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Urs Fischer on Translating “YES” in Moscow

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*Urs Fischer's "Small Axe" (Installation view, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, 2016)
(Courtesy Garage Museum of Contemporary Art)*

To mark the one-year anniversary of its move into a permanent home in Gorky Park, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow has opened “Small Axe,” an exhibition by Urs Fischer.

Fischer is known for gigantic, drama-heavy works, like the 2007 “You,” in which he dug a crater in the floor of Gavin Brown’s Enterprise; his full-size wax-candle replica of Giambologna’s “Rape of the Sabine Women” at the Venice Biennale in 2011; and the aptly named 2004-2006 sculpture “Bread House,” which he constructed out of loaves for La Triennale di Milano. For the Garage show, he is operating in a somewhat less extravagant register. Scattered throughout the large and airy central gallery of the Rem Koolhaas-designed museum are 26 small bronze sculptures (all from 2016), some only three inches in height. By installing this suite of works alongside larger ones — like a nine-meter-long pen-scribble, a life-size wax-candle statue of a couple, and a series of silkscreens from 2011-2014 — the exhibition functions as a survey of Fischer’s range and vitality.

Outside in the museum’s courtyard sits the latest and largest iteration of “YES” (2011-), an ongoing project in which Fischer and his assistants collaborate with a team of local volunteers and passersby in the construction of a clay sculpture garden. That is where we spoke to the artist on the opening day of “Small Axe.”

This is the most recent iteration of “YES.” How have you found working on it here, in Moscow?

The first two or three times I did “YES,” it was just a day, so it was more like a situation — a weird explosion or something. We would work with the volunteers on it, and they would leave before the opening. So when people arrived, they saw this strange dead thing. Here in Moscow, on a good day, we’ve had two hundred kids making stuff — it’s the most lively, crazy thing. But as soon as they leave, it becomes Pompeii. The idea is to keep people going, so it doesn’t devolve into this post-apocalyptic scene.

I was looking at photographs from the past few days, and they’re almost indistinguishable from pictures of a summer camp. The feeling is really playful, definitely not post-apocalyptic.

I’ve been having moments where I almost felt like I’m a part of a tourist program or something. I’m standing here saying to myself, “Is it art? What’s my role in this?” [Laughs] I always thought about it as something closer to a Carl Andre piece — each individual object part of one work, undergoing transformations. This is the side I’m into. But all of a sudden I saw this other side, this summer camp side, and I’m like, Why not?

Does that change worry you?

No, not at all, I stay open to it. I don’t know what the work is yet! I’m feeling it out still.

A persistent theme in discussions of your work is scale. Inside the show, everything is much smaller, more intimate than the “YES” project, with its outsize chaos.

You could say it’s the public versus the private ... a public imagery and a private imagery. But the making of the two is fundamentally the same. Inside, with these small detailed sculptures, things are more refined, but it’s the same simple approach. Logically, you can be more playful with things on a small scale. If you do the same sculpture and it’s large, it becomes a statement. In smallness, you can be very whimsical, even stupid. [Laughs]

It’s interesting to contrast tone here with the one of your show at JTT last month, which had a similar premise to that of “YES” but was situated inside the gallery and seemed to be more about decomposition. The results were darker – even within that messiness and playfulness.

Well, that turned out darker than I thought it would. In the beginning, nobody knew if it was appropriate to touch the work. With people standing around it, it became very vulnerable, something they thought should be protected. It was produced with plasticene, so it changed the moment you touched it. It could be warped but also healed.

This show contains a candle sculpture that also decays over the course of the run but doesn’t give viewers that option to care for the material.

It’s one direction. With the candles, what I came to understand is that you switch orders from man-made to natural — of gravity, drop size. It’s natural order, like in a park, with a somewhat tailored outcome. You can control nature, but it makes what it makes and not what you make.

The work is a depiction of Yoyo and Bruno Bischofberger, the Swiss dealer-and-collector couple. It seems fitting to make a candle in the shape of collectors — a sculpture that can’t be kept.

Yeah, I think they don't like that, actually! [*Laughs*] They are obsessively immersed in art. It's absolutely crazy, like they want to absorb everything. Art collecting is hoarding — well, everything in an apartment is borderline hoarding beyond a bed, a chair, and a cup. But art collecting is extreme hoarding. I have this disposition, too. So, in some way, I thought that transforming their physical being was like the artwork taking over their physical existence.

You called the show "Small Axe," after the Bob Marley song. What's the big tree, to extend the analogy?

You can draw so many analogies out of it. I mean, I had this song in my head, and they said, "We need a title now!" [*Laughs*] That song is done in anger. Here, it's more of a nod to subversion. There's no big actions but small ones that chip away. Of course, you can make a more beautiful, more grand-looking show than this one. This show has some grand elements, but it always collapses back down into this other, smaller place — these incisions that, rather than a big conceptual gesture that's like one grand fuck-off statement, try to play and to give something a little more.