



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Installation view of "Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private" with "Dazzled" (2016, front) at the Legion of Honor.

At Legion exhibition, times are changing

Irreverent Urs Fischer exhibition brings something new

By Charles Desmarais

"In the 100 year history of the Legion of Honor," says the director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in a press release, "this is the first exhibition to bring works by a contemporary artist into dialogue with a wide range of the Museum's permanent holdings."

That can't be literally true. A hundred years ago, the Auguste Rodin sculptures that greet us today at the Legion entrance were, in fact, the contemporary art of their time. But with a major installation by the Swiss artist Urs Fischer that enters into lively conversation with the master, the museum resets its time machine to Present. Meanwhile, we get to watch as Max Hollein and his team begin to execute their plan to shake up the Legion — and, thus, our conception of art history — with works by living artists.

"Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private" opened Thursday, April 20, and runs through July 2. Orga-

Fischer continues on E2

Urs Fischer, "boy in chair" (2014).



Mats Nordman / Gagosian Gallery

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Legion gets modern with Fischer show

Fischer from page E1

nized by Claudia Schmuckli, appointed in July as the Fine Arts Museums' contemporary curator, it comprises 30 substantial works. It begins even before we enter the museum, with 16 bronzes, all on the scale of major Rodins. The works are installed in the vast Court of Honor, which is ordinarily graced only by Rodin's grand "Thinker" (1880, cast circa 1904, and acquired in 1924 — just before the opening of the current Legion building).

Those who confine themselves to looking only at works of a certain time period, whether current or in the past, can hardly claim to love art. Any object we can view now was made in the past. And the life span of a creative idea is measured in centuries. Classic or contemporary? It's only a matter of degree.

The Fischer bronze sculptures in the courtyard appear in-process — they have a patina that makes them look very much like wet clay, for which I mistook them from a distance. The hands — even the feet — of the maker are much in evidence, with finger impressions and sneaker prints patterning the surface. Rodin famously left many of his works looking unfinished, casting hand-squished clay forms into permanent metal. (Rodin, of course, was himself well aware of Michelangelo's "non-finito" figures, emerging from their marble imprisonment.)

Somewhat like the masters, Fischer had a workshop of assistants to help with the sculptures. In his case, about 1,000 of them. As part of his 2013 survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the artist recruited volunteers from among accomplished ceramists and kids in local schools to build them from clay.

The sculptures are a good introduction to Fischer's irreverent art, and his unconventional way of working. Gloriously full of funky charm and childish humor, the installation consists mostly of figurative works. Their titles alone, all in lowercase, often convey the sensibility at play: "bro w/ hat," "pile," "man on pile." More ambitious concepts — "lion in chains," "pietà" — are sublimely ambitious failures. They are embarrassments simultaneously blessed by, and doomed to, perpetuity.

The fact that they exist at all is a testament to another of the artist's widely famed characteristics. It might be a kind of dedication to consistency, or just plain capriciousness.

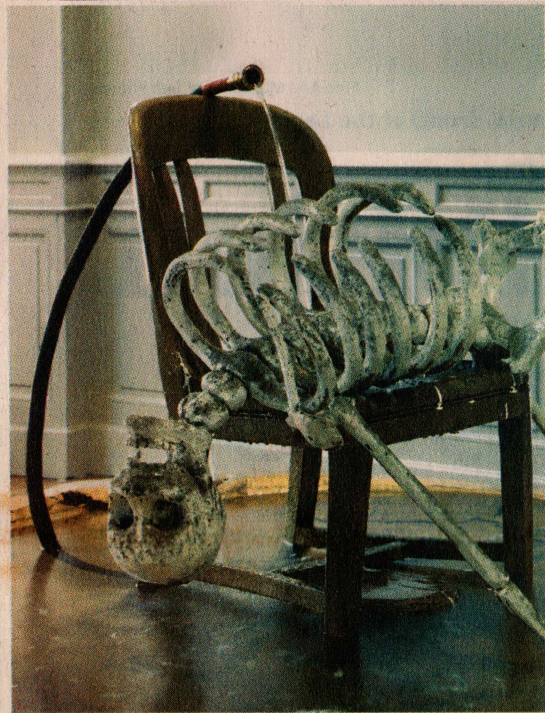
He originally told Jori Finkel of the Los Angeles Times that he expected the wet clay pieces to dry up and fall apart through the course of the 2013 show. "Their stuff won't be preserved for eternity," he said. "My stuff won't be either." By the following year, apparently (the works are all dated 2014), he had decided instead to cast them in bronze.

The guy changes his mind a lot, I learned from several last-minute amendments to the exhibition checklist provided by the museum. But an argument on the side of Fischer's brand of consistency — of dedication to a precise idea, regard-



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Urs Fischer, "Mr. E & Spotzy" (2011), installation view. Some Legion visitors are startled by something new and different.



Stefan Altenburger / Gagolian Gallery

Urs Fischer, "Invisible Mother" (detail).



Mats Nordman

Urs Fischer, "Crying Horse" (2016)

"Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through July 2. \$6-\$15 ("Monet: The Early Years" has an additional charge). Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

less of how frivolous that precision might seem to others — is a decision made in the final hours of installation.

I had seen a work called "Innocent Knowledge" as it was being installed, and it brought me up short. It was deceptively simple visually, but laboriously accomplished — a wavy line of fresh green apples floating across a large gallery of Baroque art, suspended individually on nearly invisible monofilament threads from the ceiling. Striking in color and in their incongruity, the apples were meant to rot over the course of the show — eventually, one presumes, looking more at home among the well-aged paintings and objets d'art in the room.

But off to the side were low stanchions that would have been used to keep people from swinging the apples — or bumping their heads. I wondered aloud whether the artist would go along with such an

artificial barrier. Sure enough, by the next day I was told that the artist and curator had decided to abandon the piece.

The story indicates the amount of care and thought that has gone into the placement of each work in the show. In the central gallery, an 8-foot-tall male figure is made of pigmented wax; a wick at the top will be lighted each day, and the man will gradually melt, head first. His name, the title tells us, is "Adam." The work of course is sited next to Rodin's plaster "Eve" (1881). More subtly, the burning man's contemporary slouch is an echo of the extreme "contrapposto" poses of Rodin's "Three Shades" (1898) nearby. Eve and the Shades were originally designed for — what else? — "The Gates of Hell."

The simple out-of-placeness of a work can heighten our attention to the usual order of a room, as when a tiny blue "Crying Horse" (2016) is frozen mid-stride amid a field of par-

quet flooring.

If the exhibition seems scattered or odd, it's because it claims a liberty most of us have not considered: It is a show about the freedom of sight and seeing. It is very much about the history of art, but also the joy of making.

The most powerful work in the exhibition combines these elements, and yet it is nearly invisible. "Mr. E & Spotzy" (2011) is from a series of mirror-polished stainless steel boxes that have prosaic photographic images screen-printed on their surfaces (an iron and ironing board, in this case). More comprehensible than the object itself are the reflections of the room around it, with its patterned floor and high white walls. Rodin sculptures in the room, seen in splintered replication, remain high-mindedly themselves and yet are subsumed into something mundane and, at the same time, new.

The installation had not yet been officially unveiled when I saw it, but the show's impact was unavoidable, with Fischer claiming prime spots throughout the museum's principal galleries. It looked like a hit, with most viewers paying close attention to works out of keeping with typical Legion fare.

Still, the show will be a challenge for some. Like the man in Gallery 14, who turned on his heel from a large aluminum panel bearing the grotesquely manipulated image of a woman's face. The wall label says the work depicts a vampire, and explains that it temporarily replaces "The Tribute Money," a 17th century prize of the museum's permanent collection.

"Where's my Rubens?" was all the man said.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1