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Beauty Business: Erwin Wurm

By Katya Tylevich

Miami is a humid city, even in the last week of February. Twice, in that week, I go to see the excellent Erwin Wurm exhibition, "Beauty Business," at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach — the first time, I run from the outdoor parking to the entrance under a warm downpour; the second, I slog through a heavy, thick air, quite enjoying the feeling of moving through stopped time. No breeze to disturb or complicate the state of body in movement; even the hands on a watch tick with exhaustion. Though the Bass Museum is well air-conditioned inside, that sense of enveloping heat and the acute awareness of bodies and objects planted in the jelly of a petri dish are very much retained in Wurm's show. One of his works, *Mies van der Rohe – melting*, which is an acrylic sculpture of a Miesian high rise (roughly 1,1 metre tall) in a static pool of itself, speaks with particular clarity to this weighty sense of measured, stagnant collapse. Other works, which wrap invisible torsos in bronze jackets (*House I, House II*) or skeletal furniture in warm sweaters (*Architecture*), seem to be reviving cold bodies and cold design from hypothermia. Wurm stretches wool sweaters over the cold, white walls — *Knitted Wall II* (metal pink) and *Knitted Wall* (mental purple). And his *The bob* sculptures — large polystyrene and paint suggestions, which range in height from roughly 2 to 3 metres and crowd one room like strangers on a dance floor — invite the imagination to tuck itself behind the knee or into the warm belly button (or worse) of a Rubens nude for a cozy siesta. There are other symbols of heat: boiling blood pressure in Wurm's *Anger Sculptures*: maquette buildings that he's pulverized before casting into bronze and titling *Beat And Treat*.

There's the implication of getting red in the face (from shame, as well as alcohol), in a room full of *Performative drinking sculptures*, or custom wood furnishings with referential names (i.e. *Willem de Kooning dresser*) that allow users to hide their bottles and cans of the good stuff into various trap doors. The *Kippenberger Credenza*, in particular, demands an adroit drunkard, who can balance in the two "leg holes" provided for the camouflage of man in object. A video runs on a small TV in the room dedicated to these drinking sculptures — the TV shows well-dressed and lightly sauced crowds interacting with the sculptures and with their drinks as they ought to be; the video provides the (presumably) sober real-time viewer with the sense of the recorded evening's body heat, the sense of a party, the sense of elevated Blood Alcohol Contents. In that, of course, it underscores that viewer's relative isolation in the room, his or her sobriety, and assumed hesitation to "touch" the surrounding art.

Spanning two floors and multiple media, the works in Beauty Business share the very distinct touch and humour of a single artist — I would write that the works speak to each other, but perhaps it's more appropriate to observe how they wink to each other, talk behind one another's backs, tease the viewers, push them from one emotion to the next, and laugh aloud. But what is the joke being told, here? Is the punch line that we are as cold as our modern objects — heated only by the

temporary effects of booze, wool, rage, crowds, and the more imaginative reaches of our minds? That is pretty funny. On paper, *Beauty Business* is Wurm's "first cohesive focus on the home or dwelling."

As stated in the museum's description, *Beauty Business* is also the name of a comic book that the artist used to hide from his parents, in various locations of his childhood bedroom. The show shares with this anecdote a thrilling sense of deviance and hint-hint. The very different artworks in the show all seem to delight in a game of "I know something you don't know" — or, perhaps, hide and seek. Walls are hidden, shapes are hidden, booze is hidden, function is hidden, bulges are hidden, references are hidden — sometimes ... just as often names are dropped (Giacometti, Munch, Calvin Klein, Francis Bacon, Pollock, and many others), and abstract figures feel like the pay-off of a good peep show.

But like the alcohol concealed in Wurm's "drinking sculptures," the ideas embedded in this exhibition may also cause a sort of depressive hangover — despite being a very clever and humorous show, *Beauty Business* is also devastating. Those suggestive body parts are detached, after all, suggestive of warmth, but cold to the touch. Behind the outreached "arms" of a sweater is a hard dead end. Those bulging men's briefs on a pedestal (*Warehouse Anonymous*, and *Warehouse Calvin Klein*) are fabric, styrofoam and acrylic to the touch, despite what the mind may posit. The show is a series of monuments of emptiness, loneliness, fragility (collapsing buildings, destroyed maquettes), secrecy, shame, and frustration. Masterfully, deliberately, Wurm allows for his viewers to grab at the potent objects and concepts of *Beauty Business* and find that their fists return full of hot air.

On the first floor of the Bass Museum, just steps from Wurm's *Anger Sculptures* and *Little Big Earth House*, there is currently another show on display, a small one: the Egyptian Gallery. Its highlights are an Egyptian sarcophagus and mummy. The sarcophagus — a "coffin" without its corpse — is not unlike Wurm's bronze jackets, which shape themselves around air, in search of the body they're meant to house. The mummy — the preserved remains of a thirty-something-year old male — has its head and body wrapped in cloth. I think to Wurm's abstract wooden 'skeletons' wrapped in fabric (i.e. *Architecture, City Model*), and spend a long time staring at the familiar human form in front of me. The docent in the room, full of knowledge and nobody to share it with, clears his throat. "We covered the body so that it wouldn't scare children," he tells me. "Of course, all everybody wants to do now is pull the cover off."