

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

NEW YORK  OBSERVER

GalleristNY

Bed Piece: Visiting Urs Fischer's New York Studio
Sarah Douglas



Photograph by Angela Kunicky, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

1. Sculpture

“I believe you start the day when you go to bed, not when you wake up,” said Urs Fischer. It was an unseasonably warm early February day, and the 39-year-old Swiss-born artist was in his studio in the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, wearing jeans and a pale blue sweater that mostly covered the tattoos that blanket his arms; around his neck he’d knotted, apparently for aesthetic effect, a silk scarf bearing a yellow and blue pattern. “I brush my teeth, I shave, I put clothes out, ready for the next day, I take a shower and I go to bed.”

Our conversation had turned to beds, because Mr. Fischer—who has made art in many different modes, from digging holes in floors to manufacturing reflective metal boxes with photographs of objects adhered to them to sculpting a tongue that, with the help of a motion detector, sticks out of the wall at viewers—had been making life-size sculptures of beds or, perhaps to put it better, sculptures based on beds, or based on things that, in some imagined world, happen to beds. One of these bed sculptures sat in the center of his studio. In its case, a bed appeared to have buckled under the weight of a load of

concrete in which boot prints were visible. The piece, which he referred to as *Kratz*, wasn't quite finished, he hastened to add as we stood over it. The concrete would need to look "more liquidy," he said, running his hands through his hair briskly—a gesture he made often that afternoon, as though it helped him to think—and directing at the piece an expression of vague consternation. He likes, he said, "the perversion of something that looks soft."

That bed sculpture, along with another one that was being cast at a foundry in Switzerland, was destined for his exhibition at Gagosian gallery in Beverly Hills, which opened last night. It is being shown along with Mr. Fischer's "Problem Paintings," large images of actors' and actresses' headshots over which some other, incongruous image has been superimposed: mostly fruits, vegetables, tools and metal pipes of various kinds. Mr. Fischer's cavernous studio bustled with activity; he runs a sizeable operation, and this spring promises to be a busy one for him. No sooner does his exhibition at Gagosian close in early April than he opens a much larger show—a survey of two decades of his work—at the Palazzo Grassi, French megacollector Francois Pinault's private museum in Venice.

Mr. Fischer has a sort of holistic understanding of what sculpture is. Early on in our studio visit, *The Observer* mentioned to him that, during a preview of a show last October at New York's Gavin Brown's Enterprise of his tables—ordinary tables emblazoned with images of everything from stuffed elephant toys to art dealers and artists—we had overheard him say to someone, about the plastic surgeons whose images decorated one table, "It's about sculpture." In his studio, he laughed at this, and nodded. "It's true," he said. "Plastic surgeons do sculpt. They sculpt appearance."

He talks about the medium with great zeal, but also as though it is a problem, or a puzzle he is attempting to work out. He admires sculptures of the Buddha—"sleeping Buddhas, standing Buddhas, leaning Buddhas, it's always this successful sculpture"—and pietàs—"you can make many pietàs and they will all be great in some way"—and his former studio assistant Darren Bader's current effort at MoMA PS1, which includes a sculpture made up of two burritos. He and a sculptor friend have a lifelong dream of going to Easter Island, to see the monumental figures there. He speaks of sculpture in terms of "problems of form." Lately he has been thinking that, historically, "There is so little sculpture that is successful. I mean, over thousands of years. You have times when it blossoms, and then it deteriorates into illustrations. There are small pockets in history when sculpture transcends decoration."

While he spoke, the objects in his studio began to take on a sculptural resonance, including the books that flank his computer. On one side, a worn paperback, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, in German. On the other, a stranger volume, *Marienerscheinungen in Kurhessen*, which resonates with his work, particularly the "Problem Paintings." The gallerist Toby Webster sent the small, 1969 hardcover to him as a gift. Its title translates, roughly, to "Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Kurhessen," a province of Germany, but it's a joke; the apparitions in question here are of a woman in a bent-over posture that reduces her to her very round, bare ass. The photographer and graphic designer Gunter Rambow had her pose in a variety of sites—verdant landscape, cluttered kitchen, modernist building. Mr. Fischer

paged through it, laughing, marveling, “There was no Photoshop, so this must have been just the guy, the camera.”

2. Beds

The sculptural quality of beds is undeniable: the snowdrift of an unmade bed, the slick, formal, slab-like quality of a made one. A bed is, de facto, a powerful image. The word can function as a noun, an intransitive verb, or, considerably more sexily, as a transitive verb. Life begins and ends in beds. They’re all but synecdoches for the noumenal world. Places of illness or of robust activity. What happens or doesn’t happen in them, sheets starched or sweat-drenched, has been and will continue to be the subject of innumerable discussions, contentious, fanciful, embellished, mournful, shameful, joyous, and so on, and so forth. Children jump on them. A whistle-stop tour of the bed in art might take us from Roman sarcophagi to *Madame Monet sur son lit de mort*; from Delacroix’s roiling Sardanapalus to Rauschenberg’s paint splattered wall-mounted mattress to Tracey Emin’s dishevelment, with lots (Titian’s *Danae*, Manet’s *Olympia*, Maurizio Cattelan’s twin mini Maurizio Cattelans snoozing side by side) in between. The self-righteous are fond of saying, “You’ve made your bed, now lie in it.” It so happens that a few days before visiting Mr. Fischer’s studio, this writer found herself in an argument about making or, as the case may be, not making the bed, one that culminated with what seemed at the time a clever formulation or, as the case may be, excuse: “Leave it to bed makers to make serviceable beds.”

The more elaborate of Mr. Fischer’s two life-size bed sculptures, the one being cast in Switzerland, has taken nearly a year to make, and a prodigious amount of labor. Its production began last spring, when Mr. Fischer bought a bed frame and mattress, and then custom-produced, himself, polyester sheets so that they could be arranged in a certain way. He then made a cast of that bed, sheets and all, and, from that, made what he calls a “skin” of silicone. After a lengthy process that involved casting and recasting individual parts, spackling, filling and sanding, he painted it in a range of blues and greys derived from photographs of stormy landscapes. Those colors, he reasoned, would make it be seen less as a bed, or as any particular thing, and more as “atmospheric. I want it to look soft, like it flies away.”

On his computer, he flashed through images of this bed sculpture, and spoke of it as the skin of a bed hanging in the air, dangling, or drifting this way and that. From certain angles, it didn’t look like a bed at all, but rather just a jumble of suggestive forms. He considers it to be the centerpiece of the Beverly Hills exhibition, “because of its lavishness,” he said. “It’s very baroque.”

He’s worked in this mode before, making life-size sculptures of mundane objects that appear to be melting. His massive exhibition at New York’s New Museum two years ago had a lavender piano that appeared to be melting and a droopy Pepto-pink lamppost. He’d always wanted to make a bed sculpture. “A piano is like a bed,” he said. “It’s something you put in a house and it has a sculptural function.”

His melting object sculptures—the piano, the lamppost—have been compared to Surrealism, but he doesn't see it. "I'm not so pro-Surrealist," he said, adding, "Maybe I'm more pro-Dalí than Surrealist because at least he seemed to have had fun." Instead, he brought up a 16th-century sculpture of St. Bartholomew in Milan's Duomo. "I feel more along these lines than a dogmatic Surrealism," he said. In that sculpture, the flayed saint, the surface of his body a patchwork of muscle and fascia—"more naked than naked," as Mr. Fischer described it—carries his skin thrown over his shoulder, an image that has always seemed, to this writer, suggestive of Yeats' description of an old man's skin as a "tattered coat upon a stick."

Mr. Fischer described this bed piece, which he'd been calling *Soft Bed*, as "a suspended skin, a suspended surface of something." He paused, thinking. Then resumed. "I don't know what it is," he said. "It will fly off. It has no gravity." As with his candle sculptures—often of human figures, they are meant to burn down to an amorphous mass of wax and be remade—the bed pieces may have a touch of the memento mori about them, a subtle nod to the big sleep; in Los Angeles, he said, *Soft Bed* might make people think of car wrecks.

3. Problems

At another station in the studio, three assistants were working on a "Problem," standing on top of a canvas and using a large, roller-like apparatus to place an image. On a wooden table nearby, fruits and vegetables in various stages of freshness were laid out. They are photographed in the studio; a black sheet separates off a photography studio. Mr. Fischer works by trial and error. "We'll photograph 20 vegetables," he said. "They all look shit, then one looks good. Some things work, some don't."

On the walls were completed "Problem Pictures," the most iconic of which is an actor apparently outfitted as Napoleon whose nose is obscured by beets, complete with their roots and stems. "I use these publicity stills because they look a certain way," Mr. Fischer said. "I'm happy you don't know who it is. It becomes like nobody. These images of people who pretend to be somebody, but they're nobody."

Cinematic imagery has played a role in Mr. Fischer's work before. Last year he painted Frankenstein's craggy visage, probably a still from *Bride*, interrupted by a strawberry. In one of his books, his large blob-like metal sculptures—there were several at the New Museum and a monumental one stands on the grounds of megacollector Peter Brant's foundation in Greenwich, Conn.—are superimposed onto street scenes, in place of monsters on the attack. In that book, these sculptures, which bear the greatly enlarged fingerprints of their creator, appear alongside and seem to grow out of the Mummy, and, again, Frankenstein, whose repetition implicates Frankenstein as a metaphor for sculpture itself, or perhaps Dr. Frankenstein as a metaphor for a sculptor: this is high-stakes bricolage, monster-making. But the latest crop of "Problem Pictures" seems apt for a Hollywood setting on Oscars weekend: the glossy visages of stars and starlets, interrupted. The "Problem Pictures" could, as a group, stand in for

the role of art in Tinseltown amidst all the glitz and glam of awards weekend. James Franco notwithstanding, visual artists still seem a bit of a sideshow in L.A., sometimes a nose-thumbing one. Produce would be one way to foil the paparazzi: Hey it's...wait...can you move that banana for a second so we can see *who it is*?

Mr. Fischer produced a small photograph of another "Problem Painting" he'd been working on. Like the rest, it has an image of an actress in the background, but, in place of a fruit or vegetable, there is a person in the foreground of this one, Mats, one of his studio assistants. "This is a photo of someone who is not pretending to be someone else," Mr. Fischer said. "He just is who he is." Before taking the photograph, he'd been telling Mats dirty jokes, and got him laughing, so this "Problem Painting" lacks a certain stern quality that the others have. "He wasn't in control of how he looks. It's the antidote to all of this."

4. Etc.

Mr. Fischer's last exhibition in Los Angeles, in 2007, with his looping-line sculptures and a life-size, melting chair, was at Regen Projects gallery, a more modest venue than Gagosian. In his studio, Mr. Fischer made allusions to the changing composition of his collector base, and the potential need to adapt to this. "The people that come [to your work], it changes," he said. "It changes the problems you have, and sometimes it's good to get work with new people who understand this world better."

The cast of characters invested in Mr. Fischer's work has indeed changed in the past few years. In May 2010, his well-received exhibition "Oscar the Grouch" opened at the foundation of Peter Brant, who is known to own some of the pieces that were on view at the 2009 New Museum show. The same week the Brant Foundation show opened, a 2007 Fischer, *The Grass Munchers*, the artist's arms and hands made out of cast aluminum, pigments and wax, sold at auction for \$902,500, way past its \$600,000 high estimate, and more than four times his previous record of \$144,400. In June 2010, the art industry newsletter the Baer Faxt reported that, while Gagosian didn't represent Mr. Fischer, he would do a show in Los Angeles. It was in November of that year that Mr. Fischer's work hit the million-dollar mark at auction, when his life-size candle sculpture in the shape of a woman, in an edition of three, sold at Sotheby's for \$1 million over a high estimate of \$600,000. It went to an anonymous buyer on the phone, but Larry Gagosian and Peter Brant were under bidders.

The following May, Mr. Fischer's monumental yellow teddy bear sculpture sold for his current auction record of \$6.8 million; the Warhol-collecting Mugrabi family consigned it to Christie's, having reportedly bought the piece from the auction house's owner, Mr. Pinault. Another of the bear sculptures is owned by hedge fund honcho Steve Cohen. According to a report on Artinfo by Judd Tully, last September, at the Haiti benefit auction organized by David Zwirner gallery and Christie's, it was former Christie's contemporary art head and now powerful private art advisor Philippe Ségalot who placed the winning bid on Mr Fischer's aluminum panel and silkscreen piece *Tomorrow* (2011), after competing with

Acquavella Galleries, dealer Christophe van de Weghe, and Christie's specialist Robert Manley. Mr. Ségalot is art advisor to Mr. Pinault.

And, come April, Mr. Fischer will have the distinction, with his "Madame Fisscher" show, which spans two decades, of being the first living artist to be the subject of a solo exhibition at Mr. Pinault's Palazzo Grassi museum. His first major museum outing since the New Museum in 2009, and his most significant one in Europe, it includes both pieces from Mr. Pinault's collection and loans from institutions and private collectors. The artist is looking forward to it. "Things can go through immense bureaucracies," he said. "At the Palazzo, they don't have those structures. People take care of things, things happen."

As for the Gagosian exhibition, for anyone who was watching and, as it were, reading closely back in fall 2009, Mr. Fischer's showing eventually at one of the 11 worldwide outposts of Gagosian gallery had an air of inexorability to it. In October 2009, on the occasion of Mr. Fischer's New Museum exhibition, *The New Yorker* magazine ran a profile of him by Calvin Tomkins. Discussing Mr. Fischer's 2007 artwork *You*, a giant hole dug in the floor of Gavin Brown's West Village gallery—it was purchased by Peter Brant and re-shown in the 2010 exhibition at the Brant Foundation—Mr. Tomkins included the parenthetical, "(Chris Burden had done something similar—and much larger—in 1986, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, with a piece called *Exposing the Foundation of a Museum*.)" For anyone on whom that "and much larger" was lost, the point was jackhammered home by a full-page ad that Gagosian took out in the Dec. 2009 issue of *Artforum* magazine, while Mr. Fischer's exhibition was still on view at the New Museum; it showed a photograph of Mr. Burden's 1986 piece, along with a message: "Chris Burden is represented by Gagosian Gallery."

While he appreciates Mr. Burden's work, Mr. Fischer said he doesn't see the comparison. "There are lots of holes that are not as profane as showing the foundation of the institution," he said in his studio. "I come from an emotional point of view, not from a didactic point of view." If *You* must be compared to another hole, he seems to prefer it be *Double Negative*, a 30-foot-wide, 50-foot-deep, 1,500-foot-long trench that Michael Heizer dug into the Nevada desert in 1969.

At the moment, there is much talk in the art world about the role of the megagallery, hoovering up artists from the smaller shops. But Mr. Fischer makes no apologies for the exigencies of the market, or for the decisions he's made about where to show his art, and he shows it at many places, including Gavin Brown in New York and now Gagosian in Los Angeles. He talks about "program galleries" and "dealers." "Art dealers are people who never built somebody up but they can do things very well," he said. "They can do things very discreetly."

"I need to find a good balance of everything," he added. "That's the way it is. The thing is, never pity a gallerist. They can always pick up another artist, if they are doing their job. As an artist, you have one artist."

Messages at the entrances to places are generally significant. In the *Inferno*, Dante is 35 years old, “halfway along our life’s path”—you might say he’s mid-career—when he finds himself in a dark wood, having lost his way. He encounters the poet Virgil, who leads him to the gate of Hell, which bears an inscription, “*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate*”—“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Above the door of Mr. Fischer’s Red Hook studio, there is a white awning, on which these words are written in thick black type: “If you do not have a plan for your life, someone else will.”