

## Understanding Wurman

*What my life is, is documenting the journey  
from not knowing to knowing.*  
-Richard Saul Wurman

When our neighbor Mitchell Kaplan, owner of Books & Books, briefly introduced me to Richard Saul Wurman, on an afternoon of 2019 at the Coral Gables Museum, I had no idea of who he was. The two men expressed their interest in making an exhibition of Wurman's watercolors, and I promised to follow up on the proposal, as is our protocol with any artist. A few days later, I received a couple of books in the mail: one was called "Understanding Understanding", and the other, "Mapping Mortality". Suspiciously, they were related to Wurman (he had conceived them), but they were not about his art.

After a basic Internet research, fascinated by the books and by the genius of this man, my head started spinning. Throughout his life, Richard Saul Wurman (Philadelphia, PA., 1935) has challenged traditional forms of presenting and understanding facts. He has lectured extensively, and published nearly a hundred books on different subjects, with a focus on 'information architecture' (a term that he coined.) He founded an array of conferences where great minds from the most varied backgrounds converged, including the popular TED Talks (1982.) His trailblazing, multidisciplinary approach to Knowledge and Understanding has granted him numerous accolades, including several honorary doctorates. How could I possibly overlook his lifetime oeuvre to concentrate only on his artmaking? Was it feasible to organize an all-encompassing show that could take over the whole museum?

As time passed, our periodical conversations taught me that Wurman is very stubborn and could not be diverted from the idea of only exhibiting his art. With a smile in his face and a humble attitude, he would repeat "who cares about what I did a long time ago?"; "It is already done, and it's boring". Indeed, Wurman's artworks are among his most recent projects, and yet this principle does not apply, in the case of the paintings - his first watercolors of birds were done in the 1960s. An explanation to this might be that, for him, the subject matter of the works is the very act of painting, while the birds are just a pretext.

The birds in the paintings are not posing quietly for the viewer, but rather seem agitated and daring. Semi-abstract, expressionistic brushstrokes are often combined with clean lines of ink and small pieces of gold leaf. The compositions are very simple - figures are always against the subtle white of the rice paper, wrinkled by the watery pigments. Wurman applies a set of rules that simplify his creative process. As he continues to paint, the size of the works is dictated by the size of the frames available, and not vice versa; and he would stop painting when he ran out of space on the walls of his house. This bare-bone practicality teaches us that, rather than a new profession at the end of his career, artmaking is just another side of Wurman's endless curiosity and explorations. This is also why the frames are seating on a narrow wall shelf and leaning onto the walls (instead of hanging from nails), for an easy, last-minute switch of order; and the title of the show is *Richard Saul Wurman; Some Stuff*.

This past year, marked by home confinement due to the merciless COVID-19 pandemic, Wurman invested much of his time experimenting with his first bronzes, a collection of which was added to the show. Most of the pieces are conceived as imaginary landscapes where

creatures and objects coexist. The maquettes are collages that combine clay in the form of expressionistic animals such as mice and snakes; branches and other pieces of nature collected from his garden; and ready-made objects, such as water bottles that appear disproportionately gigantic, and intriguing, within the compositions. “Imagine these figures at a huge scale, where men could walk in the space between them; like in a park” says the architect in Wurman, in front of one of the sculptures.

Accompanying the art, classical design furniture is randomly arranged by Wurman in the middle of the gallery. Chairs and low tables not only contain some of his sculptures and books, but also serve as a platform to host conversations where the speaker can walk through the audience with a wireless microphone. This concept of the space, thought to enhance conversation and communication, is close to the structure of his conferences and gives visitors a hint of that other world Wurman inhabits, when he is not being an artist.

As in many other facets of Richard Saul Wurman’s work, his honest and humble incursion in visual arts reflects his fascination with uncharted territories, and his constant desire to grasp and understand the unknown. For us, it is also an opportunity to better approach and comprehend his (still enigmatic) genius that is so ahead of our times. We are truly thankful to him for choosing the Museum to display his art; as well as to Mitch Kaplan for that afternoon of introductions at the Museum, and for accepting being the co-host of several of our presentations in the gallery, throughout the show.

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