PLASTER

ERWIN WURM

NO LAUGHING MATTER

WRITER:
HARRIET LLOYD-SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHER:
STUART NIMMO

Right, let's get something straight: Erwin Wurm's work isn't funny. There is wit, sure, but it's just foreplay – a set-up. If you ever reach the punchline, it's more likely to crack a rib than tickle your tummy.

"When I grew up, many artists dealt with big questions through pathos, through heaviness. Pathos makes people small. I like to make people levitate." Wurm is speaking over the phone from his home-studio, a vast complex formed of a 12th-century castle in rural Limberg, Austria. For work this big, space is essential – as is solitude, and minimal interruption.

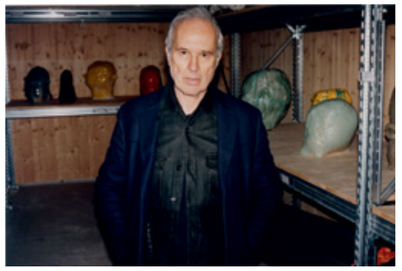
The artist has just returned from a fly-by trip to London, where he opened a show at Camden Arts Projects, a relatively new, indie space in a former 19th-century church. The set up is this: you walk in to find large plants dressed in human clothes. Some look ready for a day's white-collar work; others as if they've just dropped a pinger at the club. Leaves and branches protrude from armholes and skirts. There's a campness to them, something tropical, joyous and a bit silly. So far, so fun. Now Wurm can wind the tendrils tighter; it's story time. Among them is the Greek nymph Daphne, transformed into a laurel tree to escape the unwanted, love-doped pursuit of Apollo. Or perhaps there are tales of humanity's comi-tragic relationship with the plant kingdom; how we live with it, nurture it, survive only because of it, and in exchange, fuck it right up. Suddenly the plants aren't wearing the clothes – they're being suffocated by them. They're not dancing, they're writhing. "It's a metaphor of how we treat nature, other animals, and human beings," he says.

This is the Wurm effect: glance once and you'll just get a slapstick line – a fat house or candy-coloured car, kooky creatures wearing oversized clothes or luxury accessories; furniture wearing humans; a Volkswagen bus stuffed with hotdogs, a hot water bottle the size of a hallucination. Look twice, and you'll feel the sting.

Wurm is not a fan of the term 'funny'; he prefers 'absurd'. "Often people see humour as not smart or serious. And I'm dealing with serious problems. Humour is included, but it's not the telling of jokes. That's something else", he says. "I'm trying to reflect our time from a different angle. Some people could laugh, some people could have a tear in their eye."

Fat, of course, is a classic comic trope. For Wurm, it's the ultimate symbol of a *more more more* culture with an inability to know its own limits. Objects of status and success – a house, a car – now have a very human dilemma.

Until September, you'll find a polished aluminium version of Wurm's *Fat Convertible* outside the Berkeley Hotel in Knightsbridge. It's one of the most affluent parts of the world, where everything gleams and drips with branded, bloated wealth. If you're looking for the punchline, check the reflection.



Erwin Wurm photographed for *Plaster* at his studio-home in Limberg, Austria.

In 2026, Wurm's *Fat* sculptures hit differently, inextricable from current discourse surrounding fatness and thinness – how the volume of the body can dictate social status and personal worth, how we must fight against fat at all costs; suck it in, suck it out, strap it up, or in the Ozempic era, block it from entering us in the first place. Wurm notes his equal fascination with the growth aspirations of body builders, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, or those, like Michael Jackson, who modified their bodies to extremes. "In this culture, changing volume means changing content for humans. It becomes, all of a sudden, psychological, social, a question of identity," he says. "Gaining weight or losing weight is a sculptural notion."

Installation view, 'One Day Yes / One Day No' at Camden Arts Projects 2026. Photo by Deniz Guzel

Wurm originally wanted to be a painter, but when he applied to study painting at the Mozarteum University Salzburg in 1977, he was rejected and moved to the sculpture class. "It was a big drama for me," he recalls. "But after a while, I started to think, 'Okay, I'll take it as a challenge.'" He started to break down what sculpture was: mass, volume, skin, surface, time, material, wrestling with new ideas in the shadow of minimalism, conceptualism, Pop Art, and Fluxus. "I read once that if you want to be successful, you have to overcome your fathers."

You also have to overcome your haters, and for Wurm proposing art as a career, there were plenty, including his own father, a police detective who was not enamoured by the prospect. "Everybody was against me," he says. "Not my mum, she supported me. Everybody else found it ridiculous or insane, an idiotic choice for a life."

At art school, things were no more comforting. Wurm recalls one crit session led by Bazon Brock – critic, artist and key proponent of Fluxus. "The first pieces I brought, he destroyed me. He said: 'Throw everything away. It's bullshit.' This was important because I fought. Others stopped, they didn't want to go on with their studies. For me, it was great because I realised he takes me seriously, and he found what I was doing to be problematic. Some years later, he became one of my biggest supporters."

This was when Wurm realised that making art alone would never be enough. An artist had to make a structure, a system or foundation to bolster an idea – it had to be defensible.

One such concept is his *One Minute Sculptures*, in which Wurm collapses sculpture into a fleeting action. Everyday objects – chairs, sweaters, buckets – become awkward props that participants balance, wear, or lean against according to simple instructions. As a viewer, you move from congregation to stage, not always a comfortable transition. The Camden show includes one: *Organisation of Love*, for which two people are required. As outlined in the hand-written instructions, the two participants are to wedge the objects – in this case, a broom brush, a water bottle and some assorted cleaning products – between their bodies and hold. "As soon as you step on the pedestal, you change from a subject looking at the exhibition to an object being watched," says Wurm, who is rarely present for that part. His work is long done.

The *One Minute Sculptures* became successful very quickly. They hit the mainstream when the Red Hot Chilli Peppers cited the series as inspiration for the 2003 music video for *Can't Stop*. People wanted to book Wurm to make them for parties, club nights and concerts. "I always said no, because I wanted to have them strictly in the museum context. If I let go and fell into this trap, I would lose them, they would become shameless, stupid and empty. I only made 120 *One Minute Sculptures*, I could have made thousands. When I become weak, it's better to stop and try to do something else. That doesn't mean that I didn't make bad pieces and weak pieces, I did. You can have success, but you have to fight for it, and prove yourself every single day."

Success often brings with it attempts at commodification. Wurm gives an example: when he began taking photographs of his *One Minute Sculptures* to create some permanence from the ephemerality. They were shown in his gallery to a warm sales reception. "They called and said 'Let's do more. Can you do more? We want to show more!' So I made more, and then the other gallery called, and said 'can you do more?' He began to wonder if more was really more. "Do they not become weak?" he says.

For Wurm, staying grounded is essential. He mentions 16th-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who "wrote about world's questions by just writing about himself" – and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, who was still referencing the complex issues she had with her father in her work well into her nineties. Wurm still feels like a boy from the Austrian countryside, making work about what he knows, which like many of us is the absurdity of humanity – he's just found a more powerful means of articulating that than most ever do.

Coinciding with this year's biennale, Wurm is holding a major new show in Venice, where he and his wife recently bought and restored a house. "It feels like coming home," he says of the exhibition, curated by Elisabetta Barisoni and Cristina Da Roit and commissioned by the Municipality of Venice. It takes place at Museo Fortuny, the former home and atelier of Mariano Fortuny, a kind of 19th-century jack-of-all-creativity. Wurm will present works in dialogue with the vast collection of clothes and objects owned by Mariano and his wife Henriette Fortuny. "They had this incredible palazzo, which is a big mess with all his pieces. He [Mariano] was a very bad painter, but he made great dresses," says Wurm.

"First, they offered me the attic. I thought about it, but then I said 'no thank you very much, it's not good for my work!'," he laughs. "I thought they would say 'That's it then', but they said, 'Ok, then we'll offer you the entire house.' Apart from the attic, of course."

"THE ARTIST MUST FIGHT FOR CONTROL, FOR PERMANENCE, DEPTH, BUT ALSO, FOR THE STUFF THAT FORCES US TO SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY, AND LEVITATE."

The show is split over three large floors. The ground level will just be Wurm. On the first and second floors, he is tête-à-tête with the collection. Among the sculptures are *Repentance (After Donatello)* from 2023, which draws on *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1453–1455), a masterpiece of Early Renaissance realism. It's a harrowing reference, Mary's body beaten and emaciated from 30 days repenting in the desert. In Wurm's response, her body enshrouded in a cascade of pink jumpers, appears to float. There is majesty here, but from a different perspective, it could be viewed as another story of the human impact of excess. This time, it's devotion.

One Minute Sculptures: Psyche – As You Like It, 2024. Photo by Markus Gradwohl

If anyone should have the last word here, it's probably Democritus: "The animal needing something knows how much it needs, the man does not." In a culture of content feeds that are never truly fed, the artist must fight for control, for permanence, depth, but also, for the stuff that forces us to see the world differently, and levitate.

Erwin Wurm's exhibition, 'Dreamers', is at Museo Fortuny, Venice, from 6th May to 22nd November 2026.

Image on reverse:
Erwin Wurm, *Renault 25*, 1991
Mixed media
135 × 204 × 475 cm
© Erwin Wurm, ACS, 2026
Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi
Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul

PLASTER