

*Swiss artist Urs Fischer talks to curator Neville Wakefield about art and identity*

Neville Wakefield: Let's start with tattoos and the writing of identity on the body. Did you get tattoos before you made any art?

Urs Fischer: No. I mean, when do you start making art? To children art is natural. It's only later that art becomes unnatural or is seen as a strange thing you do. Everybody, as a kid, is an artist.

NW: And then we lose it.

UF: You lose it or you exchange it for other ways of playing or interacting. But it is natural. What it is I don't know, and how it ties in with identity I couldn't tell you. From my point of view there's something claustrophobic about artists' oeuvres.

NW: Is that about becoming too much of a virtuoso? You get too good at what you do and you don't know how to do anything else.

UF: You program your mind to this sort of thing. There are certain forms of feedback people receive that make them think they're on the right path. It's inevitable that you become what you become. What I always try to do is run away, because it freaks me out.

NW: Is that fear of classification, or of being defined?

UF: I think it's that you don't want to be this guy. Maybe you want to be *that* guy, but you want to be that guy for a week. And then you would like to explore other things. The strange thing is there is something appealing about "that guy" to some people. For instance, with Duchamp, who cares about the works, at this point? It's just the reproductions and the fantasy of "that guy". He worked really hard all his life to keep that fantasy alive.

NW: He stage-managed it.

UF: Exactly – and that's where the real artwork comes in. But it's a very broad idea of "that guy" that transcends and speaks to people. That's a good version of "that guy" – but you still don't want to be that guy. Or think of Picasso. What transcends is not an individual painting; it's the fantasy of the first liberated hand. He was really prolific throughout his life, and that's what we remember, not the actual artwork.

NW: Has having kids changed your view of creativity? Kids address that side of you that's about life and the mini-me and the resurrection of the self through another, but they also signal your inevitable demise. They grow; you diminish.

UF: I have many observations and I don't know what to make of it. The first thing I realized is that I would like to take my part of being "that guy" and shrink it down. Artists are horrible to have in a family in most cases. You see children or grandchildren of artists – good or bad ones, it doesn't matter – being left to deal with somebody else's work. You shouldn't leave any mess for anyone.

NW: Fear of mess is a big thing. People try to clean their lives up before they die.

UF: Before, it didn't matter – it's just my crap and I'm swimming in it. But when my daughter arrived, all of a sudden I realized, "Oh my God, this poor little girl will have to deal with this stuff eventually." I don't want having to deal with that crap to be her identity. So I'm trying to archive and clear my mess out of the way for her. Maybe even for me. I sometimes fantasize about doing something else in my life other than art. I wouldn't know what it is, what would satisfy me.

NW: That tension between order and chaos... The Swiss are known for keeping very good time and making very neat wood stacks, but the ones I know are also anarchic in their thought processes.

UF: That's because they're all medicated! Swiss people are interesting because they see themselves as being as normal as you can be. In terms of black and white, they would be the ultimate gray. Their self-image as a nation is really normal; there's no eccentricity. In reality, they're way out of balance. They're on the far end of a spectrum, which makes Switzerland kind of great.

NW: Maybe that's why there are so many Swiss artists.

UF: What else can we do? We need some form of revolt.

NW: What was it like growing up with both your parents as medics?

UF: My dad was a hand and burn surgeon, and in the garage there were stacks of slides of before and after operations. At a certain point I got really into those. I talked to my sister later and learned that she found them and looked at them obsessively, too. They were not child-friendly, all those chopped-off fingers and limbs.

NW: Did that inform your work? You often seem to use the body as material.

UF: It's just here, you know? I use the body but I also use furniture, or anything that's in close proximity and does the job.

NW: Are you trying to erase the distinction between formal artwork and work that deals with pop culture? I'm thinking about your series of *Problem Paintings*. Are they mash-ups of pop culture and everyday objects?

UF: For the GARAGE project we tried to see how it would be if you didn't print it, if you juxtaposed these things in real life. So they're all photos of things in real life – a kind of homemade version, where you lay actual eggs on a face and then photograph it.

NW: What's the logic of the juxtaposition? Is it like the surrealists' idea of the sewing machine and the umbrella, only here the chance encounter is between, say, a pickle and a Hollywood star?

UF: It's different. There are usually two photos – not in this magazine, but in the other ones I've made. It's basically a collage, a juxtaposition. The funny thing is that fruits are more universal than movie stars.

NW: People want to recognize the Hollywood side of it, not the fruit side of it. But everyone knows a kiwi, not everyone knows Rita Hayworth.

UF: You have to put something that they want to see behind. Most of the people in these paintings are from old black-and-white movie stills that I've really worked on. The kids have no clue who these people are. Zero. They don't even know Kirk Douglas.

NW: But they still recognize themselves in these images. In your mirrored box sculptures, you literally see yourself. When I look at them, I'm part of the image.

UF: That's why these film stills work – for me it doesn't matter who it is. The stills come from a time when black-and-white photography was at its peak. The images are very graphic because it's all about light and dark; the faces are like the perfect Greek sculpture, this idealized thing. A lot of it has to do with depth of field. In the old photos, usually the depth of field is on one eye, and it's as thin as a sheet of paper. With the paintings I want to build an ultimate space – there's a lot of space but there's no space.

NW: What is the problem in the *Problem Paintings*?

UF: It's just funny. It's just a name. Any problem functions because it occupies the center of your existence, no? It obstructs.

NW: And what's the "painting" side? There isn't much paint either, in the traditional way.

UF: But who cares about the traditional way? Problems are omnipresent in everyone's life; they are everything from the best motor to do something to the biggest obstructer. Problems are amazing.

NW: And what about the food aspect?

UF: It's just alive. It's just things that are alive. The great thing about fruit is that it's basically a mother built around a seed. It's a disposable mother that's given with every seed and it builds the nourishing ground around it and decomposes and gives all the essential stuff to this little seed to become something.

NW: Like parenting.

UF: Exactly. Besides flowers, fruits are probably some of the most lavish gifts of nature to itself to continue. That's why fruits are so sweet and look so beautiful. But where it gets strange is when you have grapes without seeds.

NW: Are there any parallels between cooking, eating, and making art?

UF: Yes, definitely.

NW: Beyond that you make something amazing and then you consume it and it all turns to shit?

UF: You can obsess on the shit part or you can say all the parts that don't turn to shit are what give you energy to do everything you do. Compared to how much you eat, there's relatively little shit, actually. I'm more interested in all the other parts, the energy it gives.

NW: Is that the invisible part?

UF: It's more the process of cooking. You can follow a recipe, but you always have to play with it. If you give the same ingredients to different people, they will cook different things. You can cook the same dish every day and it changes a little bit and you can't really say why. When you start cooking, you can tell if it's going to be good or not. Once you make it, you can tell if it was just you being insecure or if the food was really bad. It's the same when you make art – you have to rely on yourself as the one and only judge. Did you make the right decision? Why is this art and not a bunch of shit? You are the only lawmaker there. You're more than the judge and the jury; you're the parliament and the judicial branch. You're the separation of powers, and you're one power.

NW: I know you like cars but you don't drive. Is it the same with food? Do you cook?

UF: I like to cook for two or four people. Here at the studio we always cook for 15 people.

NW: Why don't you drive?

UF: I tried many times but somehow getting a license was always complicated, and then I lived in other countries where the license would not be valid. At age 16 or 18, I had zero urge to drive a car.

NW: So where does your interest in cars stem from?

UF: I love cars. I like to ride in cars. One thing I understand about cars is something that a lot of drivers thankfully forget – the amount of mass they move at what kind of speed. The relative speed between cars is a small difference. I'm more amazed by the traffic at the core of our mobility; it's such an unregulated, crazy thing.

NW: They did studies on why freeways get congested. There's a butterfly effect – someone texting on a cell phone 10 miles down the road creates a huge backlog.

UF: Everything is so regulated nowadays, but with traffic it's like, "You guys figure it out." You can park, here's your license, here's your two-ton mass you can accelerate in a few seconds to 60 miles per hour. It's extreme but it works.

NW: Do you think the art world is regulated?

UF: The art world is conservative enough that it doesn't have to be too regulated. Where does this urge for regulation come from? It's usually when there is abuse that you need regulation. What people are ready to pay for a thing, that's what they pay. If an artwork is made badly, you can decide for yourself. I cannot tell you why I buy art – I just do it. I can't help myself.

NW: You buy art because you're interested and because you want to be in proximity with it.

UF: I usually buy things I like from people I know, and then I hang them up at home and look at them. You learn different things about artworks by looking at them over a long period of time. It's a totally different understanding from what

you get at a new show, where you look for five minutes and that's it. There are two sides to art – this domestic aspect, and the impact it has in the public sense. It's the second that frustrates me.

NW: What's the frustration?

UF: With art becoming more mainstream, mainstream interests, mainstream modes of operation, get shifted onto art. There's the monetary value, or that it's sold by a particular gallery, or so-and-so bought it. All that helps define a thing. But aside from that, is the thing good or bad? What does it do for me?

NW: Do you care whether it's good or bad?

UF: Good and bad are the wrong words. What I care about is does it work, does it transport, does it communicate? What does it do? The power of art lies in its ability to communicate somewhere other than in the things you can explain verbally. The frustration for me now is that art seems to not do much compared to popular culture and all these other things.

NW: Should art be doing more?

UF: In Renaissance times, artists provided the imagery for things like heaven and hell. They helped construct the popular imagination. Now this is solved by popular culture; it's easier to access, it's faster, it's better. What art can do is an afterthought, nothing else. Walt Disney is the closest thing to Michelangelo we've had, in terms of the impact he has had on people and what beauty is. It's crazy. I don't think art has the importance that it's given. For a segment of society that wants to be in opposition to popular culture, art serves as our Disney, but that's a segmented thing.

Basically, I'm disappointed that it seems not possible to make much better art. We're all lazy. Why is it not possible to make art as I imagine it, where it's really like, wow!? Sometimes you get a wow moment, but it's so rare.

NW: You're really prolific. Do all your ideas come to fruition, or do you ever just give up on an artwork?

UF: Some things take a long time to make. I don't give up on the thing, I give up on the solution. There are many interests I've had for a long time, and I revisit them because they still interest me. I made a work with candles in 2001 – it was a figure of a girl, quickly and roughly carved. The one I made in Venice a decade later is a totally different scenario, involving 3-D scanning technology.

NW: I was thinking about the candles in terms of these cycles of creation and destruction and what we're saying about fruit, deteriorating in order to regenerate. But the wax pieces, when they die, they have died.

UF: They melt. They just change. That's the thing with decay – on a visual level, it moves from a man-made to a natural order.

NW: Entropy.

UF: Natural order is usually beautiful. When you are an artist, you cannot control materials, but you can guide materials to where you think you want them to be. You move paint with a brush across a painting. When you cast

something in wax, you have this man-made thing, and then you melt it and the melted part takes on another character. The candle is very big but the little drops are as big as wax is when it melts. They have the size they have; they're not bigger or smaller. The drips, the viscosity, how it cools... they just create this other, natural image.

At its core, art is all about order. Our lives are all about order. Your body is about order. Excrement is separated from the rest of your body because it would be bad for you to have it in your bloodstream. Everything is in order – your thoughts, your words. When you're an artist, you basically arrange, rearrange, or alter; you play off order.

NW: The problem most people have with art is that it looks chaotic.

UF: That's an order, too.

NW: A lot of people would say that your art is messy. That wax dripping all over the place...

UF: Reality is about things like this, so it's okay. But you know, the wood stack thing? You play with order to make sense of things.

NW: The wood has its own order – the forest – but until it gets stacked it doesn't look like order.

UF: A forest has specific spacing between trees, and the light, and how the roots grow. It's a natural order, and it's what makes it beautiful. What we consider a beautiful landscape is a specific form of order. As an artist you compete with reality, and the order of reality is always more interesting than the order you can make. But because you make the order it becomes information versus just existing.

NW: Are the playful aspects of your work about fucking with order?

UF: Probably. You can make a disorder or a displacement, and you get an image. Natural order has no image. So you subtract order and you rebuild order. The better the image, the more it communicates.

NW: That's where the collage aspect comes into play, I guess. You take something that's experiential and collage it onto a surface, whether it's a psychic surface or a physical surface.

UF: That's one way to do it, but it can be anything. You can do any kind of placement or displacement or arrangement. You can do it with paint or with whatever you want. Sometimes I prefer to do it without having to make it up, because through making it up you make it much more personal, but it's a personal preference. You become more "that guy" again.

NW: But by virtue of being "that guy" you're in a better position to reach out to all of those people whoa aren't but want to be. Isn't it a question of audience and so of populism?

The impact of images you make as an artist can never be as populist as a TV series, which is so direct. I think there is a space for images that are more common, and for communicating in a more common way, rather than withdrawing to a Freemason-like secret society of art.

NW: But that's what the art world is – a secret society. An open secret society.  
UF: My daughter painting is not a secret society. She celebrates life. Some people ask me about my work – “What does it mean?” It means nothing. Why do they even think it means something? Because they feel excluded. Why do they feel excluded? Because they're stupid? No.

NW: Because there's a whole culture geared around art being exclusive and therefore unavailable in some way. Isn't that just the culture of exclusivity?  
UF: Maybe it's also the way art history is written. If you read books from the 1900s, they impose an order on art history. Some of it is technical –the arms of sculptures could extend outward because the sculptors' skills improved – but also certain elements in a painting starting to mean something. These codes were probably more accessible to people at the time, like how we can decode editing in a movie today. The problem is that most art doesn't deal with common imagery anymore. We don't repeat images like they used to. We don't make pietàs anymore. Now it's individualistic, and everybody does their own thing. There is no common code in reading art, so there's this confusion.

NW: Art is characterized as an exploration of the unknown, whereas before, in ritualized art and religious art, it was about known imagery. Maybe that's why people find it easier to talk about *Breaking Bad* than about Jeff Koons.

UF: It is easier. If you have a conversation about Jeff Koons, what are you going to share? Your experience in seeing it? And is it important that you can talk about it with somebody? What if it's just for you?

NW: People get baffled by lack of narrative as well. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, as Joan Didion said. Narrative is the thing that turns chaos into order. It's the connective issue. *Breaking Bad* is narrative. We can't talk about your artwork in the same way.

UF: Yeah, there's nothing you can do about it, no?

NW: Shit, we're fucked.