

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Artist interview

Urs Fischer, the reluctant interviewee

On the eve of his Palazzo Grassi retrospective, the artist talks about how journalists have misinterpreted his work

By Jonathan Griffin



Left: Madame Fischer, 1999-2000. Above, Problem Painting, 2012

Urs Fischer draws on the humble stuff that surrounds him: fruit, cats, chairs and candles are recurring motifs in his work. Transformation and entropy are both themes and techniques; at last year's Venice Biennale, he received acclaim for three, large-scale candles in the forms of a chair, the artist Rudolf Stingel (a friend of Fischer) and a towering replica of Giambologna's marble *Rape of the Sabine Women*, each of which slowly melted during the exhibition.

Fischer achieved success early in his career, and despite leaving his native Switzerland for New York, his work is still most often compared to that of European artists such as Fischli and Weiss, Franz West, Dieter Roth and Georg Herold.

Despite his sculptural sensibility, Fischer trained as a photographer. Many of his works approach issues of mimesis and the limits of representation, such as his ongoing series of mirror boxes, onto which he prints high-resolution photographs of objects. Partial to grand gestures, he excavated the



floor of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, in 2007, leaving a gaping hole that he titled *You*.

This month, Fischer becomes the first artist to receive a solo retrospective at François Pinault's Palazzo Grassi, in Venice (see p87). He spoke to *The Art Newspaper* during "Beds and Problem Paintings" at the Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills—his first exhibition with the gallery.

The Art Newspaper: Your new series of silkscreens, "Problem Paintings", overlays Hollywood publicity shots with objects such as screws, nails, fruit and vegetables. Has Hollywood always been an influence?

Urs Fischer: I think you'd have to live in the forest not to have been influenced by Hollywood. I think the entertainment and advertising industries shape everybody these days. It's like the Catholic Church; Hollywood is like the Vatican. It shapes how you imagine the world to be, who you want to be, what's good, what's bad. So, to answer your question, no more than anybody else. **In these works, you're referring to a particular era of Hollywood's Golden Age.**

It's a specific way of sculpting an image of a person that is not personal; it's idealised. Actually, it's not about the faces in the background so much as the things in the foreground. My daughter comes in and she doesn't say: "Oh, that's Veronica Lake." She says: "Lemon! Mushroom! Salad!" The things in the foreground are much more universal than the things in the background. That's what people misunderstand because they look at the wrong layer of the painting.

Many people refer to you as a Swiss artist, but you've lived in the United States for a long time.

You're always a Swiss artist when you're born in Switzerland. But I don't know what a Swiss artist is. If I was to say I'm not a Swiss artist any more, then that would mean that I knew what a Swiss artist is, which is kind of mysterious to me.

Do you notice the influence of New York?

Yes, sure, everything influences me. It's good; I like that influence.

Is that related to the centrality of scale in your work?

No. I've made large-scale works since 1993. It has more to do with your mind and the radius of your action. Things that have to do with space have to do with space; things that have to do with what's in front of you, which is the radius of your shoulder and arm when you sit, are small. Then you can stand up and do this kind of thing [reaches out] so there's a more human-sized,

Untitled, 2011, at last year's Venice Biennale

direct thing. And that's what art is. To dig any deeper as to why someone uses big or small things, it doesn't matter, because ultimately everything can be equally efficient in your mind. The physical size of the work doesn't make it big or small. A good example is Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture of Hitler [*Him*, 2001], in a big room. Is it big or small? For me it's big, because it's not about the work, it's about the space around it that makes the work. So it's a very, very large work. **So why do so many of your works enlarge found objects?**

I like it. Artists just make art. There's nothing special to it. That's the art I do. I want to do this. You can dissect everything in every possible way, and the next day you can dissect it in any other different way. It's not like a car you can take apart. Partially, yes, but even your interest in dissecting art changes every year according to your mood, according to culture. What we do as artists is not to dissect; we do the assembling. So I just think: "I make this; that's what I do." I don't have to justify anything to anybody because when you do that, when you want those kinds of answers as somebody looking at art, you don't get shit out of it. You don't enjoy the stuff you see. The advantage of art is that it just does what it does. You look at this lemon, it's a lemon, that's it. There's nothing more to it.

Is technology important to you?

It's not even a question. People see I use computers, so they say I'm making computer art. It's not about making computer art; it's just using the new thing. Everybody uses it. Before, everybody had the *Yellow Pages*, and then, all of a sudden, everyone had laptops in their studios. You use all this stuff because it's normal. It's integrated in everything you do. It's the same in art. Sometimes you need it, sometimes you don't.

Your series of mirror boxes, in which photographs of an object from different angles are printed directly onto mirrored aluminium, seem to relate to 3D scanning processes.

You know what this is? You guys get it wrong. Have you ever carved something? In old-school carving, you have a view on each side of a block and you cut that out, and it basically makes the shape. This is what this is. It's just a minimal way of having a space that something occupies in the room without having it there. But it makes the space it occupies much more aggressive than with the real thing. I don't know if it's technical or not. Do you care if your fridge has a microchip in it or not? Not really.

People often comment on how diverse your oeuvre is; how one piece to the next is always a surprise.

There are people who say this and there are people who say: "Oh, it's the same again." I don't care. The only interesting thing about art is what one does over one's entire lifetime, and the chance that art can travel in time. Art only lives because of the excellence of a very few people in the past. That sets the outer perimeter of what is possible. There is so much stuff that doesn't weigh up, that has no ambition whatsoever; it kind of lays around and it works. It serves its purpose. But the space that's given to you—the size of the space—is defined by the things that have been made that open up something. I'm not talking about the genius of the artist; no way. I'm talking about the efficiency of certain works, in what they do to your perception of the world. And ultimately that's what it comes down to. For me, everything else is like a playground fight. When something inspires you, it really inspires you.

Do you feel as if you need to make your work resistant in some way to critical interpretation?

No. Critical interpretation is critical interpretation. Making art is making art. There is critical interpretation that is of the same ambition that I try to have with my work; then there is critical interpretation that is actually very lazy. The second one I don't care about—the first one is interesting.

Can you talk about the Palazzo Grassi show?

It's very different to this show at Gagolian. It's a lot of older works that I haven't seen for a long time: ten years, 12 years, in some cases. You make them and then they go; then they come back your way and you look at them.

How does it feel when you look at old work?

I just did this for my exhibition at the Kunsthalle Vienna. Some of it was good; some of it was, like, OK. But you've got to be cold-blooded and let it be. There's nothing you can do about it. You just take it, and you try to treat it nice.

And you're making some new work as well?

There is new stuff. It's a variety of things. But all in all, it's a much gentler show than this—in the palette, the size, the materiality, the atmosphere.

You're planning a film programme to run alongside the show.

Yes. It's just a whole bunch of films I like, and think are interesting. Some are good, some are bad.

Art films or cinema films?

Cinema films. Documentaries.

Does this return us to the influence of Hollywood on your work?

What, my liking films? Who doesn't like films? Give me a break!

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

My cat licking my ear. ■

□ "Madame Fisscher", Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 15 April-15 July

Biography



Born: 1973, Zurich

Lives and works: New York

Education: Schule für Gestaltung, Zurich

Selected solo shows: 2012

"Beds and Problem Paintings", Gagolian Gallery, Beverly Hills;

"Skinny Sunrise", Kunsthalle

Vienna **2011** "dngszjkdufiy

bxfjkglijkhtr kydkhgdghjkd"

(with Cassandra MacLeod),

Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New

York; "Urs Fischer and Georg

Herold", Modern Institute, Glasgow **2010** "Douglas

Sirk", Sadie Coles HQ, London; "Oscar the Grouch",

Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich,

Connecticut **2009** "Urs Fischer: Marguerite de Ponty",

New Museum, New York

Selected group shows: 2011 "ILLUMInazioni/

ILLUMInations", Venice Biennale; "Modern British

Sculpture", Royal Academy of Arts, London **2010** "The

New Décor", Hayward Gallery, London **2008** "Who's

Afraid of Jasper Johns?", Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York