

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Sculpting to His Own Beat

Swiss Artist Urs Fischer Defies Conventions; Palazzo Grassi's Monograph Survey

By ANDREW MCKIE



'Madame Fisscher, 1999-2000' by Urs Fischer.

Two weeks ago in Venice, you could have seen one of Jeff Koons's "Balloon Dog" statues inside the atrium of Palazzo Grassi, facing inward and with its tail pointed toward the doorway on the Grand Canal. This particular giant, highly polished, stainless-steel copy of the things fashioned by children's entertainers, is magenta, not that one could tell that at the time. The piece was swaddled in layers of paper and tape, as if it had received the attentions of Christo, the artist who wrapped the Pont Neuf in 1985, and the Reichstag a decade later.

This is one indication that preparations for a new exhibition are under way, one that the scaffolding and packing cases confirm. But these heavy wooden crates, unlike Christo's productions, are intended for unwrapping: stencilled along the side of them are the words "Mostra: MADAME FISSCHER."

This is the enigmatic title of a monograph exhibition bringing together some 30 works by Urs Fischer until July 15 (www.palazzograssi.it), the first solo show at the gallery to be devoted to a living artist, and which forms a sort of mini-retrospective of the Swiss sculptor's work since the late 1990s.



Matteo De Fina
Urs Fischer

The one exhibit already in place on the ground floor, a fortnight before the show opens, gives some sense of Mr. Fischer's work. From behind a pillar in one corner of the atrium can be seen emerging the hindquarters of a medium-sized black dog (a terrier, perhaps), the tail waving jauntily. I walk round to inspect the rest of it. But there is only the back half of the animal, and a wire leading to an electrical socket powering the tail-wagging mechanism.

It is playful—silly, almost—and funny; its unfinished state drawing attention both to its artificiality and the materials through which a mechanism has been fashioned to ape a living creature (convincingly, as long as you stand on the other side of the pillar). In these neo-Classical surroundings, it is certainly incongruous, yet it constitutes a response to Mr. Koons's work, a piece that depends on a polished, *finished*, artificiality. Which of these, the viewer may wonder, is more like a dog? Or a sculpture?

When the exhibition opens this weekend, this floor will be dominated by an even more pointed contrast between the formality of the gallery and the means by which Mr. Fischer's work is produced. The 38-year-old artist is erecting a full-sized replica of the studio in which he used to work in London (he now works in Brooklyn, New York, where he lives with his partner Cassandra MacLeod and their 2-year-old daughter Lotti) complete with, as he tells me later, "the walls, the holes, drawings pinned up, the tools, the trash, places where people have dropped s—..."

But at this point, none of that has been unpacked. Upstairs, on the *piano nobile*, where preparations are further along, there is a faint air of tension among the curators and assistants as they assemble the exhibits. Caroline Bourgeois, Palazzo Grassi's curator for this exhibition, is looking on anxiously as a group of handlers piece together "Spinoza Rhapsody," a huge, swooping length of what looks rather like a section of intestines. Each piece, which will be suspended from the ceiling on invisible threads, is being laboriously slotted together and propped up on wooden supports, according to a detailed plan, over which the handlers are constantly arguing. They will do this for the next two days.

Only two people look relaxed. One is Mr. Fischer himself. Casually clad in jeans, trainers and denim shirt, he suits his name very well; there is something definitely bear-like about his burly, heavily tattooed frame. He is supervising operations with wry detachment, occasionally intervening politely and patiently.



Stefan Altenburger / Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
'The Lock' (2007), on show at Palazzo Grassi in Venice

"In my opinion," he says, "those sections should cross there, and this piece needs to be further up towards the wall." People start sliding dustsheets gingerly, or grappling to keep the elevated sections upright. Something clatters to the floor. Ms. Bourgeois looks worried again.

The other calm person is François Pinault, whose foundation controls Palazzo Grassi, and from whose own spectacular collection many of its exhibits have been drawn. A slight, reserved figure who counts Gucci and the auction house Christie's among his numerous companies, Mr. Pinault headed ArtReview magazine's annual list of the 100 most powerful people in the contemporary art scene in 2006 and 2007. He asks courteously if I'm familiar with the artist's work.

He makes no mention of the minor detail, which I later discover, that Mr. Fischer has ripped out one of the internal walls of his Palazzo, letting the light crash in from the Grand Canal on the sculpture now being assembled like an extremely complicated 3D jigsaw. Possibly he feels he has got off lightly; for a show at the Gavin Brown gallery in Manhattan in 2007, Mr. Fischer dug a 2.5-meter hole in the ground with a jackhammer, without bothering to warn the owner.

With the assurance of a man used to flying by the seat of his pants and pushing things right up to deadline and who, when this show opens, will have four exhibitions running simultaneously (the others are in Los Angeles, Paris and Vienna), Mr. Fischer tells me about his more modest reconstruction plans here.

"Each space has its problems," he says. "In certain white cube places there's this idea of purity and focus you can concentrate on the work alone. But there can be something exclusive about that; this is an inclusive place, though of course in the other sense it's a very *exclusive* place."

This is the thinking behind installing the replica of his former studio. "In some way, the studio is also the anti-'Balloon Dog'—or really, anti any finished, hermetic sculpture," he says. "I just wanted it to fall in a way that I wasn't fighting the building."



*Stefan Altenburger / Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
'abC' (2007)*

The exhibits upstairs provide a more conventional setting for a survey of his other work. Mr. Fischer has used the opposing corridors of the piano nobile to play with symmetry; at the top of the staircase, two cast-iron sculptures of small birds perched upon chunks of rock hang by their necks from chains reaching up into the ornate ceiling. A sculpture of a ripped office chair is echoed on the left-hand side by "The Lock" (2007), one of his most successful and mysterious pieces, which comprises a New York subway seat and handrail, with a sports bag protruding from the wall above and, suspended between the two by hidden magnets, a pink-iced cake.

Elsewhere, there is a destroyed dressing table, and a series of dissolving forms as black as molten tarmacadam. Mr. Fischer, whose earlier work (as at last year's Biennale in Venice) has sometimes been made in candlewax and allowed to burn down, is interested in the process of decay and metamorphosis.

Mr. Fischer had relatively little formal training himself. "When I was young I took photographs, I was drawing, but I wanted to get out of Zurich and—I don't know why—I thought maybe Amsterdam would be a good place to be. Then I ran out of money," he says. "Someone told me about this place you could study and they would pay you, so I went there for maybe three months." He began to show his work, some in collaboration with his teacher, the German sculptor Georg Herold, and hasn't stopped since.

"You can have big thoughts, but maybe many small ones which undermine them. You are subversive to yourself—not for the sake of it, but because you can't help it," Mr. Fischer says. "Every narrative is welcome for all of us at all times. Some are very refined and some are very simple, but when you think about what's going on around us, you can either give up or throw up."

He struggles to explain the range of his work. "It's vast and endless; you can never know what's happening," he says. "You can focus and attempt to provide a description of life, or you can leave it be. I enjoy paradox. I enjoy that there is no clarity. I like things all open and parallel. But they're just things."

At last, he seizes upon the comparison he wants for his work. "Music is the best," he says. "One of the best sculptors of the '90s, in my opinion, is probably Dr. Dre: just how the rhythms are, the physicality of the way he spaced it out."

This sounds like an unexpected expression of Walter Pater's celebrated maxim that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," in that it unites subject and form. "Maybe, yeah," says Mr. Fischer. "Something which feels spatial, and three-dimensional and precise. Maybe it's just because I'm a sculptor."