

## Reinhard Mucha's Unsettling Precision

Mucha's reflective sculptures ensure that while looking at one work, viewers are aware of others and our presence among them.



Reinhard Mucha, "Bohmte, 1985," diptych (photo © Reinhard Mucha, 2018, © Mucha / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019, Courtesy Sprüth Magers)

LONDON — Reinhard Mucha's work is unsettling. His clinical, precise sculptures are often disrupted by found objects or makeshift elements, such as packing tape, bubble wrap, and electrical cabling. Their complex titles contain multiple dates: no brackets around the numbers indicate when a piece was first made; square brackets indicate a revised version; and round brackets, the original dates of work by other artists that he sometimes absorbs into his own pieces.

This palimpsestuous process creates a heavy, historical richness, which led a few critics in the 1980s and '90s to propose Mucha as a potential German successor to his countrymen Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. Why Mucha hasn't quite realized this prediction is perhaps, in part, because of his reluctance to exhibit his work. Yet Full Take, a new show at Sprüth Magers in London (Mucha's first in the city for over 20 years), presents a compelling assortment of his works from the past 30 years. Most pieces are recent updates of their previous incarnations (as is typical of Mucha), while others are in their initial form, no doubt awaiting future reworking.



Reinhard Mucha, "Wind and Too-Tall Towers, [2019] 1982" (photo by Jochen Arentzen, 2019, © muchaArchive / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers)

Before studying at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Mucha trained as a blacksmith — and in the exhibition's first room, the sculpture "Wind and Too-Tall Towers, [2019] 1982" showcases his playful navigation of objects and machines. Above our heads are four inverted office chairs clamped to a suspended wood frame, which wraps around an existing structural pillar in the gallery. Positioned on each chair are four functioning electric desk fans; nestled in between are plugs, sockets, extension cables, folded cardboard, and plastic. The sculpture looks like a prototype, with its workings-out on display. The title suggests something more sinister, though: high-rise buildings causing wind tunnels that buffet passers-by.

Glossy surfaces, glass, and mirrors serve as powerful motifs in Mucha's work. Seeing our reflection creates "a form of silence and emptiness and loneliness," he said in an interview for *Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole*, a 2005 collection catalogue for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The way Mucha's reflective sculptures are hung at Sprüth Magers ensures that while looking at one work, viewers are aware of the others in the space and our presence among them. In "Oderin / Untitled (MÄNNER FRAUEN), [1987] 1987/1981," which takes up the rest of the first room, an imposing gray felt box is supported by six comically small footstools. When walking around it, the gap narrows disconcertingly at one point between the box and the gallery's walls, forcing us close to a painting that hangs behind glass in the corner and has the words "MÄNNER" (men) and "FRAUEN" (women) written in huge white letters on a slick black background. A white lightbox appears after "Frauen," like a punctuation mark providing an additional moment of contemplation; it's powered by a roll of cabling tied with packing tape printed with the word "fragile."



Reinhard Mucha, "Untitled (Wand – Kunst- und Museumsverein – Wuppertal – 1978)" (1985) (© Mucha / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019, Courtesy Sprüth Magers)



Reinhard Mucha, "Oderin / Untitled (MÄNNER FRAUEN), [1987] 1987 / 1981," detail (photo © Reinhard Mucha, 2016, © Mucha / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019, Courtesy Sprüth Magers)

Mucha's purest exploration of reflection appears on the gallery's second floor. In the diptych "Bohmte, 1985," a glossy brown-painted square is placed beside a glass-fronted wooden cabinet lined with brown felt. In the first, you can see your blurred silhouette. In the second, you can see your defined tinted reflection, as well as another diptych in the same room. For "Untitled (Wand – Kunst- und Museumsverein – Wuppertal – 1978) / Untitled (Isolde Wawrin – Ohne Titel (Objekt), 1978), [2019] 1985," Mucha frames Isolde Wawrin's amoeba-shaped green painting, patterned with blue blotchy brushstrokes, above an aluminum box frame. Inside it are black-and-white photographs documenting the 1978 exhibition in which Wawrin's painting was shown alongside a breeze-block sculpture by Mucha. A page taken from the show's catalogue listing the participating artists, with Wawrin's name underlined in red pen, is meticulously mounted next to the photos.

Other works that use archival materials include "Plauen / Edition 1991 – >>Kreuzstück<<, [2019] 2019/2004." Two metal circles (originally part of "The Wirtschaftswunder, To the People of Pittsburgh, 1991" ) hang side-by-side at 1.6 meters from the floor (about average head height). One contains a page from what looks like a building catalogue, featuring a picture of a cross-shaped metal drainpipe captioned "Cross with 4 gusseted branches, Diameter 31 ½ in"; the other circle is a cloudy mirror. To the right of these, a tarnished zinc tub sits in the center of a mirror-and-steel-gridded frame attached to the wall. Its glass front is etched with a border of parallel gray lines, but two have broken away from their arrangement and cut across the view of the tub.



Reinhard Mucha, "Oderin / Untitled (MÄNNER FRAUEN), [1987] 1987 / 1981," two-part work ensemble, installation view Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2016 (photo © Reinhard Mucha, 2016, © Mucha / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019, courtesy Sprüth Magers)

Lines crop up time and again in Full Take, evoking Mucha's long-held fascination with the national significance of Germany's railways and industrial travel routes. In "Schuld, [2019] 2015," he intersperses horizontal wooden slats with curved train tracks from a model railway that don't join up. A split-screen video installation in the basement — "Hidden Tracks, 2014," conceptually the least effective work in the exhibition — features close-up images of Mucha's sketchbooks and a few abstract, train-related sculptures, all set to a noisy soundtrack of screeching train wheels and voices from a US radio show. In "Blohm + Voss (Ohne Titel – Stuttgart, Schwabstraße 2 – 1980), [2019] 1980," Mucha combines trains and ships: Blohm and Voss is a German shipbuilding company famous for making Bismarck, the Second World War battleship; and Stuttgart, Schwabstraße is a train station. This striking installation is made from horizontal strips of mirror, glass, and wood flooring, which encase two small video screens showing black-and-white images of old cargo ships. (Mirrors placed beside the screens give reverse copies, too.) Surrounding them are blood-red parallel lines etched onto the glass front, while perched on a window ledge to the left, almost out of sight, is a black-and-white print of a cargo ship, framed in chunky white steel. The accompanying soundtrack of crashing waves reverberates through several of the gallery's rooms.

It's in this sense of reverberation where Mucha's strength lies — how his work lingers in your mind, revealing its layers incrementally. He may well be an artist "more about refinement than about development," as Roberta Smith wrote in *The New York Times* in 1993. But that's not to say his sculptures lack intrigue.

Reinhard Mucha: Full Take continues at Sprüth Magers (7A Grafton Street, London, UK) through May 11.