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DIEU DONNÉ LAB GRANT PROGRAM
PUBLICATION SERIES NO. 16

B. Wurtz

Works in Handmade Paper 2013-2015



Cannibal Designs: An Exercise in How to Make the World One's Own

by Jan Avgikos

What a difference the handmade paper makes. It expands the affective dimensions of B. Wurtz's art and tweaks it in ways that might be altogether new. The noisy mundane materials of the marketplace that are common in his art—the plastic bags, the bread wrappers, the mesh sacks, the stuff salvaged from the recycling bin and cleaned up to live another day in whimsical sculptures and wall pieces—are set in soft collision with deluxe handmade paper, which in and of itself is a powerful sensual and signifying presence. An ideal continuum of master craftsmanship, traditional materials and recipes, it manifests uniqueness at every turn—in the vagaries of deckled edges, pliant translucent depths, toothy surfaces, receptivity to color—all of which not only epitomize but guarantee authenticity and value.

It's miraculous that such beauty can be coaxed out of such humble natural fibers as abaca (derived from a type of banana tree found in the Philippines), linen and cotton. At the other end of the spectrum are Wurtz's "collectibles," none of which are in any way noteworthy, not withstanding the care and attention he bestows upon them. Even though it's one of his talents to find elegance in non-descript materials arranged just so, there's no way the plastic bags, clips, lids, wrappers and other so-called disposables can transcend themselves. That tension—between the rough and the refined—is always on display, however sublimated it may be by affective devices of humor, play, resourcefulness, conscientiousness—even sincerity.

Each of the series produced in collaboration with Dieu Donné, in one way or another, stages encounters of the most banal with the most seductive. The theatricality distilled from the repetition of this gesture can run high. Orchestrated with an exhilaratingly light touch and loads of hilarity, the sustained "let's party" pitch that animates so much of the work also contributes to a vague sense of delirium that tugs at the elevated mood. Thrown into happy flight paths generated by feel-good inventiveness, the insignificant materials recycled into the work aren't fully contained and can even function as obstacles that distract from carefree jubilation.

It was jarring at first to lay eyes on a series that features a posse of plainly plastic lids from Stonyfield





Yogurt containers (\$4.49) cocooned in one-of-a-kind papers made from abaca fibers (think the finest paper tea bags and you're close) whose layers resemble luxurious linings from wild milkweed pods. All that pearly evanescence suggests the air has literally thickened and slowed down, congealing around the mundane objects. We witness the capacity of handmade paper to absorb difference, the way an oyster smothers an irritant grain of sand. It enfolds and aestheticizes, but it doesn't necessarily silence the noise of logos and advertisements that are an indelible part of the materials Wurtz harvests from the marketplace. Despite the diaphanous veils that muffle the objects and forever fuse them to the paper surfaces, we can still discern the Stonyfield logo-image of a small family farm, a few free-range cows, and a lush meadow. Ah, the agrarian dream! In another series of wall-pieces, sets of plastic bags from whole-grain breads, together with their plastic closure clips, are neatly laminated onto sheets of delectable papers. Visually subdued but still legible, the images on these wrappers offer a similar slice of 19th century life built around an imaginary ideal consisting of hearth and home and our daily bread.

These and other marketplace souvenirs, rich in meta-data, come with built-in contents that are never totally tuned out. Rather, all the balancing acts that animate the art—intimations of weightlessness are frequent—could potentially cascade into precarity, threatening the nonchalance and gaiety with torrents of polemics on the industrial food complex, the mythologizing foisted on us by corporate advertising and other media flows that seek to broker our identities, the globalization of markets, the problems with plastic. It's tricky. Which way do you want to go?

All the rumbling strikes close to home given that the main topic of the entire ensemble of paper works produced at Dieu Donn e is food. It's one of the three basics Wurtz has previously identified as fundamental to his existence:

food, clothing, shelter. Adding just a little "oomph" of advocacy for the simple life to an untitled series, his own *FCS* logo is produced as a pictographic paper patch affixed to neatly pressed abaca bags that are suspended from paper-wrapped coat hangers in such a way as to resemble small sleeveless garments. Ranging widely from wall-pieces to free-standing, even suspended, sculptural groupings, the artworks reflect his design preferences for simplicity and playfulness—and, we might surmise, his own penchant for clean living.

Working with paper processes as a total novice meant everything was experimental and new, and in the land of pure discovery B. Wurtz is one happy guy. Despite the low buzz of critical components, his excitement is palpable and it permeates the art, with results that range from lyrical to downright messy.

Inspired by paper's infinite malleability and endless possibilities for mimicry, Wurtz creates a veritable jamboree of "food art." (He holds the record for most works produced during an artist residency.) He takes still life to new heights with an ethereal-looking chandelier ornamented with charming near-weightless fruits and vegetables fashioned from pliant pigmented papers. In another piece, the tissue-like kozo paper is shaped to masquerade as a harvest of dried garlic heads, whose rounded cloves shed their paper-like skins. Paper imitating another paper-like substance, one made by hand, one by nature (let's say) — it's a winking gesture suggestive of reflexive tendencies that surface throughout his art.

A super-size faux shopping bag—a facsimile of the brown paper bags available at super-market check-out counters—occasions another irrepressibly self-conscious moment. Wurtz's handmade paper version, sized to approximate his body height, is replete with arrays of logos and trademarks that pledge responsibility to the planet and to workers alike. Just like the "real" shopping bags, they



FACING PAGE: B. Wurtz in the Dieu Donn  studio with artistic collaborators Paul Wong and Lisa Switalski during his Lab Grant residency, 2013-2015.

ABOVE: *Untitled (7914)*, 2015
 Pigmented linen pulp paint on cast kozo with plastic bag, wire, and artist made wooden base.
 78 x 29 x 28 inches
 (198.1 x 73.1 x 71.1 cm)

exhort us to reuse, reduce, recycle and, in some sense, to resist! Just like its cousins out there in the real world, this bag wants to reassure us that everything is gonna be all right. If you've never noticed, there's lots of information encoded on those brown bags. Besides the usual advice to "Please Hold Both Handles"—which is a joke when the phrase is transplanted to Wurtz's faux big-boy bag—there's something else. Typically, there's a stamp on each bag that records the maker's name and date of production and a declaration that it was "made with pride." Ditto Wurtz's bag, which has its own maker's mark that reads "Made With Pride by B. Wurtz." There is no doubt concerning the pride Wurtz takes in his work. It seems noteworthy that he declares his sincerity precisely at a point that's open to doubt with respect to the actual brown shopping bags that circulate at food markets. Do we really believe that every bag—how many millions would that be?—is individually made with pride? That's way too much of a stretch – and for what? Do we have to be consumers and naïve at the same time? Wurtz has made one bag, not a million. We don't question his motives or his earnestness; but it doesn't go without notice that the juncture between belief and disbelief is where he puts a spotlight.

Another series of wall pieces features a cornucopia of pictures of vegetables, torn from the pages of colorful supermarket ad flyers and pressed into wet paper pulp in artful arrangements. As if picked from a global garden, each item of produce is identified by place of origin: Dominican eggplant, Mexican hot pepper, Jamaican pumpkin, Costa Rican white yams, Idaho potatoes. For the finishing touches, squirts and splats of pigmented paper pulp, like smoothies in motion, take aim at and make attempts to encircle the images of fetching fresh vegetables. Like loopy dance diagrams, waltzing all over the page, they deposit slurpy trails of blueberry, raspberry and periwinkle plenitude. The proposition is to "taste" color. The synesthesia is profound. There's delirium in these parts, and it points in the direction of an oceanic high.

Suspended, cantilevered, balanced, trailing, trembling, floating, flying – the chorus of artworks suggests that lift-off is about to occur. The buoyancy and animation, together with non-stop whimsy and inventiveness, translate to goofy energy (which is where the optimism comes in). A yogurt lid, tethered to a wall-piece by a long cord, is ready to roll. Mesh bags tied to tiny metal poles fly like tiny proud flags, fast and true. That the celebration is already underway, is born out by several small sculptures set on sturdy little wooden legs – some with brightly colored paper balls are arranged in small bowls, others feature the

mentioned mesh flags affixed to metal spindles. Like diminutive tabletop ornaments, they look as if they are ready for the party to begin.

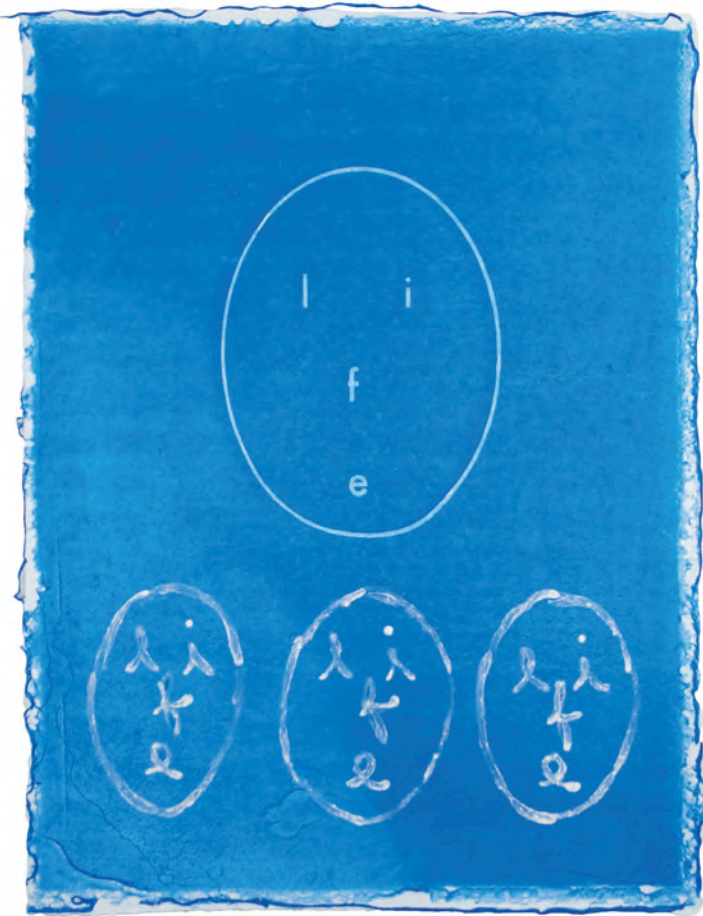
With so much emphasis on food, especially with the works that incorporate cultural artifacts, we must factor that the yogurt lids and bread wrappers are recycled from products consumed by Wurtz himself. Personal patterns of consumption are on view, however notational those aspects of the artistic process may be, and suggest a closeness that's sufficiently embodied as to border on conceptual carnality. There's plenty of personal ethos, too. Thrifty, down-to-earth, conscientious, informed—these are values that might characterize the ideal global citizen. Humble materials, emphasis on good clean fun, concerted attempts to keep everything pretty simple—add it all up and it's like a centering mantra with Baba Ram Dass:

Don't Worry, Be Happy.

We could call it positive energy. It's one possible path. The sentiment extends to a series that features

another of Wurtz's "logos to live by." In one after another monochromatic panel, a watermark spells out l-i-f-e, with the four letters arranged schematically in correspondence with the spatial logic of facial features—two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. It's a rudimentary exercise in pattern recognition, the first we learn as newborns. It stands as an apt metaphor for a disposition that percolates throughout the art and that ratifies a presence that is perpetually grounding itself. In effect, Wurtz does what we all do—he adapts products to suit his own needs. He celebrates hybridity, *mélange*, hotchpotch, impurity, contamination. That's how newness enters the world. We might think of it as reflecting the freedom of the individual to make his or her own way.

Jan Avgikos is an art critic and historian who lives and works in New York City and the Hudson Valley.



Untitled (7820), 2013
Watermarked, pigmented abaca with linen pulp
paint on cotton base sheet
24 x 18 inches
(61 x 45.7 cm)



Untitled (7866), 2013
Watermarked, pigmented abaca with linen pulp
paint on cotton base sheet
24 x 18 inches
(61 x 45.7 cm)

Exhibition

B. Wurtz

Works in Handmade Paper 2013-2015

April 30–June 6, 2015

About the artist

B. Wurtz was born in Pasadena, California and since 1985 has lived and worked in New York City. He received a BA from the University of California at Berkeley in 1970 and an MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 1980. Recent solo exhibitions include Metro Pictures, New York; Kate MacGarry, London; Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin; Maisterravalbuena, Madrid; White Flag Projects, St. Louis; Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany; and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut. Wurtz's work has been included in the recent group exhibitions *Displayed* (curated by Matthew Higgs) at Anton Kern Gallery, New York; *Jim Isermann/B. Wurtz* at Mary Boone Gallery, New York; *Stay in Love* (curated by Chris Sharp) at Laurel Gitlen & Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York; *Alexandre da Cunha, Michael Rey, Michael Williams, B. Wurtz* at Office Baroque in Antwerp, Belgium; and *Prague Biennial* in the Czech Republic. A solo museum exhibition with publication will take place in 2015 at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, England.

About Dieu Donn 

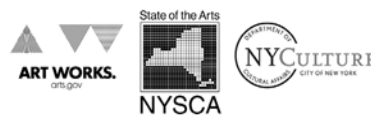
Dieu Donn  is the world's leading cultural institution dedicated to serving established and emerging artists through the collaborative creation of contemporary art using the process of hand papermaking. The Dieu Donn  gallery is open to the public Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–6pm and Saturday 12–6pm or by appointment.

About Lab Grant

The Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn . Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past and current participants in the program include Polly Apfelbaum, Robert Cottingham, E.V. Day, Melvin Edwards, Tony Fitzpatrick, Ann Hamilton, Jane Hammond, Arturo Herrera, Jim Hodges, Mel Kendrick, Jon Kessler, Glenn Ligon, Suzanne McClelland, Dorteia Rockburne, Kate Shepherd, James Siena, Jessica Stockholder, Do Ho Suh, and Ursula von Rydingsvard.

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Lisa Switalski, *Studio Collaborator*
Paul Wong, *Artistic Director*

This is issue number 16 of the Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program publication series documenting the residency program for mid-career artists.

Images

FRONT COVER: *Untitled (7852)*, 2014
Pigmented abaca on wire hanger with stenciled linen on pigmented abaca.
28 x 18 inches
(71.1 x 45.7 cm)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: *Untitled (7838)*, 2015
Pigmented cotton on styrofoam objects with found plastic container and wire on artist made wooden base.
22 x 7 1/4 x 7 inches
(55.9 x 19.1 x 17.8 cm)

PAGE 3 TOP: *Untitled (7873)*, 2013
Plastic bags and bread clips on pigmented cotton base sheet with linen overlay.
30 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches
(71.1 x 45.7 cm)

PAGE 3 BOTTOM: *Untitled (7905)*, 2013
Linen pulp paint, collaged yogurt lids and newsprint on cotton base sheet with linen overlay, cast cotton yogurt lid, and string.
38 1/2 x 22 1/4 inches
(97.8 x 56.2 cm)

BACK COVER: *Untitled (7913)*, 2015
Cast kozo with string on wire and found wooden commercial chopping board.
10 1/2 x 13 x 5 1/2 inches
(26.7 x 33 x 14 cm)



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