

PINK STAGE  
17th CENTURY  
IN ABSTRACTION

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Australasian Art & Culture



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POINTED SHOE  
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17th CENTURY ?  
PASTEL COLOURS  
SLOPING  
FRANCE  
RUSSIA  
ITALY.

A VERY  
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# ERWIN WURM SHAPE SHIFTER

Philosophy sires an absurdist take on life in the sculptures of Austrian artist Erwin Wurm, from fat cars to thin houses to audiences instructed to turn themselves into an artwork.

FEATURE *by* STEVE DOW



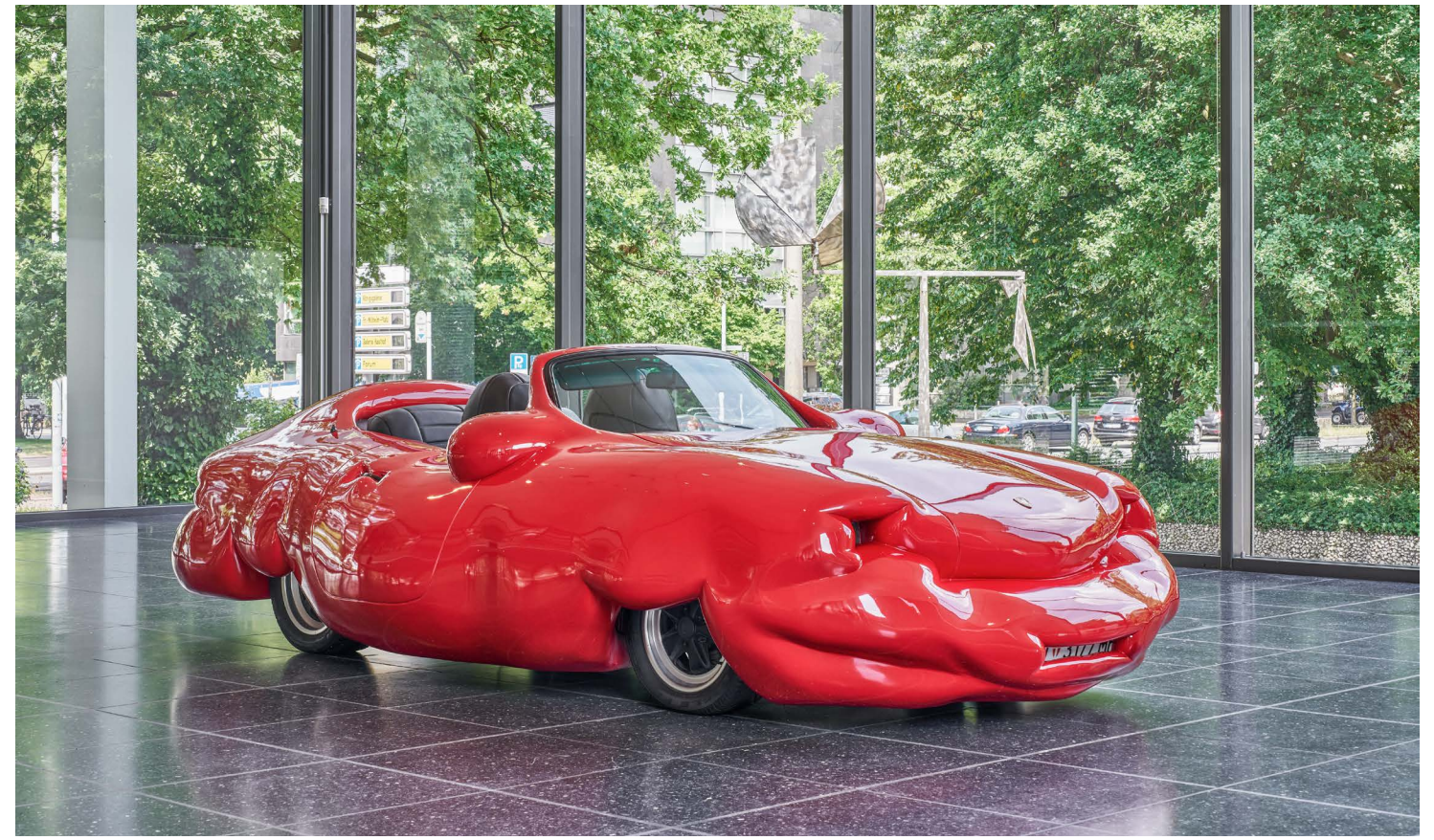
Sculpture was a forced marriage for Austrian artist Erwin Wurm. Enrolling in art school in Vienna as a young man, he wanted to be a painter, already dealing with the puzzlement of a policeman father and housewife mother with little interest in art. Forced into the course he would never have chosen proved to be both a lesson in the absurdity of life and a gift that helped him to see sculpture in the everyday. Now, Wurm's career-making sculptures of fat cars, thin houses and giant sausages may seem larger than life, but his ethos is grounded in examining human foibles and discomfort.

Consider, for instance, his famed *One Minute Sculptures*. Breaking the barrier between viewer and art, he issues props and instructions to members of the public, requesting they hold specific positions for a minute. "This came out of a tragic moment in my life," Wurm, a father of three, tells *VAULT* via video conference from his studio in a big 12<sup>th</sup>-century house in Lindberg, about an hour's drive from Vienna, where he also keeps an

apartment with his second wife, Elise, who works on his catalogue and website.

"I had a terrible divorce and my parents died. It was traumatic, and I was very down. I always had this idea I wanted to realise of short-living sculptures, [questioning] the notion of sculpture: if I stand straight and still, it's an action, but can it also be a sculpture [and if so] what do I have to do to transfer an action into a sculpture? What are the coordinates to realise this? I made many tries, and many didn't work out. I needed this private tragedy as a kick, in a way. Incredibly, it became a big success, which was a big surprise for me."

Wurm reads every day. Lately, it is the works of French writer Annie Ernaux and the late American novelist Philip Roth, who, Wurm remarks, wrote satirically about the indignities of age. The absurd humour in Wurm's work, however, is a byproduct of his philosophical engagement with Plato, Epicurus, Kant and Freud, among others. Plato's allegory of dysfunction in the leadership and a ship's crew, for instance, is an inspiration behind *Ship of Fools*



Top to bottom  
ERWIN WURM  
*Abstract Sculptures*  
(*Giant big, me ideal*), 2014  
bronze, polished, 300 kg  
298 x 133 x 91 cm  
Ed. 5 of 5

ERWIN WURM  
*Ship of fools (Just about virtues and vices in general)*  
(*One Minute Sculptures*), 2017  
mixed media, instruction drawings  
245 x 206 x 492 cm

Opposite  
ERWIN WURM  
*Fat Car (Convertible)*, 2005  
styrofoam, polyester, car  
130 x 469 x 239 cm  
Ed. 3 of 3 + 2 AP

ERWIN WURM  
*Narrow House*, 2010  
mixed media  
700 x 120 x 1600 cm

Page 26  
Left to right  
ERWIN WURM  
*Mind Bubble Standing*, 2024  
bronze, patina, 150kg  
190 x 100 x 50 cm  
Ed. 1 of 3 + 2 AP

ERWIN WURM  
*Mind Bubble Standing*  
*Small*, 2024  
bronze, patina; 46kg  
120 x 60 x 32 cm  
Ed. 1 of 5 + 2 AP

Courtesy the artist  
and Thaddaeus Ropac, London

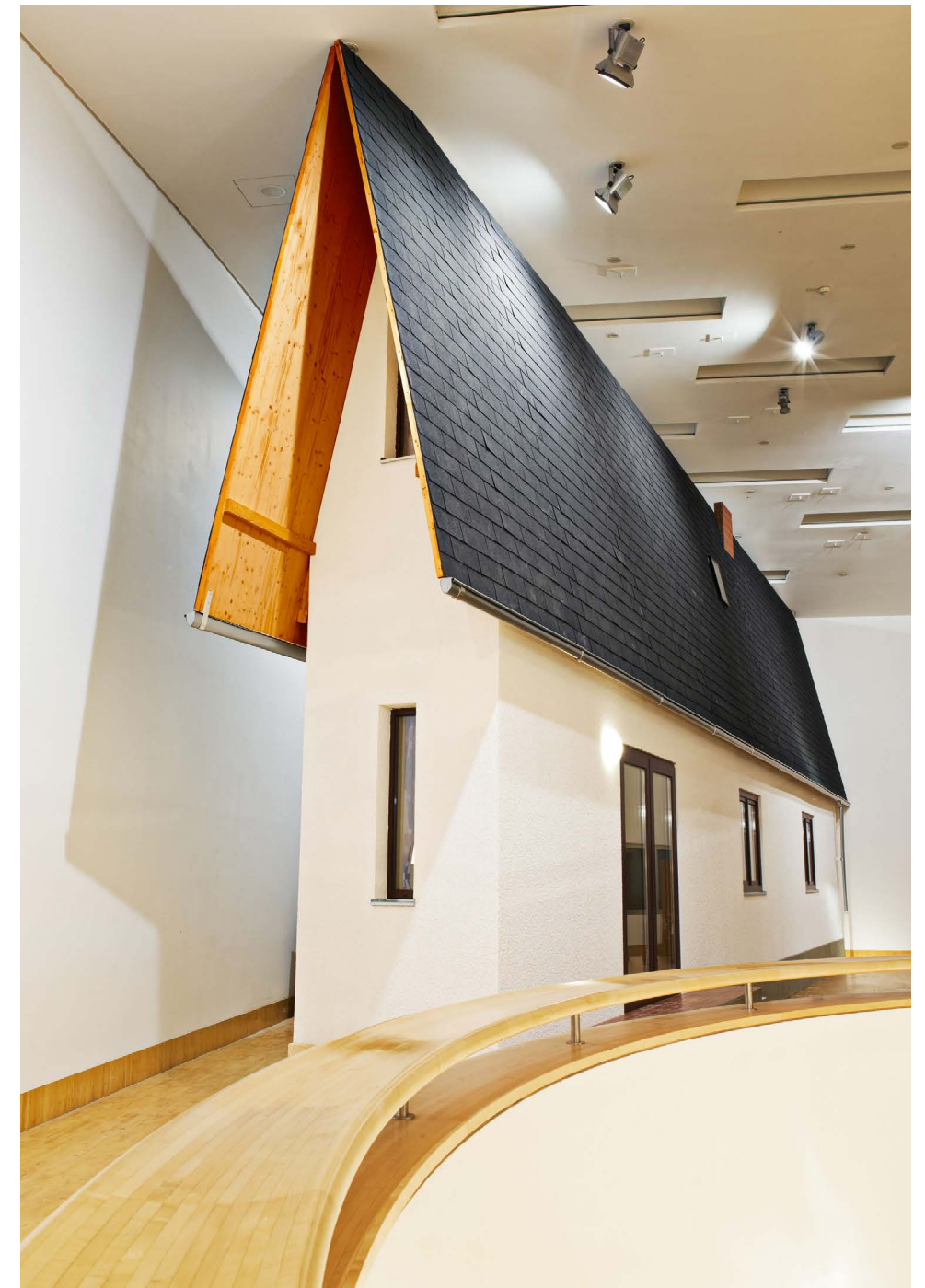
(2017), a work utilising an old cream and brown caravan, the type seen on Austrian and Australian roads alike in the 1960s and '70s.

"My parents, we travelled to Italy, and you had to drive slow in these long traffic jams, and it took hours. When you travel with a van, you take your world with you – we didn't [interact] with the Italian world, we didn't go there to eat. We took everything – the TV, the food – in the caravan with us and we lived in this bubble there. That's the interesting thing with the caravan," he laughs, "the only thing you leave behind is your shit."

I tell Wurm the first work I saw of his was the red *Fat Car* (2006), at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania, which I read as a commentary on conspicuous consumerism, although, ironically, a jigsaw puzzle of the red *Fat Car* could be bought in the MONA gift shop. Wurm laughs and says he wasn't aware of this merchandise. For him, the work was born of a discovery that he could make such a car look bloatedly human, an anthropomorphised cross between mechanics and biology.

On the other hand, his work *Narrow House*, in which people are invited to walk through a home constructed at uncomfortable angles, was a metaphor for limited bourgeois thinking, a critique of ideology and dogma. It was a reflection of his life, being born in Bruck an der Mur in 1954 and growing up in Graz.

"It's about narrow society, very much, because I grew up in the '50s and '60s in Austria, in Graz. It was a lovely hometown but we were still beaten at school by the teachers; it was tough, and everybody was body-shaming everybody. It didn't occur to me that this was wrong.





*“What can artists do? Artists are always misused in all the societies because society demands artists work in a certain direction. The aristocracy, the monarchy, the church, the so-called revolutionaries from the left and the right – everybody expects art to work in their kind of sense. The socialists, the communists, the fascists, all did the same. I believe that art should be free and not connected to all this political misuse and drama.”*



Installation view  
ERWIN WURM  
*Dignity*, 2021  
Ulrich Ghezzi,  
Salzburg, Austria  
Courtesy the artist  
and Thaddaeus  
Ropac, London





Top to bottom  
ERWIN WURM  
*Be The Police (One Minute Sculptures)*, 2024  
bronze, acrylic paint,  
police cap  
115 x 116 x 82 cm

ERWIN WURM  
*The Idiot I (One Minute Sculptures)*, 2024  
bronze, acrylic paint,  
chair by Carl Jacobs  
bronze 30 x 57 x 56 cm  
chair 78 x 58 x 46 cm

Opposite  
ERWIN WURM  
*Orange Step Small (Substitutes)*, 2024  
aluminium, acrylic paint  
100 x 30 x 25 cm

Courtesy the artist  
and Thaddaeus  
Ropac, London



This wasn't normal, but it was what the society produced. It was a post-War society, but still there were many Nazis. It was another time, very narrow-minded," Wurm explains.

"I took my parents' house as an inspiration and made it very narrow; immediately, you get claustrophobia. It's not only the house and the door but it's also the images, the books, even the smell of the house. I've showed the house in many places in the world, and everybody immediately says it's their parents' house."

As we speak, Austria is heading towards electing its first far-right government since World War II, part of a reactionary wave sweeping Europe. The United States has just inaugurated Donald Trump again as president, aided by tech titans whose social media sites promulgate lies and misinformation. I tell Wurm I feel that global reality has been distorted beyond satire, beyond absurdism.

Does he think we're heading into a dark age, I ask, and what can artists do about it? "You know, we live in an absurd and totally paradoxical time, but the world was always like that," he says. "Don't forget, there were the world wars. And how many other wars were there in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? We thought there was this big positive point, which is America, but maybe America was never as positive as we all thought ..."



"Now, of course, it's insane, but I think the world was always insane. I read recently parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the world is like this, circles that go down and down and deeper and deeper." Wurm spirals his index finger downwards. "But I think that's life, humankind ... Yes, what is happening now politically is not fun, not nice, but this will be overcome by something else, and I hope it's more positive."

"What can artists do? Artists are always misused in all societies because society demands that artists work in a certain direction. The aristocracy, the monarchy, the church, the so-called revolutionaries from the left and the right – everybody expects art to work in their kind of sense. The socialists, the communists, the fascists, all did the same. I believe that art should be free and not connected to all this political misuse and drama."

The absurdity of the artist seeking autonomy free of, say, art school course determinism and political didacticism is that they, the artist, might yet come up against the monolith of pithy institutional marketing. Wurm's 2025 retrospective at Vienna's Albertina Modern is his most comprehensive to date, with 180 pieces from his career spanning sculptures, drawings, videos and photographs, but the artist is bemused by the emphasis on age in the exhibition's title.

"They call it 'retrospective for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday' – that's ridiculous," says Wurm, who uses a personal trainer to do weight resistance work three times a week. "Who wants to be acknowledged by his age? But besides that, I love the show. We did it very well. A lot of works from different periods to the end – hopefully not the end," he corrects himself.

"Nobody feels like 'being 70'. In my brain, I have the feeling I'm 30. Of course, there's this self-reflection that tells me all the time, 'You're 70', but besides that, I enjoy life, I enjoy my work very much, I have great friends and family, and I would like that this goes on," he chuckles. "I'm not ready to depart yet." **V**

*Erwin Wurm: A 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Retrospective* continues at the Albertina Modern, Vienna until March 9, 2025.

Erwin Wurm is represented by Thaddaeus Ropac, London.  
albertina.at/en/albertina-modern  
ropac.net  
erwinwurm.com