

METRO PICTURES

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ARTFORUM

B. Wurtz

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The work of B. Wurtz, which returned to the attention of the art world in the late 2000s and early 2010s after flying under the radar for many years, reflects an austerity more pragmatic than visual. The artist recycles things ordinarily thrown away, but—as he laid out in the text of a 1973 drawing that has now taken on the power of a manifesto—he limits those materials to items related to food, shelter, and warmth: plastic lids of yogurt or hummus containers, bread bags, buttons, the plastic mesh sacks used for produce, shoelaces, ribbon, along with objects

not so readily identified as well as modest additions of paint and wood. These he assembles into works, mostly sculptural, that balance the flimsiness of the materials against a jury-rigged monumentalism.

Among the sculptures and wall pieces in this show were a pair of small wood constructions, with vertical wire loops from which dangle open mesh bags. The bags are glossy and synthetic, their colors lushly artificial, and they take on the graceful shape of a bell; they float appealingly in the slight breeze created by people walking by, although some hang stubborn and limp. In another pair of sculptures, the wood is assembled in more pagoda-like forms, with two enclosed levels containing, respectively, a tin can and a seashell. On top of each structure, a wire is bent into a spiral, suggesting an antenna atop a basement invention. These works were placed on low pedestals, introducing a contradiction: a monument the size of a toy, which, instead of imposing from above, invites us to



B. Wurtz, *Untitled (bread quilt)*, 2012.
plastic bread bags,
wood, string, thread,
T-shirt, shoelace,
caution tape, 80 x 45".

crouch down and examine it from below. A set of smaller works incorporate by-now familiar materials, such as dangling buttons and knotted bows, and together, they resemble a field of pinwheels, yet the tiny slabs of marble on which they sit link them to something more majestic.

A pair of "quilts" are made from sealed-together bread bags with additions of dangling shoelaces, caution tape, a sock, or a T-shirt. They emphasize the dialogue between use and uselessness: the bag no longer a bag, the quilt (which is not particularly warm) hung on the wall like an artifact in a natural-history museum. Although the artist's focus on food, warmth, and shelter was everywhere in evidence, the works do not preach, which would rob them of their multivalence. Wurtz's various levels of intervention—a light touch here, a very firm sense of arrangement there—keep them contradictory: stately and playful, modest and grandiose, moral and humorous. More orderly and pronounced than Richard Tuttle, less of a spectacle than Tony Feher, less chaotic than Jessica Stockholder, funnier than Sarah Sze, Wurtz—although he shares something with each—creates an aesthetic that is all his own.

In a concurrent exhibition downtown at Bureau, mounted in collaboration with Triple Canopy, Wurtz presented the series "History Works," 2013; meanwhile, the Triple Canopy website offered a related presentation, including videos from Wurtz's years in graduate school at CalArts. In one, the artist sits at a desk with four pieces of metal laid out in front of him. Declaring that they would make a good sculpture, he begins to examine and assemble them. As he explores how the parts fit together and move, he proceeds patiently, his assessment of each piece more anthropological than aesthetic. He is absolutely deadpan throughout; there is no smirking or faux naïveté. The metal pieces finally come together to form a collapsible music stand, but this familiar object is nevertheless made indubitably strange: It is transformed into something utterly Wurtzian.

—Emily Hall