

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Out There | Urs Fischer's Really Big Problems

By KEVIN MCGARRY



The artist Urs Fischer in his studio. Angela Kunicky, courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery

The artist Urs Fischer casts a continual spell, working all manner of materials into forms that allure the senses, the mind and of course, the collectors. Clever in every size, Fischer is a master of scale, which he carefully calibrates to tap the latent wonder, tension and comedy of any empty room, especially the big ones. After his inclusion in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, Fischer's first big splash was "You," for which he excavated the floor of Gavin Brown's Enterprise in the West Village, leaving a meditative crater ensconced by immaculate white walls. To get the full effect you really had to be there — and when it comes to spectacle, that's not a bad thing.

This spring, with three solo shows going up in the span of two months, Fischer is a master of multitasking. The first, "Skinny Sunrise," opened at the Kunsthalle Wien in February. The last, in April, is a mini-retrospective of more than 30 works called "Madame Fisscher." It will be the first solo exhibition to take place at François Pinault Foundation's Palazzo Grassi in Venice. Fischer was also the first artist to take over the entire new New Museum, in 2009, as well as Peter Brant's private foundation in Greenwich, Conn., in 2010. People seem to like to give him the keys to the place and see what happens.



Urs Fischer, "Problem Painting," 2011. Mats Nordman, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

I met Fischer while he was installing his other February show, at the Gagosian Gallery's Beverly Hills, Calif., outpost off Rodeo Drive. It's his first exhibition with the mega-dealer, and although the polished cement floors have not been supplanted by an open grave, the fact that a doorway and two steps have been built to join the north and south galleries (which ordinarily serve as discrete exhibition spaces) signifies an architectural commitment on the part of Fischer's newest dealer.

My first impression of the artist was of a guy who straddles Care Bear and mafioso, baby and bouncer. Doodled in tattoos, Fischer wore a light blue sweater the same hue as his eyes, and a ring the size a lesser gangster might kiss, made from a buffalo nickel cuff link. With jolly, sardonic, lilting Swiss-German annotation, the New York-based artist gave me a tour of the show.

"Here, lift it," he said, beginning in an alcove where there was what seemed to be a simple wooden table. With the effort of turning on a light switch, and using as many fingers, I raised the entire thing: it's a trick — balsa wood, fastidiously wrapped in scans of an actual wooden table somewhere. In action, the piece is motorized to vibrate slightly, and a Post-It on the surface eschews legibility. "It's basically photography" he concluded. Photography that stands on four legs.

Fischer was trained as a photographer and is recognized as a sculptor. Or should that be the other way around? He uses the terms not interchangeably but fluidly, hinting at a polarity between intangible image and terrestrial shape, which is manifest in his work. In the excesses of either, and perhaps more so in their deficits, there is an aura of beautiful impossibility, and this is the lifeblood of Fischer's formal jokes and experiments.



Urs Fischer, "Problem Painting," 2011. Mats Nordman, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

The works in the Gagosian show that emanate this poignancy best are two beds lifted from two stylistically disparate dreams. The larger one is the color of the artist's eyes and appears, quite viscerally, to be melting. The sculpture is actually hollow, it's a silicon skin cast from a real bed, distended by two-by-fours and other unnamed objects stuffed inside, like a proverbial bag of bones. The other one is also "not a bed" (in the surreal sense). It's more understated, white, neatly made, hard and synthetic. Dumped on top is a pile of static but still violent-looking rubble, or a casting of such, as this too is a clean, uniform mass. The juxtaposition of virginal sheets and barbaric stone may sound facile, but in person the psychological temperature of the space is transformed.

All this aside, this is the first time that Fischer has shown such a preponderance of paintings, a fact he described as somewhat nerve-wracking, anxious as he was about whether hanging things on walls would conjure "enough" for people. Collectively the gigantic silk screens of Old Hollywood head shots are called "Problem Paintings," which is the show's title. The "problem" is that an organic or inorganic object obstructs each visage. Beets, a wrench or a banana — each obstacle is quotidian, but at this size, for some are as large as a pony, they are immediately iconic.

Asked whether the combinations were selected on formal principles alone, Fischer quickly responded in the affirmative. But he also explained that there is a correlation between the thing and the face. Mostly adhering to gender binaries (which I understand were fairly well adhered to in Old Hollywood), each pairing either "pulls in" or "pushes out." You can guess which category the banana belongs in. What the "Problem Paintings" do not do, by design, is portray a middle. Born from the artist's frustration that so much visual creativity that happens on screens never gains dimensionality because it looks so bad when printed out, these are illustrations of monumental flatness. There may not be as much there as in his other works, but that may be part of the point.



Urs Fischer, "Problem Painting," 2012. Mats Nordman, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery



Urs Fischer, "Kratz," 2011. Mats Nordman, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery



Urs Fischer, "Untitled (Soft Bed)," 2011. Mats Nordman, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery