

INTERVIEW WITH B. WURTZ BY STEEL STILLMAN [published in Metro Pictures exhibition catalogue for B. Wurtz Recent Work, 2013]

*Although B. Wurtz, who was born in Pasadena in 1948, operates in various media – including drawing, painting and photography – he describes himself as a sculptor. It is an important distinction, because in his work even two-dimensional means serve three-dimensional ends. Wurtz’s specialty is the found object, and for nearly forty years he has been applying his mettle to a seemingly endless variety of quotidian things, including buttons, shoelaces, empty tin cans, bits of scrap wood, wire, socks and plastic bags. His choices are never random. Since early in his career, Wurtz has limited himself to items related to food, clothing and shelter, those basic necessities of human life, which he assembles into nonchalant, sometimes Calder-like sculptures that betray little of the considerable care that went into their making. And if, at first glance, the results appear slight or dismissible, give them some time, for concealed in their ordinariness are explosive materials, mind-bombs of often-philosophical meaning.*

*Much can be learned from Wurtz’s methodology. Everything he produces is handmade in some way and human scaled, and is put together in the most pragmatic fashion. As in a good joke, or in a poem by William Carlos Williams, whatever happens in his sculptures happens in the open – effects and causes are equally visible. Like a magician, Wurtz has a deft touch; he recycles the commonplace, and often leaves the door open to potential reversibility. For instance, in Untitled (prototype for a multiple) [1993], a white sock soars above its wood and tin can base evoking Brancusi’s Bird in Space, but it remains, at the same time, an ordinary cotton sock and wearable in a pinch.*

*Wurtz – his given name is William – grew up in Menlo Park and Santa Barbara, and received a BA from Berkeley in 1970 and an MFA from CalArts in 1980. For many years, he would have been best described as an artists’ artist, better known by a relative handful of peers than by the art world at large. But his profile grew dramatically in 2011, when White Columns director Matthew Higgs curated a widely acclaimed retrospective of his work at Metro Pictures in New York. The following conversation took place before all that, in the summer of 2007, in the tidy*

*19<sup>th</sup> Century house on the Lower East Side of Manhattan that Wurtz shares with his wife, the book designer Ann Bobco; it has not been published before.*

S: Do you have early art-related memories?

B: When I was growing up, my father was a cryogenic engineer. But he also had a workshop in the garage at home where he made furniture and worked on hobbies, and I loved being out there with him when he was working. He had a table saw and would give me scraps of wood, which I'd glue together to make little houses.

S: Did you also play with wood blocks?

B: I did – it was my favorite childhood activity. I was given a store-bought block set when I was two or three years old, and, over the next several years, with my father contributing pieces of leftover wood, that original set grew enormously. Eventually it included other toys as well, all of them used in the ever more elaborate city-like constructions I would build in my room. Most of the time, I played by myself, and sometimes those cities – which often included roads and train tracks – would remain standing for days at a time. But then, inevitably, friends would come over and we'd make catapults out of Lincoln logs and bring the whole thing down.

S: When did you first become aware of art as a specific category of objects – made by artists, and occupying a broader cultural context?

B: My parents were not especially interested in art, but they had books on Picasso and other artists, which I began looking at when I was maybe five or six years old. Of course, I was always making something – drawings, paintings, constructions – so gradually I learned more. By the time I got to high school, I was teaching myself about the major developments of 20<sup>th</sup> Century art and going to the library to look through issues of *Studio International* for images of contemporary work.

S: During those years weren't you also a serious music student?

B: I was. In high school I had a piano teacher who wanted me to go to UC Santa Barbara and major in music. After a good deal of deliberation, I decided – much as I loved music – that I didn't have it in me to be a great musician. Somehow I felt I had more to say with my art. But what I learned playing the piano had a strong effect on my art making. Once you can play the correct notes, you enter a realm of nuance and subtlety where the process becomes all about phrase making and refining and the need to push further. Working this way, immersing myself in piece after piece, I discovered how compositions could open up – and open me up – to new ideas and possibilities. That's really what working on art is.

S: So, at the end of high school, were you committed to being an artist?

B: I knew I wanted to make art, but I had no idea what having an art career meant, or how artists made money. I started college at UCSB and after two years transferred to Berkeley, where I focused primarily on painting, sculpture and drawing, studying with Harold Paris and Jim Melchert, among others.

S: Was it at Berkeley that one of your teachers tried to dissuade you from becoming an artist?

B: Yes, that was Jerry Ballaine. His line to all his students was: If you can think of anything else to do, then do it, because artists' lives are hard; be an artist only if you have to be one. It was good advice and I've never forgotten it. In 1969, selling one's art was never talked about, and having a career in the art world, as we think of it today, wasn't a remote possibility. In subsequent years, there were a few times when I tried to give up art making; but I never found anything I wanted to do more than I was much good at. Ballaine was right, and probably teachers should be saying the same thing to young students today. The idea that you can come out of graduate school with an MFA and immediately start earning a lot of money is crazy, and it has shifted the focus from art to careerism.

S: What were you doing during the eight years between Berkeley and CalArts?

B: Mostly I was living and making art in Santa Barbara, but I was kind of lost. At one point, I had some friends in graduate school at UCSB, who seemed like they were having an interesting time, so I applied there and also to UC Davis because I was interested in William T. Wiley. But when both schools turned me down, I sort of put the idea aside until, a year or two later, another artist friend, David Ligare, suggested that I consider studying with John Baldessari. I'd seen some of Baldessari's work at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and I discovered that he was teaching at CalArts.

I never actually applied to CalArts. A friend and I drove down to Valencia from Santa Barbara to look around, and I took along a box of my artwork – little sculptural things. Douglas Huebler and some other people were working in the office, so I left my things there and went out for a guided tour. When I returned, I noticed that a wire on one of my sculptures had been bent, and I got really upset. But it turned out that the people in the office had taken my box, reviewed my work and accepted me! I began in January of 1979, in the middle of the school year.

S: Was it difficult to adjust to the CalArts zeitgeist?

B: Though I had known about Baldessari and Doug Huebler – whose work I had also seen in Santa Barbara – I was somewhat naïve about the rest of the faculty. For instance, when Michael Asher was assigned to be my mentor I had no idea who he was, and it took me quite a while to understand where he was coming from. The first time he came to my studio he seemed more interested in my Sears Craftsman miter box than he was in my sculptures – and he freaked me out by asking me what I was doing in graduate school. I was a little older than the other students and had been making art for a long time, and he wondered why I'd spent money on tuition when I could be renting a studio in Venice and just continuing to be an artist. I immediately worried: Have I made a mistake? Why am I here? Looking back, what I needed and got from Cal Arts was to be challenged in just that way.

S: What intrigued you about Baldessari?

B: In Santa Barbara, I'd seen his piece *The Pencil Story* [1972-73], which combines two photographs of a pencil – in one it is dull and dirty and in the other it is freshly sharpened – with a text speculating that his impulse to sharpen it might have had “something to do with art.” I was drawn to Baldessari's humorous examination of what art can be, and by his assertion of its vital connection to the real world. I was also attracted to his unconventional means – at the time he was making photo pieces with shaped frames, sort of thinking about photography in sculptural terms. His mixing of categories seemed to relate to my own inclination, since high school, to make paintings that were more about sculpture than painting.

S: How did the other students respond to your artwork?

B: I arrived having made a lot of work with found objects, but one of the first pieces I presented involved found words. With my eyes closed, I'd selected words from newspapers and magazines and assembled them into sentences, which I gathered in a book for Baldessari's Open Seminar class. I was determined not to tell anyone how the sentences had been made — caught up, in a sense, in the popular misconception that art is touchy-feely and can't be talked about. As a consequence, I came under a lot of fire. At CalArts, every gesture was questioned. Without a doubt, the key thing I learned in graduate school was the importance of thinking through every aspect of my work. I had to take responsibility and acknowledge even what was beyond my conscious control; I needed to be as aware of my intentions as I was of what resulted.

S: And that started you thinking beyond your definition of an artist as someone who works only from heartfelt but unexamined intuitions?

B: Right. I hadn't really considered that unexamined intuitions are often traditional notions, clichés of art making, which result in nothing new. Later, when I decided to tell everyone how my sentences were made, they became more interesting. Questions came up that led to new ideas. You're not going to kill an artwork by talking about it. The discussions at CalArts proved that there's no objective way to talk about art and yet it's important to try. Otherwise you're left with the myth of the creative person and a kind of phony mysteriousness about the art making process. It can be important to remember that art is just another human activity.

S: In 1984, four years after graduating from CalArts, you embarked on what would prove to be an important body of work, the “Photo/Objects.”

B: The “Photo/Object” series consists of small-scale sculptures placed directly on the floor beneath large, framed black and white photographs. Each “Photo/Object” sculpture – they all feature a found object perched on a homemade wood base -- is paired with a photograph taken of the same sculpture. The photographs were made outdoors in natural light; and, because they were all close-up shots from below, they make the sculptures look monumental.

S: What got you started on this body of work?

B: I was cleaning out my studio – I was living then in Hollywood – when I came across a small particle-board box, made by my father, filled with scraps of wood. Trying to decide whether to throw it away, I turned the box over and built a small structure that looked something like a house; photographing it, I figured, might enhance the illusion.

S: After this first piece, what guided your choice of objects?

B: I looked for objects that suggested architectural forms and was ready to consider anything. The next piece had a red Frisbee on top and looked, in the photograph especially, like a Roman temple. I didn’t always know what the objects were: one, which I thought was a grater – I’d bought it from the hardware store – was in fact a toaster made for campfires. Another sculpture, made out of cardboard corners, resembled crumbling pyramids when photographed.

S: The photographs are quite striking; several make me think of Bauhaus-era architectural studies.

B: When I began the series, I envisioned the photographs as blurry snapshots, taken from a moving car. I was surprised, but not unhappy, that the results were more professional looking.

S: Structurally, the “Photo/Object” series sets up a dialogue between points of view – between looking down at a small sculpture and looking up at a larger photograph. The photograph transforms my perception of the object, and the sculpture alters, even undermines, my reading of the photograph.

B: I was trying for that. Some people suggested I show only the photographs, but I wasn’t trying to trick anyone. I wanted to let the photograph do its transformation with the object right there. I’ve always thought this group of work was related to Japanese bonsai, where the scale shifts dramatically between a miniature plant and a real tree. In this series, I wanted to show the illusion without hiding how it had been done.

S: You’ve been employing found objects for more than 40 years. What excites you so much about things that already exist?

B: Though sometimes I make things from scratch, I like using what’s at hand and often identify with Doug Huebler’s statement: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.”

S: While the items you use remain very evidently themselves, they also undergo significant transformation as they become part of your sculptures. For instance, in a piece you made last year, *Untitled* [2006], four or five plastic shopping bags, including one with an all-over camouflage motif, are suspended on wires above a cobbled-together wood base. The whole suggests a macabre tableau from the war in Iraq, in which, as it were, a headless or bodiless soldier stands guard over a hanging assortment of innocents.

B: I don’t recall where I got that camouflage bag – I’ve never seen another one like it – but I know it’s a loaded image and I’m not surprised by your reading. A lot of what I do involves balancing the formal and visual aspects of objects with what they are in the world. I don’t set out to communicate particular narratives or meanings, but I am trying to make works that are open to multiple interpretations.

S: You frequently find beauty in the least obvious things.

B: Plastic bags can be ugly – especially when they become litter – but there’s beauty in the way they function, and in what they make possible in daily life. The beauty I’m after often goes beyond aesthetics and celebrates an object’s true nature. Objects that are already considered desirable or interesting don’t need me – there’s nothing left to contribute. But there’s something I really love about all the stuff we use and overlook – commonplace things whose connection to life is strong.

S: Over the past several years, in your domestic life, you’ve become a passionate chair collector. Is there a connection between collecting and making sculpture?

B: As a huge fan of PBS’s *Antiques Roadshow*, I’ve become aware that for many people having one of something is interesting, but having more or a lot of the same thing raises the ante. I am drawn to differences or variations between similar things, and I tend to work in series, which, in a sense, is like building a collection. I’ll make a sculpture and then another will suggest itself. Before long, almost without noticing it, I’ll have a series whose individual pieces inform one another.

S: The first “Photo/Object” piece seemed to happen almost by accident. Is that how your work typically begins?

B: I tend not to plan things out in advance and like to work spontaneously, often emulating, in my own way, John Cage’s chance operations. I’d never begin anything if I tried to think through every possibility; so chance allows me to acknowledge that the possibilities are endless and yet still move in a particular direction. Invariably, on some deep level, I know what I want.

S: My sense is that you are always starting out from your own life, looking at some very specific thing in front of you. And then you expand from that to consider the wider world. Do you think in those terms? That if you pay close enough attention, others will come along...

B: ...And see a bigger picture. Yes, that's what I'm hoping for. But your question makes me think back to the '70s when there seemed to be a lot of autobiographical work around. I remember deciding then that for autobiographical art to be interesting it needed to have a connection to the rest of the world. You start with your own experience – there's almost no avoiding it – but you must also reach out and engage something bigger. It's always a balancing act.

When I was a teenager and trying to figure out how to determine good art from bad, I came up with a simple test: Could I sense the personality of the maker? It wasn't that I needed to see traces of a hand – the work could be fabricated by others, as Donald Judd's was – but I wanted to sense the artist behind it. In my own case, what I do goes back to sitting on the floor in my father's workshop, gluing pieces of wood together. The joy in making things and the conviction that they matter began right there, and they are what my work is all about.

S: The idiosyncrasies of your style are reflected in your invention of the persona 'B. Wurtz,' who seems to be the true creator of your work and conspicuously signs every piece by hand.

B: 'B. Wurtz' *is* a kind of persona. But, while other artists dramatize their personae and put them on display -- Joseph Beuys is a good example – I've wanted mine to be present in the art objects and nowhere else. Having a persona is my way of acknowledging the part of myself that is driven to make art.

S: Is art necessary?

B: Whenever that question comes up, my first response is that it isn't, that it has no use. But then I think, No! Art is extremely necessary, just not in any quantifiable way. It can pique our curiosity, stimulate our brains and raise important questions. But, in the end, what makes art essential is that it provides a fundamental pleasure, the simple one of looking.