

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The West Wing

Mammoth Nonlinear Retrospective Offers Blithely Illuminating Look At Celebrated Austrian Artist



Franz West's "The Ego And The Id"

Franz West--To Build a House You Start With the Roof: Work 1972-2008

Through Jan. 4 at the Baltimore Museum of Art

By Kate Noonan

It's not often that an exhibition of this magnitude comes to Baltimore, and rarer still when one is actually conceived here. *To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work 1972-2008* at the Baltimore Museum of Art is the first comprehensive survey of Austrian artist Franz West in the United States. The exhibition of 117 works spanning the course of four decades begins with three sculptures on display outside the museum and continues indoors in the five rooms of the Thalimer and May galleries. Moving in reverse chronological order, you see the full spectrum of West's diverse body of work, which continually blurs the lines between high and low, fine art and design, and high art and craft.

To Build a House You Start with the Roof, a title that references both West's own nonlinear way of thinking and the exhibition's backward order, was a collaborative effort

between BMA's senior curator of contemporary art, Darsie Alexander, and Franz West himself. Featuring large-scale sculptures, installations, collages, and West's bulbous, interactive sculptures known as adaptives, *House* is most impressive not for its comprehensive coverage but for the way in which it reveals so much about ourselves as viewers. Throughout *House* we are continually asked to move outside of our comfort zones, break the traditional boundaries between art and man, and interact with the work to become a part of the exhibition; how we do this, in turn, eloquently points out the idiosyncrasies of each of us as individuals.

West's soaring two-part sculpture, "The Ego and the Id," opens the exhibition and was the aspect with which the artist had the most involvement. The winding, neon lacquered aluminum sculpture nearly fills the entire opening gallery and was designed specifically for the space at the BMA. Here West immediately calls attention to the ways in which we interact with art physically and psychologically, particularly within the authority of the museum setting. Although labels for the artwork clearly indicate that the work is meant to be touched, viewers still approach it with trepidation: cautiously taking a seat on one of the sculpture's integrated perches. Now you take on a dual role, both as a viewer and as a living part of the artwork. The work, then, becomes equal parts sculpture, performance, and collage.

From "The Ego and the Id" you travel back in time to West's works from the past decade and the 1990s, including a number of illumination pieces that build upon ideas set forth in the neon-light works of Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman. You also see interactive furniture setups, and most interestingly a mirror-installation room accompanied by a collection of four adaptives. The adaptives, each an amorphous blob attached to a metal pole, rest precariously against the wall, waiting for you to pick them up. As you and others play with the sculptures, a small television broadcasts the reactions of museumgoers from previous exhibitions, adding another collagelike layer to the piece and providing encouragement to the most timid of viewers.

Gallery three offers further insight into the development of West's use of collage. These more traditional works on paper, hung salon-style, are some of West's most personal works, in which you literally see the hand--and in one case, the ear--of the artist, who smears paint across his clippings from magazines and newspapers. Here are instances in which you discern the direct result of West's conscious choices: images and articles he discovered, cut out, and affixed to paper.

Moving into gallery four witnesses a dramatic softening in both color palette and material; West uses considerably more papier-mâché as a sculptural medium. As melancholy music from a documentary video plays in the background, these delicately balanced sculptures become even more fragile, and carry with them a feeling of impermanence and decay--West's interpretation of the surrounding rubble from his childhood in postwar Vienna.

Softer still is gallery five, featuring two furniture pieces and several examples of West's earliest adaptives--now too delicate to touch, although they were originally intended to be worn--involving significantly more bizarre and personal actions than did his later social adaptives. Providing a stark contrast to the exhibition's Technicolor opener, West's final piece, "Large Lamps," brings the show back to the present decade. Massive floor lamps envelop the gallery in a soft, pale violet light, proving that sometimes a well-articulated whisper can be as powerful as a scream.