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Erwin Wurm: 'I once made a Fat Ferrari for a collector in Aspen'

The Austrian artist's bloated cars and puffed-up houses poke fun at consumer culture — but are curators scared of them offending gallery-goers?

Erwin Wurm at the Fortuny Museum in Venice, photographed for the FT by Matteo de Mayda © Matteo de Mayda

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Christian House

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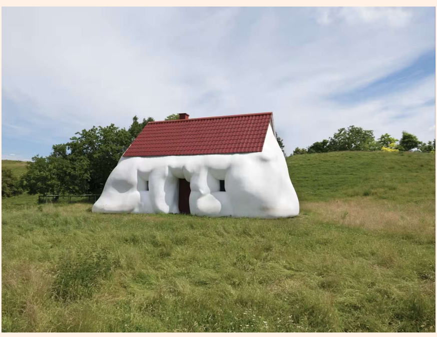
Erwin Wurm is telling me about the time his long-horned sheep showed him up in Brazil. "At the moment we have 18 sheep," says the Austrian artist whose playful, psychologically-charged sculptural works of bloated cars and houses, giant phallic pickles and eerily empty clothes critique consumer culture. He lives and works in a 12th-century estate in Limberg, a village in Lower Austria, where his herd of ewes and lambs lives inside "Fat House", his 2003 installation of a suburban home puffed up like a monumental marshmallow.

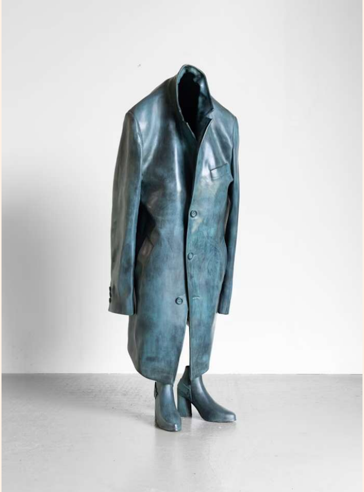
"Some years ago, I had a show in Brazil and 'Fat House' was sent over there," he says. "I flew to Rio de Janeiro and when I entered the work, I smelt my sheep. It was intensely embarrassing." With its combination of high art and absurdity, it's a very Wurm moment.



'Fat House' (2003) by Erwin Wurm © Erwin Wurm, Bildrecht Wien, 2026

He is speaking on a video call from Venice where he has been installing an exhibition at Museo Fortuny, a 15th-century palazzo that was once the home and studio of the Spanish fashion designer Mariano Fortuny. Even on screen, the 71-year-old artist is an affable presence — self-possessed, quietly amused — crisply dressed in a collarless, black Austrian Janker jacket. He looks more like a Habsburg grandee than a conceptual artist. But his impish smile belies the spruce look.

In *Dreamers*, a presentation timed to the 61st Venice Biennale, Wurm has filled the Gothic palace with works spanning three decades, ranging from photographs of his *One Minute Sculptures* from the 1990s — in which participants followed Wurm's instructions for ephemeral and ridiculous poses such as sitting on top of a door or wearing pens in ears — to recent sculptures such as "Rodin's Coat" (2023) that finds the French master reduced to a bronze of his unoccupied overcoat.



'Rodin's Coat' (2023), a bronze by Erwin Wurm © Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London

Erwin Wurm, 'Untitled (P21)', 2018/2019 from the artist's 'Dark' series © Erwin Wurm, Bildrecht, Wien 2026

The installation has been surprisingly calm, Wurm notes. When he showed in Venice in 2011, he found local technicians lacked precision. "I was very insistent on what we needed. And the guys said: 'Don't be so Austrian, be more Italian'."

He insists that Austrians do have a sense of humour. "Look at the writers like Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek. It's a very strange humour. It's always mean in a way." Historically, he says, the nation's psyche was squeezed between the twin powers of royalty and the Catholic church. Artists also explored these pinch points. "The expressionists, the actionists . . . they were more or less on the same theme: desperation between life and death and making fun of it. It's this dramatic laughter."

'Since the very beginning, I've been asking questions about what is a sculpture. What can it be? What does it mean to us?' — Erwin Wurm at the Museo Fortuny © Photographed for the FT by Matteo de Mayda

Installation view of the artist's work 'Compulsion' (2008) at his Museo Fortuny show © Matteo de Mayda

Wurm also has an exhibition of new works opening at Lehmann Maupin in New York, *Double Dream*, which includes new works in his *Substitutes* series of ghostlike bronze and aluminium garments: blue, green and pink jackets, suits and hoodies with no one inside.

"Here we have clothes without people, mostly in the normal scale but sometimes we enlarge things and sometimes we make them smaller. I'm very interested in changing scales," says Wurm. "It's a tool to address certain issues and notions about sculptural effects. Since the very beginning, I've been asking questions about what is a sculpture. What can it be? What does it mean to us?"

Wurm has a "personal voice that resonates globally", says David Maupin, who has been his gallerist for the past 16 years, adding that such wry works could only emerge from “an artist that comes from his type of background and experience”.

‘It’s Not Me, It’s Not You (Mind Bubbles)’ (2025)… © Markus Gradwohl

…and ‘Hoody I (Philosophers)’, 2023, both on view at the artist’s Lehmann Maupin show in New York © Markus Gradwohl

‘Double Dream’ at Lehmann Maupin in New York © Studio Kukla

That biographical source material — growing up in a confused, repressive postwar Austria — has fed a practice that explores cultural amnesia, body politics and commerce, all with a surreal and often colourful delivery. Wurm was born in Bruck an der Mur in 1954 and studied at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. His father — who disapproved of his son’s artistic ambitions — was a policeman and the embodiment of Austria’s complex past. Few periods in his country’s history were as dark as the second world war, when Austria was complicit in the persecution of its Jewish population. Wurm’s father was a Nazi who had been wounded in active service.

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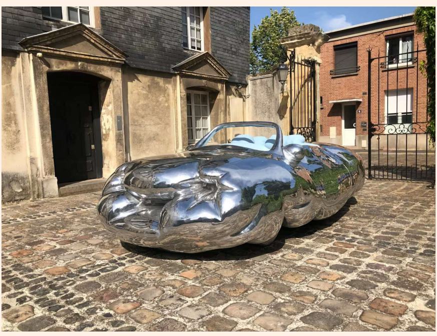
These subjects were not discussed during Wurm’s childhood. “This was before ’68. It was still a very narrow society. There were many Nazis hidden in other parties.” And there were other strange societal norms. “We were body-shaming each other every single day. This was normal. We were laughing about red-haired people or fat people or skinny people.” The common sense of that period is “poison today”, he says, but what is acceptable now might also be considered “incorrect or poison” in decades to come.


‘Fat Convertible’ (2019), one of Wurm’s series of ‘fat cars’ made by coating real cars in styrofoam and fibreglass, this one cast in aluminium © Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London

Wurm is interested in — and sensitive to — the vagaries of language and behaviour. His *Fat Cars* series — real cars swollen by coatings of styrofoam and fibreglass — are perhaps his most overt comments on the modern, largely male, obsession with size. “When we make a Porsche, I buy a Porsche,” he explains, adding that at least he can claim the car back against tax as a business expense. “I made a ‘Fat Ferrari’ for a collector in Aspen.” Would he make a “Fat President”? “No, I wouldn’t want to make my art dirty by using real politics.”

Wurm’s use of the word “fat” has drawn criticism and his *Fat Houses* and *Fat Cars* were left out of his 2023 Yorkshire Sculpture Park exhibition. “At the end of the show the director called me and said, ‘I’m very sorry, you were right. We should have shown them.’ But they were scared that the people — there are many obese people, obviously — that they would feel offended.” New works in the series will be titled “Big”.

We are all sculptures, claims Wurm. “When we gain weight, you and I, when we eat, that’s a basic sculptural thing to do. Changing volume. By changing volume, we change content, and that’s what I’ve always been dealing with. We have skin and we are dressed, which is our second skin.”

Installation view of ‘Dreamers’ at the Museo Fortuny in Venice © Matteo de Mayda for the FT

Those layers are also projections of identity, Wurm observes. “There’s a famous Swiss writer called Gottfried Keller who in the 19th century wrote a book called *Kleider machen Leute* which means ‘clothes make people’. And that’s the old story, everybody knows the whole fashion industry is about that. When we look at old Roman or Greek sculptures and we see these bronze bodies, very mighty and gigantic pieces like horses or goddesses or warriors, they are only defined by a very thin layer of bronze, they are empty inside. That’s a great synonym for us and our clothes.”

Both the Venice and New York exhibitions include recent works from his *Dreamers* series: anthropomorphic figures with pillows as heads which are both soothing and sinister. “I have a pillow with little legs standing on Forbes magazine and I call it ‘Nightmare’. I like this work a lot . . . I’m from Vienna, Sigmund Freud was from Vienna.”

The subconscious is clearly on his mind. Looking around him, he tells me how he is drawn to the comforting and hallucinatory qualities of Venice. “You land with the plane, you go to the boat, you step into the boat and all the weight of the world falls off,” he says. “It’s just a dreamland to me.”

‘Double Dream’ to June 6, lehmannmaupin.com; ‘Dreamers’ to May 6-November 22, fortuny.visitmuve.it

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