

Made You Look

Human life animates *Erwin Wurm*.

How we move, fill space, and behave is all funneled through the Austrian artist's absurd sculptures and gestures transfixed in time. As a result, his critiques of bourgeois life are as sharp as they are entertaining.

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Erwin Wurm plays with volume, scale, and movement—the external metrics of sculpture—to make us think about how much we internally value our material stuff. Do these objects really represent our true selves? What if the proportions shifted a few degrees this way or that way? How would that look, and what would that say about us? He is a poet of fluctuation.

Handsome, well groomed, and chicly if casually well dressed, Wurm talks in a very clear and direct way about what he does. He serves as the chief of a 14-person art operation in the village of Limberg, Austria (a team that includes one of his sons and his wife). His works may have a sardonic edge at times, but Wurm is secretly a can-do enthusiast. Like any artist, at the end of the day, he simply wants more opportunities to make things.

At 72, the age at which many people would be enjoying a quiet grandfatherly era, the Vienna-based artist finds himself a darling of the fashion world, of all things. Designer Satoshi Kondo based Issey Miyake's entire Fall/Winter 2025 collection on his work and then tapped him to collaborate on that season's runway show at the Louvre, to smashing success. He has also collaborated with Hermès and Lanvin, and the creative team during Demna's Balenciaga tenure personally thanked him for inspiring the brand's shoe designs.

"The fashion industry uses me quite often," Wurm says from his Venice home. He officially represented his motherland at the Venice Biennale in 2017, but the reason he is there today is to finalize his show "Dreamers," on view through November at the Museo Fortuny, located in a 15th-century palazzo. Mariano Fortuny, who lived from 1871 to 1949, makes a great historical

predecessor for Wurm. The Spanish-born and French-educated designer and inventor became a star in Venice, where he received huge acclaim for his silk tunic dresses (he even made his own dyes) and found time to revolutionize theatrical lighting on the side. Fortuny's mode of invention with flair is something Wurm can relate to. After all, Wurm is an artist who made models of a future theoretical work and sold them; after he raised enough money, he bought a Porsche, took it to an auto specialist, and made it bulgingly weird but still painted perfectly. The result became the first installment of his "Fat Car" series, 2001–05. "Fortuny also made paintings—not such good paintings, but it doesn't matter," says Wurm, laughing slightly.

His Museo Fortuny exhibition features garments with no people in them, the stiff clothes filled out as if someone was inside, and pillow-like forms with legs sticking out, as if someone overslept and became one with the bedding, and then just walked out of the house. Typically Wurm casts his works in metal (aluminum and bronze are his go-tos) and then paints them, frequently a single color, giving them a solid, punchy effect that evokes mid-20th-century Minimalism and Abstraction. "I love color," he says. "It's the painter in me."

Some of the new works are installed in rooms replete with Old Master paintings, and others in large empty spaces of the palazzo. "Normally, we show in empty, white spaces," Wurm says. "Quite often I like to show things outside, in public spaces, because I like normal people to be involved in my work." But Museo Fortuny's rooms, stuffed with other artworks alongside his own, give him a jolt of pleasure. "This is crazy, and I like it," he says.







This year Wurm also transformed the entrance of the grand old Hotel Sacher in Vienna, famous for the dessert invented there, the *Sachertorte*. His project at the hotel, also on view until the end of November, features two of his newly commissioned “Bags” figures, in this case a bag and a briefcase, on either side of the main door. The luggage is anthropomorphized such that each piece has sprouted long, skinny legs, one of Wurm’s favorite gambits, with *Dancer* on one side and *Step Big* taking a cartoonishly large stride on the other.

The humor of his work is something Wurm has downplayed in the past. He seems to say he does not want the work to be *only* funny. “If a laugh is the only response, then it’s poor,” he tells me. There is a seriousness of purpose underlying everything he does. Given that he explicitly compares the Sacher figures to childhood drawings, it makes sense to look to his own upbringing in central Austria. “My father was a policeman and my mother was a very nice, loving housewife,” Wurm says. “Nobody was interested in art, literature, or music.” His work *Narrow House*, versions of which have been installed all over the world beginning in 2010, is based on his own family home. A classic Austrian dwelling turned into an unnaturally skinny form is a playful gag at first sight, but it is also explicitly a dry comment on the limited culture he experienced at home.

The creative mind always finds a way, though. He remembers being attracted to a Baroque picture frame he saw as a child, and how he really loved playing with the wooden Nativity figures at Christmas. His parents thought for a minute that he wanted to become a priest, but no: It was what he calls an “aesthetic, haptic interest” in the figures.

He started making tiny drawings as well as mini sculptures as a youth. “I had to share a room with my sister,” Wurm recalls. “She had a desk, and I had a desk, and I made these tiny little sculptures of silver wire with stones and things I found.”

Perhaps Wurm cherishes his opportunities so much now because he had to make a stand early in life to get onto this path. “I wanted to go to art school,” he recalls, “but my father had other plans for me. He wanted me to become a lawyer or a judge. He was very much against it, we were fighting, and doors were smashing.”

Wurm agreed to get a teaching degree as a safety measure, which he did, from the University of Graz, but he never used it. “My father thought I would forget about art,” Wurm says. But he did not and instead attended Vienna’s University of Applied Arts and Academy of Fine Arts, getting degrees from both in 1982. Wurm initially wanted to study painting but wasn’t accepted in that class, forcing him to pursue sculpture instead.

Arriving on the art scene at that time meant being heavily influenced by Minimalism and Conceptualism. Painting was about to be revived, but it was still seen as dead. One of Wurm’s first series hit the sweet spot for a frustrated painter showing in a world of high-concept installations: He made small balls of congealed oil paint and called them “Color Dumplings,” a series that continued from 1985 until 2023.

His big breakthrough came in the mid-1990s with the performance-inflected “One-Minute Sculptures,” the influence of which has lasted and deepened in the decades since. He had participants interact with an object, or objects, often standing on a plinth. The initial works began with a sweater, a chair, a piece of fruit, and they became more involved as they progressed, as with *Sit Straight, Hold Your Breath and Think About Spinoza*, from 1999, which is just what the title suggests. Like a Sol LeWitt installation, the works come with instructions on how to stage them.

Although the series necessarily has an ephemeral aspect, Wurm never calls his “One-Minute Sculptures” performance. Originally these works were documented with Polaroids and other cameras. Participants would get a Polaroid to take with them, and something in the process feels like it anticipated the age of TikToks, selfies, and the like. (“Come get ready with me as I embody a sculpture.”) “I was always interested in sculpture,” he notes. In a similar vein, his video works portray himself or others performing a wide array of movements; he says he was interested in how he had to “squeeze the movement, or slow down the movement” to get the piece right, his own version of choreography.

Wurm has always found a way to come back to the body as subject via metaphors that have an instantaneous, visual click. “A house is like a third skin,” he says. “We have the skin that protects us, then we have clothes, and then the housing that protects us from the outside conditions.” The movement of growth and shrinkage that he constantly alludes to is fundamentally about how we as people change, physically and otherwise.

His daily studio practice involves the classic artist routine of sketching ideas in a little book as a first step. “Good ideas knock on my door and say, *Hello, here we are*,” Wurm says of a surprisingly pleasant-sounding process. He adds, “Then I let them wait and rest.” As the works grow into models and take other next steps, he gets help from his team—they can do most everything in the studio except cast large pieces, a task that is outsourced—but he notes, “I am the only one who makes decisions.”

When I ask Wurm about his favorite artists, he cites Kerry James Marshall and Cecily Brown right away—notably, two painters. But his lodestar is the towering legend Pablo Picasso, most famous for painting but a frequent sculptor who worked into his nineties.

Wurm strives for a clear-eyed view of his own career. As he puts it, “Well, you know, I have made some bad work.” (He declined to specify which pieces are not up to snuff.) “But I’ve learned to handle it,” he adds. “I found my peace with it.” That peace came from doing something no one would recommend: comparing himself, at least in one way, to the man he calls a forever master.

“One day I went to Switzerland, to a private museum with these Picassos, but they were bad,” Wurm recalls, pausing to remember the amazement. “And it was a relief, because, *Okay, this master made some mistakes, too.*”

To put it in the terms of Wurm’s sculptures, you might say it was a day that his natural artist’s self-doubt narrowed slightly, and he gained a bit of perspective.

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