

Beauty can be beside the point

By Edward Gunts

October 12, 2008

At most museums, security guards will pounce if you dare to touch the art on display.

In the exhibition on Austrian artist Franz West that opens today at the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#), visitors are not only allowed to touch some of the artist's work, they're encouraged to sit on it, pick it up, wear it, kiss it, caress it, lounge on it, take it to a private room and have their way with it.

If ever an artist has devoted his career to breaking down the boundaries between art and everyday life, performer and audience, it is Franz West (pronounced "vest"). The BMA builds on this theme with a sweeping exhibit that challenges visitors to rethink preconceived notions about the difference between art and life, form and function, viewer and object, beauty and ugliness.

Franz West, *To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972-2008* is the first comprehensive show in the U.S. of a contemporary artist who has gained widespread acclaim in Europe.

In an age when interactive exhibits are all the rage in the museum world, it's a genuinely interactive (albeit relatively low-tech) show, with elements designed to appeal equally to the most knowledgeable art aficionado and the first time museumgoer.

Featuring West's seminal pieces, from his own childhood trundle bed transformed into a work of sculpture, to four dreamlike "Lemure heads," it's a coup for the museum, which beat other institutions to the punch in organizing such a complete and scholarly exhibit.

Even for an institution with a long tradition of staging monographic shows about significant contemporary artists, West is an intriguing choice. Born in 1947 and based in Vienna, he is best known for large-scale works with a biomorphic bent, but he also creates collages, prints, drawings, lamps and furniture. The significance of the BMA show, which contains 117 objects from more than 70 lenders, is that it puts his work in perspective by showing not just the super-sized pieces, but also the early work that led up to them and some of the influences along the way, including fellow Austrians Sigmund Freud and Adolph "ornament is a crime" Loos.

Curated by Darsie Alexander, the museum's senior curator of contemporary art, and set in the museum's Thalheimer Galleries, the exhibit starts with West's latest creation and works backward in a roughly reverse chronological order (sort of a museum version of the movie Memento.)

The first work is *The Ego and the Id*, a 20-foot-high aluminum sculpture consisting of a series of colorful, loopy forms that undulate like the tracks of a roller coaster. Sections closest to the floor suggest the lower portions of a beanstalk climbing to the sky. Growing from these stalks are plantlike protuberances that look like mushroom stools and are meant to be sat upon, as Alice did in *Wonderland*. It's the artist's way of inviting viewers to confront his monumental playground and also cozy up to it, becoming one with the art on display.

Going back through the galleries, we learn about the "Adaptives," a series of smaller, portable pieces that were meant to be lifted, carried about, even worn like prosthetic devices, with shapes that evoke everything from a parasol to an oversized cotton swab. Much of the fascination is watching how people interact with them. An offshoot is the "Refreshers," sculptures made with liquor or wine bottles, sometimes with remnants of fluid still inside.

West's art is not polished or pretty. It's raw, earthy, visceral, intentionally rough-edged.

He often works with found objects and "humble" materials such as papier-mache, which is made from old newsprint and has become his trademark. We see objects on pedestals that are rock-like and bandaged, and collages that are more than a little risque.

The result is a multilayered exhibit that can be read on a variety of levels. Some people will react mainly to the bright colors and suggestive forms of West's later work (including three large sculptures on the museum grounds). Scholars will like learning about the way his art progressed over the years. Walking through the exhibit backward, you see West grow up before your eyes.

More than anything, the exhibit underscores West's ability to maintain a singular voice and vision over the years. Though many of his pieces reveal a wry sense of humor, they have an underlying melancholy aspect to them, a forlorn dimension that seems to have originated with his upbringing in post-World War II Austria.

Critics have used phrases such as "artfully awkward" and "clumsy elegance" to describe his work. If his sculptures were characters in a play, they would be Gogo and Didi, the hapless protagonists of *Waiting for Godot*. They give off the impression of the clownish interloper who doesn't quite fit in with his refined surroundings, the underdressed dinner guest who didn't realize the invitation called for black tie.

Does West's work merit such a prominent place in a museum that typically features Matisse and Monet? One could argue it's the perfect subject for this place and age, given the shaky global economy.

West's risque collages and naughty forms are right in sync with the sensibilities of a city that gave rise to filmmaker [John Waters](#), the self proclaimed Pope of Trash, who invites visitors to "come to Baltimore and be shocked."

And West's reliance on everyday, "trash art" materials is an appropriate symbol for a period when everyone is being told to cut back and make do with less. It's a downbeat aesthetic, doomsday art for the dark days to come. What could be more fitting to show to post-meltdown museumgoers than art made from half-empty liquor bottles and yesterday's newspapers, with Pepto-Bismol pink as a recurring color?

"Good art is not what it looks like, but what it does to us," observed the French sculptor Roy Adzak. West may not create work that is beautiful in a conventional sense, but with his combination of pragmatism and pathos, he is clearly an artist for our times.

if you go

Franz West, *To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972-2008* opens today and runs through Jan. 4 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 Art Museum Drive. Call 443-573-1700 or go to artbma.org.