

Franz West, Beyond the Looking Glass

By Blake Gopnik

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, October 23, 2008; C01

BALTIMORE -- It's every art lover's dream. (Or maybe nightmare.) You open your eyes, and you're suddenly *in* a work of art. You're surrounded by melting clocks on trees, Dali-style, or you're walking down an empty de Chirico street to nowhere. Or worse yet, you're inside the fractured world of a de Kooning or a Francis Bacon.

That's the effect you get if you spend enough time -- even wide awake and drug-free -- with the art of Franz West. West (pronounced "vest") is a 61-year-old sculptor from Vienna whose influence has been building for several decades now. His first big American survey, titled "Franz West: To Build a House You Start With the Roof," opened earlier this month at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Encounter a few Wests here and there -- there were some at the Hirshhorn in 2006 -- and they seem good enough: funky, expressionist blobs, sort of in the spirit of the melted-slag sculptures that Jean Dubuffet pioneered in the 1950s, or giant forms, painted kindergarten colors, that could be Noguchis gone wrong.

See a whole show of Wests, however, and you realize that those blobs aren't really the art, at all. It takes another critical component to complete them: you.

West's sculptures are like theatrical props, the gallery is the stage they decorate, and you're on set as the star of the production.

That's most obviously true of the "Adaptives" that first got West noticed, back in the 1970s. Those are strange, white-plaster forms that look almost like guano-covered

scepters or walking sticks or ruffs. West sets them out in the gallery alongside "Please Touch" signs, asking us to wear, carry or play with them, as we see fit. They're meant to cross a museum's normal barriers between art and audience, pushing us beyond a passive gaze.

But the other day in Baltimore, while visitors seemed intrigued by the idea of art you can fiddle with, mostly they just picked pieces up and put them down again. West's "Adaptives" are *bits* of art that for once enter our world -- then fall flat once they're there. Things really start to heat up in West's work when the art gets us to enter its world. That's what curator Darsie Alexander has made happen in this survey. (It's her last show in these parts. Olga Viso, former director of the Hirshhorn Museum and now head of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, has stolen Alexander away as her chief curator.)

A *great* example is a 1999 piece titled "2625." It consists of two very simple chairs made by West, with legs of steel rebar and seats and backs of gloppy white resin, facing each other from either end of a very low plinth that's four feet by eight. Between them, an 18-inch white cube hangs on a wire from the ceiling. Look at the piece, and it feels like a somewhat peculiar work of installation art. Climb *into* the piece, by sitting on one of its chairs, and all of a sudden your relationship to art has changed. You've gone through the looking glass, to a place where there are works of art that include living people. Lewis Carroll gave *us* talking chess pieces and playing-card gardeners. West gives us us, as sculptural elements.

And here's the even stranger thing. Because you can't actually see yourself as you sit in this West, you end up being two places at once. You're in the work, as a novel art supply. But in your mind, as you think about what the piece must look like now that it has been completed with a human form -- yours, as it happens -- you're also outside it, as a traditional observer, in a sort of out-of-body experience.

Another work, hung on a wall nearby, makes that point even more strongly. It consists of a coarsely hacked wood slab, painted pink, with a hook holding a rubber bathing cap you're invited to put on.

Looking at the piece in Baltimore, it *seemed* like standard "participatory art," in the 40-year tradition of such stuff. (That art played a big part in the avant-garde in 1960s Vienna. Its "actionist" happenings had a huge influence on West when he was young.) But once I squeezed the tiny cap onto my head, I realized something strange was going on: I couldn't see the fool I was making of myself as I became the work of art. (Don't bother Googling -- no one was taking pictures.) I could only imagine it. Which meant that it felt very much like one of those dreams where things are happening to you, but you're also outside yourself watching them happen.

There is definitely a dreamlike quality to West's art, and to this whole show. It's got a surrealist tinge. But the fact that we're inside the dream gives it heft that classic 1930s surrealism didn't always have. You had to imagine yourself into the little sculpted worlds of Alberto Giacometti: locked in a twig palace with an armless lady, or strolling across a game-board landscape that's also a graveyard. In West, there's no imagining. You're there, perched in a scrap-metal chair in a strange, two-walled living room where a cryptic collage hangs to your right and an upended Giacometti nose sits on a sideboard to your left.

West takes the potential of surrealism and brings it to life, which also helps to bring it down to earth. Where Salvador Dali's surrealism can feel arch, like a stagey science-fiction conceit, West's version, for all its theatricality, is right there for us to feel.

Try sitting on a kind of toadstool that sprouts from the bottom of West's 20-foot-tall loop of dented metal ducting, enameled shocking pink. (The piece was made just for the Baltimore show.) You're a tiny figure in a dream, but you're also full-size you, and wide awake. No one's asking you to play a surrealist game of let's pretend.

Still, I don't think anything West makes could work without the surrealist precedent -- without a whole bunch of artistic precedents he's playing with. That's because with West, we're not entering any old alternate universe. We're entering the alternate universe already set up in other works of art. That explains why, when West's works are taken alone, they can look derivative of people like Dubuffet. And why those derivations seem absolutely necessary, once a survey like this lets you get what's happening across his whole output. After all, if West's "props" didn't look like earlier works of sculpture, how would we know the stage he has set is meant to put us inside art?

The Giacometti shapes and surfaces in West's papier-mache objects are clues that tell us what is going on. So are the found objects West incorporates into his sculptures; they call up memories of the found objects in works by Picasso or Jean Tinguely, even by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Same goes for the 1950s-style, Hans Arp-y biomorphs that West favors, including one huge kidney shape that West has covered in classic Jackson Pollock splashes. West gives us objects of almost archetypal artiness -- which makes them the perfect props for his theater of art.

Even West's welded-rebar chairs and sofas, which have lately become some of his best-known and most popular objects, make more sense as props than as independent works of art or design. As art, they are one-liners: "Look at me, I can be fine art and furniture at the same time." (There's a whole movement in contemporary art that depends on that conceit. West's chairs are often grouped with it.) As design, they're simply stale: attractive enough, but based on an idea of junk-built modernism that's not very fresh. As props, however, they work wonders: They're just peculiar enough to look like art -- to help stage a world that's evidently arty -- but just usable enough to let us live inside that world.

Of course, any work of art starts to take on *meaning* only when a viewer interacts with it. The thing about West is that, by putting on a crazy pantomime about that interaction, he forces us to feel it as it happens. We can't help feeling it. We're in it.

Franz West: To Build a House You Start With the Roof: Work, 197