

Press Release

# Erwin Wurm

## Surrogates

15 February—14 April 2024  
Opening Thursday 15 February 2024, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Ely House, London  
37 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NJ



Erwin Wurm, *Paradise I (Idea of a High Heel Big)*, 2024. Steel, epoxy resin, styrofoam, acrylic paint.  
217 x 110 x 140 cm (85.43 x 43.30 x 55.11 in).

*It's very simple: we are bodies first, though we consist of mental qualities and spiritual qualities and psychological qualities... And the body is our first measure of relation to the rest of the world.*

— Erwin Wurm

Thaddaeus Ropac London presents *Surrogates*, an exhibition of new sculptures by Austrian artist Erwin Wurm, including three series of works shown for the first time: *Paradise*, *Mind Bubbles* and *Dreamers*. On view concurrently with the artist's major institutional survey at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield,

the exhibition features painted metal and epoxy resin sculptures, alongside key developments in the continuation of his iconic *One Minute Sculptures*. Together, the works assembled embody Wurm's characteristically expansive approach to the concept of sculpture as he disrupts traditional distinctions between subject and object, the human and the non-human, spectator and participant.



Erwin Wurm, *Dreamer*, 2024. Aluminium, acrylic paint.  
150 x 80 x 40 cm (59.05 x 31.49 x 15.74 in).

Across the exhibition, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar through Wurm's playful treatment of the sculptural principles of 'two- and three-dimensionality, mass, volume, skin and surface, movement and time'.

Just as he has previously added volume to cars and houses to reconfigure our relationship to the objects as capitalist status symbols, here, the form of a woman's high-heeled shoe is distorted almost beyond recognition. The heel of the shoe raises the height of an individual in what the artist describes as 'an act of social play'. With its new swollen appearance – and emphasised by the peachy colour of one iteration of the sculpture – the form assumes a flesh-like quality that destabilises ontological boundaries between what is worn on the body and the body itself.

Clothing has been a key source of inspiration for Wurm since the late 1980s, when an abundance of second-hand garments near his then-studio prompted an extensive experimentation with worn objects that continues today. 'Clothes are our second skin, a shell that separates our bodies from the outside world,' he says. Coupled with his investigation into the ways in which volume might be articulated, as inspired by his observation that classical bronze sculptures are hollow, this statement led to the formation of works using thin, skin-like membranes of painted aluminium, as represented in the exhibition by his *Substitute* series (2022–).

The *Substitutes* appear as disembodied figures, composed solely from hollow aluminium garments arranged as though worn by a body that is curiously absent. In an inversion of the volume added to the shoe in the *Paradise* series, the garments are deflated. Their 'skin' separates the hidden, internal volume of the sculpture from the external space in which they stand. The garments, poses and (often monochromatic) colour palettes highlight the particular social values we might ascribe to what an individual chooses to wear. The sculptures become 'substitutes' or 'surrogates' for the human body, whose volume, mass and form are defined by the 'second skin' of the aluminium clothes.

As is characteristic of Wurm's practice and encapsulated in the exhibition title, *Surrogates*, this idea of substitution acts as a social commentary that cuts through the artist's often humorous treatment of the objects and rituals of everyday life. He conceives of the disembodied *Substitutes* as a way to call attention to the role of the individual in the rapidly changing social, political



Erwin Wurm, *Repentance (After Donatello)*, 2023. Aluminium, acrylic paint.  
210 x 40 x 40 cm (82.67 x 15.74 x 15.74 in).

and environmental conditions of the contemporary world, and particularly the potential absence of humanity in post-anthropocentric futures. As Max Hollein, art historian and director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has said of Wurm, 'he has succeeded in conveying to a large audience, in a hugely suggestive way, the tragedy of its own social condition.' With the *Substitutes*, the absurd becomes a tool through which Wurm asks us, in his own words, to 'look at the world from a different perspective' and

take 'paradoxical angles' to imagine parallel realities and alternative ways of being.

Asserting his investigative approach to the concept of sculpture within art historical traditions, elsewhere in the exhibition Wurm uses clothes to build bodily forms in response to two canonical works of art: Donatello's *Penitent Magdalene* (1440) and Auguste Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1891–97). Wurm explains that with *Balzac* (2023) 'I wanted to create a figure where you cannot see a human being but you get this idea of a person' emerging from the piled clothes and designer bags. Titled following his observation that the sculpture evoked the semi-abstract monolith of Rodin's homage to the French novelist Honoré de Balzac, Wurm was inspired by the myth that the French sculptor soaked the writer's dressing gown in plaster to dress his monumental form.

Similarly, *Repentance (After Donatello)* (2023) emulates the folded robe that enshrouds the emaciated body of Mary Magdalene in the Italian Renaissance sculptor's wooden original. Rendered in painted aluminium, the cascade of pale-pink, knitted jumpers is finished with a pair of white trainers standing atop a bucket. As with the *Substitutes*, the two sculptures reimagine the human body as an absurd configuration of clothing, responding to the central issue of self-representation in contemporary society.

*I am interested in everyday life. All the materials surrounding me can be useful, and the objects and topics can be involved in contemporary society. My work speaks about the whole entity of a human being: the physical, the spiritual, the psychological, and the political. — Erwin Wurm*

Addressing another aspect of the human condition, the *Dreamers* and *Mind Bubbles* (both 2024) give form to psychological thought through bodily associations. In the *Dreamers*, realistic human limbs suspend oversized white pillows above them in a playful reference to the unconscious. 'Turning our reality upside down' through his absurd fusion of bodies and pillows, Wurm evokes the writing of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).

In turn, the *Mind Bubbles* place ovular forms atop spindly, cartoonish legs in anthropomorphic imaginings of the thought bubbles found in comic strips. Wurm describes them as ‘a symbol of an idea or a specific thought, which is not described’. Building upon his earlier *Hypnosis* series (2007–8) in which the potato-like forms have realistic human legs, the aluminium sculptures evoke conscious thought. They gesture to the cerebral aspect of his participatory works, in which he often asks individuals to reflect upon their own mental states or the theories of great philosophers as they perform a prescribed action.

These new series of works are presented alongside a group of the artist’s *One Minute Sculptures*, which epitomise his innovative approach to time-based, participatory sculpture. Begun in 1996–97, they consist of written or drawn instructions that are typically performed by individuals on a plinth for up to one minute. Often incorporating everyday objects, they transform the visitor from spectator into participant, destabilising traditional modes of engaging with art. Installed in Ely House, what Wurm describes as a ‘new chapter’ of the *One Minute Sculptures* marks a key evolution in the series. Abstract sculptural elements are introduced to each work, which remain present even when they are not activated by a participant. Giving the works new life outside the temporal duration of their performance, this development demonstrates Wurm’s enduring impetus towards artistic evolution, which he has sustained throughout his long and successful artmaking career.



Erwin Wurm, *Obey (One Minute Sculptures)*, 2023.  
Bronze, acrylic paint, broom, instruction drawing.  
164 x 53 x 30 cm (64.56 x 20.86 x 11.81 in).



Erwin Wurm, 2020. Photo: Michael Wurm

### **About the artist**

Erwin Wurm lives and works in Vienna and Limberg, Austria. He has twice participated in the Venice Biennale, representing Austria in 2017. Recent solo exhibitions have been held internationally at institutions including Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (2023–24); SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA (2023–24); Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2023); Suwon Museum of Art (2022); Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice (2022); Bratislava City Gallery (2022); Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (2022); Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna (2021); Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2020); Musée Cantini, Marseille (2019); K11 MUSEA, Hong Kong (2019); and Vancouver Art Gallery (2019), among others. In autumn 2024, a major exhibition of Wurm's work will open at the Albertina Modern, Vienna. Upcoming solo exhibitions will also take place at the Musée Correr, Venice; Museo Novecento, Florence; and Fosun Foundation, Shanghai.

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