion that the repositories are

in fact empty. Wurtz gravitates toward containers, with many assemblages constituted by items used to enclose or seal: a stretch of plastic food wrapper suspended from a homespun frame of wood and wire, wafting in air-conditioned currents; a shoelace dangled around an arabesque of coat hangers; a husk of mesh netting draped over a metal loop, conjuring *Bird in Space's* contours and poetic resonance alike. Such spare tactics encourage a protracted looking at the overlooked (tube socks and mop handles have never been so evocative), but Wurtz's found objects are hardly transformed and less so redeemed. An exquisite feel for visual equilibrium—whereby, for example, a flattened green plastic bag topped with a stack of wooden boxes crowned by a blue plastic bag impaled on a wire conveys an improbable, intuitive rightness of design—obtains as well on an ontological register; the works strike a precarious balance between constituent materials and overall structure, things and forms. And failure to cohere is as much a theme as coalescence: Two untitled works feature the components of a barrel-bolt lock anchored to a wood plinth, ever separated by a few frustrating inches.

It's tempting, especially given Wurtz's relative lack of renown, to ally him with other traditions, and various intersections come readily to mind, from Constructivism's truth-to-materials politics to Arte Povera's humble modes to the Fluxus crucible of conflating the art object with the everyday one. *Hula Hoop*, 1982, is a canny reprisal of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*; a number of wall-mounted constructions are Eva Hesse ringers. There are affinities with more recent artists, too (Richard Tuttle, Jessica Stockholder), and Wurtz's engagement with painting merits a reckoning of its own—I'm thinking of a large untitled work from 2009 in which a piece of unstretched canvas is flecked with squares cut from plastic bags and squares of acrylic paint; in two cases a line ties one to the other, as if to ask, "Same difference?" In many ways, though, Wurtz's work resists connection, grounded as it is in the particulars of his own existence. His readymades are circumscribed, he says, by the "basic categories" of "food, clothing, and shelter," and they speak less to anti-subjectivity or aesthetic disinterest than to a quietly radical, deeply personal ethic of reuse: the recycling of his non-biodegradable yogurt containers and hummus lids, otherwise at the end of their commodity life cycle. For all its gentle modesty, the art sponsors a powerful emergence of the self—however elusive—through the unlovely stuff of life, not in spite of it.

—Lisa Turvey



B. Wurtz, *Unpleasant Private Thoughts and Secret Words*, 1973, mixed media, each box 2 x 4 x 3".