

Press Release

Erwin Wurm

Skins

2 March—23 April 2022
Opening 2 March 2022, 6pm—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris Marais
7, rue Debelleye, 75003 Paris



1. Erwin Wurm Studio

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2. Erwin Wurm, *Flat*, 2022

Two dimensionality, three dimensionality, mass, skin, surface, volume are important parts of my research on sculpture. Squeezed and flattened or reduced to a very thin form, my new works have a certain fragility, which I like: they become almost abstract.— Erwin Wurm

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Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais presents an exhibition of works by Austrian artist Erwin Wurm, featuring his most recent series of sculptures titled *Skin* and an exclusive look at the *Flat Sculptures*: the artist's first foray into painting.

Throughout his career, Wurm has sought to deconstruct sculpture, expanding its spatial and temporal dimensions as well as exploring questions of weight and volume. In *Skins*, the artist takes a new approach, focusing on the notion of surface and its function in holding and defining volume. 'As a sculptor, I'm interested in this idea of skin as a boundary,' declared Wurm in a 2014 interview with the *New York Times*. The *Flat Sculptures* and *Skin* works constitute the artist's most pointed exploration of the subject to date. As the economy of means of the sculptures on show contrasts with the visual saturation of the candy-coloured paintings, together the two series foreground the artist's dialectic approach to thinking sculpturally in two dimensions.



3. Erwin Wurm, *Melt*, 2021

Although Wurm is known today as a pioneering sculptor, as a student he had been more interested in painting. Admitted into the sculpture programme of Salzburg's Mozarteum University, rather than the painting course he had initially applied for, he began by asking himself the fundamental question of what makes a sculpture. This radical approach has defined the artist's practice for the past five decades, and it wasn't until the summer of 2021, during a stay in Greece with his friend, the Austrian painter and engraver Hans Weigand, that he started painting again. 'At first I thought it would just be a pastime for a few weeks,' Wurm stated in a recent interview with journalist Larissa Kikol. 'Then it intensified and now I paint all the time. It's like therapy. Unbelievable.'

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More abstract in appearance than his iconic sculptures of cars, houses and gherkins, the *Flat Sculptures*, as Wurm has named his paintings, are made up of words like 'stone', 'wurst', 'melt' or 'clay', which reference past series of works including the *Stone Sculptures*, *Fat Cars* and sausage-like *Abstract Sculptures*. The letters, which correspond to the titles of the paintings, seem, as the artist describes, 'to have been rolled flat and changed their form into amorphous structures.' Painted in various shades of yellow, pink and blue, together the works form a palette reminiscent of pale skin, forming a kind of membrane as the artist extends the planes of colour to cover the sides of the canvas.



4. Erwin Wurm, *Stone*, 2021

Wurm likens the process behind his *Flat Sculptures* to his early experiments with volume, in which he explored the consequences of making two-dimensional objects three-dimensional. His 1991 video *13 Pullover*, for example, featured his friend, Austrian artist Fabio Zolly, layering on thirteen jumpers, thereby altering his shape and rendering the flat garments three-dimensional, while at the same time causing them to lose their functionality. Similarly, the letters in his *Flat Sculptures* are stretched and squeezed to occupy the entire surface of the canvas. This makes them almost illegible save for the small portions of contrasting ground that appear between them, but allows them to acquire body and become almost tangible in the process.

If the letters in the *Flat Sculptures* are defined by interstitial spaces, in the *Skin* sculptures, Wurm turns the liminal surface that separates the volume of the body from that of the surrounding space into the subject of his work. Twisting around an invisible form, the sinewy slices of an absent, fully clothed body appear at once poetic, unnerving and absurd. Also known as 'thin sculptures', the works

are made from partial casts of live models, including the artist's son Michael and the actor and artist Lars Eiding, who are posed in the middle of mundane actions such as bending, lifting or holding things. The resulting moulds resemble after-images of the *One Minute Sculptures* for which Wurm became known in the early 1990s, in which he recorded participants performing simple actions with various everyday objects assigned by the artist.



5. Erwin Wurm, *Bending*, 2021

In both the *Skin* and *One Minute Sculptures*, the artist's relationship to his models, and particularly Eiding, himself a boundary-pushing performer who has long been a close collaborator of Wurm's, forms an important part of the work. The result of a lengthy casting process, the precarious-looking *Skin* sculptures seem almost comically frozen in time, the fruit of a joke between close friends. At the same time, suspended between presence and absence, they point to existential questions regarding our interaction with the world around us and the role of skin as the site for this encounter.

After two years of unprecedented isolation, many studies have highlighted the importance of touch in allowing us to make sense of the world around us. In *Skins*, Wurm highlights the function of surface as the connector between internal experience and external reality. At the same time, the artist credits both the *Flat Sculptures* and the *Skin* works with giving him a renewed sense of freedom and creativity in his own practice. 'I had arrived in a situation where it was a lot about instructions. There was always a finished plan that was executed. [...] That didn't take me anywhere, I didn't learn anything.' Together, the two series on show mark a return to a less programmatic, more instinctual way of working for the artist, who 'no longer wanted to stand aside like a conductor. I wanted to let myself be guided again. During the work, the form emerges.'



Portrait of Erwin Wurm

About the artist

Over the course of his career, Erwin Wurm has radically expanded conceptions of sculpture through his exploration of space and the human form. His works straddle abstraction and representation, showing familiar objects in a surprising and inventive way that prompts viewers to consider them in a new light. He often explores mundane, everyday decisions alongside existential questions in his works, focusing on the objects that help us cope with daily life and through which we ultimately define ourselves. These include the material objects that surround us – the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the food we eat and the homes we live in.

With his *One Minute Sculptures* – in which, using simple props, the viewer becomes the artwork for a limited time – Wurm erases the boundary between sculpture and viewer. The static presence of the sculpture is reversed, becoming instead a participatory process that incorporates the viewer's own body. The ephemerality of these works subverts the permanence of traditional sculpture, with 'one minute' denoting the brevity of the action rather than a literal timeframe. There is often a contemplative or philosophical dimension to the *One Minute Sculptures*, which act as catalysts for a moment of introspection by placing the viewer in an awkward or paradoxical relationship to the prescribed objects.

Wurm achieves a transformation in the opposite direction when objects or forms in his work assume distinctly human attributes. In his *Stone Sculptures* and *Tall Bags*, these anthropomorphised objects are perched on legs with characteristics or postures that evoke different personalities. He has also explored clothing as a sculptural theme – as a second skin, protective shell, outline, or the filling out of volume – in large-scale installations where architectural features are dressed in knitted pullovers. The artist views the bodily process of gaining or losing weight in sculptural terms as the addition or subtraction of material, and often creates illusions of growth or shrinkage, as in his *Fat Cars* or *Narrow House*. In recent ceramic works, Wurm has abstracted and isolated body parts such as ears, noses, hands or nipples to create surreal and suggestive forms.

Wurm lives and works in Vienna and Limberg, Austria. The artist has twice participated in the Venice Biennale: with his installation *Narrow House* at the Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti in 2011 and when he represented Austria in 2017. Recent solo museum exhibitions have been held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2020); Musée Cantini, Marseille (2019); K11 MUSEA, Hong Kong (2019); Vancouver Art Gallery (2019); Albertina Museum, Vienna (2018); 21er Haus at the Belvedere, Vienna (2017); Leopold Museum, Vienna (2017); Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo (2017); and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2016).

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1. Erwin Wurm Studio. *Schwer*, 2021. Acrylic and oil paint on canvas. 180 x 240 x 4.5 cm / *Lars, Arm Lifted*, 2020 . Acrylic resin, steel, paint . 213 x 18 x 50 cm / *Flat*, 2021. Acrylic and oil paint on canvas. 240 x 180 x 4.5 cm / *Gate*, 2021. Aluminium, paint . 150 x 58.5 x 34 cm © Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Wien 2022. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi. **2. Erwin Wurm, Flat**, 2022. Oil paint on canvas 100 x 80 x 4,5 cm (39,37 x 31,5 x 1,77 in) © Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Wien 2022. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi. **3. Erwin Wurm, Melt**, 2021. Acrylic and oil paint on canvas. 150 x 120 x 4,5 cm (59,06 x 47,24 x 1,77 in) © Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Wien 2022. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi. **4. Erwin Wurm, Stone**, 2021. Acrylic and oil paint on canvas. 120 x 150 x 4,5 cm (47,24 x 59,06 x 1,77 in) © Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Wien 2022. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi. **5. Erwin Wurm, Bending**, 2021. Aluminium, paint. 162 x 38 x 17 cm (63,78 x 14,96 x 6,69 in) © Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Wien 2022. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi. **6. Portrait of Erwin Wurm** © Michael Wurm
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