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Intoxicating Art: Erwin Wurm's "Drinking Sculptures" Will Get Viewers Sloshed at Miami's Bass Museum

By Julia Halperin

"For centuries, alcohol has played an important role in the art scene," says Austrian artist Erwin Wurm. It has certainly been integral to the success of champagne-fueled art fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach. So it's appropriate that the artist's latest series, "Drinking Sculptures," is getting its United States premiere at the Bass Museum of Art in a solo show, "Beauty Business," that opens the same day as the fair. The sculptures appear to be reconstructed vintage nightstands, credenzas, and closets that open to reveal bottles of liquor. But there's a catch: Wurm considers them complete only when the viewer is drunk.

Before the exhibition's opening, the artist will stock the sculptures with whatever liquor he chooses. (Extra bottles of alcohol will be stored in the back, just in case.) Museum guards will act as bartenders. It's unclear at this point whether visitors will be able to drink freely from the sculptures, or whether the Bass will hire performers to get drunk in the galleries instead. According to museum officials, it's all up to Wurm.

But why make an artwork that is, essentially, a bar? "Drinking was always an artistic tool," explains Wurm, pointing to artists like Martin Kippenberger and Jackson Pollock, who struggled with alcoholism. "I found it interesting to address this in a specific art piece."

In "Beauty Business," the "Drinking Sculptures" join other sculptural works, made specifically for the exhibition, that focus on the home or dwelling. "Erwin has always been fascinated with the domestic and how to change things up," says Dallas Contemporary director Peter Doroshenko, who curated the exhibition. After the show finishes up in Miami, it will travel to Dallas, where Doroshenko promises all museum visitors of proper drinking age will be able to imbibe. "I believe Texans might be able to hold their liquor a little better [than Floridans]," he says.

The works have already begun to cause a stir. When they made their world premiere in Antwerp's Middleheimmuseum in May, intoxicated visitors got so rowdy that some of the sculptures were damaged and a portion of the exhibition had to be closed. (The Bass needn't worry; the show still achieved record attendance, drawing an estimated 130,000 people.) Wurm was unfazed by the destruction. "It came with this expectation and a certain habit and change of personalities with alcohol," he says of the work. "I like this idea very much."