

This gallery highlights the full arc of Schütte's career, from his time at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the mid-1970s to the present. As a young student, he contended with the achievements—as well as the shortcomings—of work by Minimal and Conceptual artists, who expanded the idea of what art could be during the 1960s. Unlike his predecessors, however, Schütte was drawn to figuration, narrative, and handmade crafts. “I still think today that artists should have dirty fingers,” he has said.

Indeed, across the gamut of his multidisciplinary output, Schütte makes it clear: art is hard work. It can be heavy and exacting, both physically and intellectually. Among the challenges artists face are technical failures or long periods of inertia. “If I'm stuck, I don't spend my weeks in misery,” Schütte has resolved. “I change direction, switching between problems, media, or scale.” This determination has not only allowed him to keep making, but to do so with agility.

A proposal for his own tombstone (*Mein Grab* [My Grave, 1981]) and a memorial for a sailor lost at sea (*Alain Colas* [1989]) are among the earliest examples of Schütte's approach to monumental sculpture—albeit both unrealized. Macabre yet gloomily funny, these works subvert the visual tropes of heroism and permanence typical of most commemorative art found in public space.

The question of how one might live with art surfaces time and again in Schütte's practice—not only in his artworks intended for civic sites, but also in his objects for the domestic realm. In the early 1980s, for instance, the artist began making fabric garlands for the apartments and offices of his close friends. “There is a big difference in viewing the work for ten seconds or whether you live with it for a long time,” Schütte observed. The way that art functions, be it in private or public contexts, remains a core concern of the artist's.

“I like the small scale of the model because you have the whole world inside a room or on a tabletop. And then I can see some way forward,” Schütte has said. “Or perhaps I can see that this is a dead end, and I should turn around and go in the opposite direction.” He began to regard the model as an art form while studying at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he was exposed to the work of students in the stage design program. The artist adapted ideas from scenography, which implicates action and narrative, to enable his explorations of figuration and architectural space. Many of his earliest models, including those presented in this gallery, consider the conditions of making and viewing art.

For many artists working in the 1960s and '70s, ideas often superseded the physical making of art. These ideas were typically ideological, structural, and philosophical in nature and conveyed in the form of words, grids, and graphs. By the 1980s, Schütte and other artists ushered in a return to representation, which some critics described as a response to a “hunger for images.” Around this time, cherries, watermelons, and other kinds of comestibles became motifs in his work.

On view here is one of Schütte’s most ambitious installations, *Melonely* (1986), whose title combines the words *melon* and *lonely*. The title also calls to mind *melancholy*, a psychological state incommensurate with the lighthearted watermelon slices. The artist anthropomorphizes the scattered sculptures of fruit, drawing out a tragicomic quality from the otherwise simple forms.

The sculptural installations here present three scenes from the fictional life of an artist, who is joined by a cast of characters including models, patrons, and gallerists. Schütte began the series in 1988, working on the installations and its puppetlike figures over the next decade by improvising with his personal belongings and other found objects. He arrived at the series' title, *Mohr's Life*, through a similar process: he took the letters of the name of the building in which the work was first exhibited, H. Morel & Fils, and rearranged them.

In German, *Mohr* is an outdated word used to identify a supposed racial and ethnic "other" as well as a euphemism for *servant*. By naming the artist in this sculptural installation "Mohr," Schütte seemingly appropriates the term to posit the artist as not only a kind of cultural other but one who must "serve" or "service" the needs and wants of dominant society. This is one of the first instances of the concept of otherness in Schütte's work, an idea he will return to in the coming years.

“So far as meanings are concerned, I would rather talk with my hands and through forms and let these creatures live their own lives and tell their own stories,” Schütte has said. “Avoiding certain fixed positions is important to me.” The works in this gallery span four decades and demonstrate the artist’s commitment to approaching his art from multiple perspectives.

Schütte’s ability to see things from new vantage points is, paradoxically, predicated on repetition. He frequently returns to ideas and imagery, manipulating scale and context to consider manifold associations. Art, for Schütte, emerges from all the twists and turns of life. “Direct experience is much more touching,” he once shared. Dealing with subjects of both personal and worldly importance, the artist labors in complexity and uncertainty, finding humor and sometimes even clarity in the process.

Failure, in all its guises, inflects much of Schütte's work. The artist brings deficiencies and flaws—be they of states, capitalism, Western culture, or modernism—to the fore. Breakdowns materialize in his art literally, as in his peeling *Große Tapeten* (*Large Wallpapers*, 1975), and metaphorically, as in *Krieger* (*Warriors*, 2012), a sculpture whose mangled figures with bottle-cap helmets are inept at conveying martial strength.

The related themes of instability and incoherence are present in the work *Basement II* (1993). Inset in a tabletop is a labyrinth complete with stairs, corridors, and interior chambers that defy logic. Built from raw wood and covered in sawdust, as if recently completed, *Basement II* evokes the unpolished and intractable recesses of the subconscious.

Schütte's *Frauen* (*Women*) constitute one of his most significant series to date. Between 1998 and 2006, the artist made eighteen sculptural forms, each cast twice in bronze, twice in steel, and once in aluminum, equaling a total of ninety works.

The *Frauen* belong to the figurative tradition of the female nude, a genre that stretches back to the classical era and was notably championed by artists of the late nineteenth century. Though the genealogy of these sculptures is grand, their material origin is humble. Schütte initially produced 120 “sketches,” as he describes them, from clay—small, highly impressionistic forms he modeled by hand. He then selected several of these to use as references for larger sculptures. The series demonstrates the artist's sculptural versatility, as well as the limitless representational possibilities of the human form.



Houses, museums, towers, bunkers, and pavilions are just some of the types of structures in Schütte's architectural vernacular, often expressed in the form of models. "Not every model has to be built," he has said. "There are thinking models, bricolage models, demonstration models, and sculptural substitutes." Although most were never intended to be realized at full scale, several of Schütte's maquettes have since become permanent, fully functional residences and buildings, located in Austria, France, Germany, and Spain, as well as one in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Across his architectural projects, Schütte considers the relationship between the built environment and the human psyche. Architecture is capable of communicating ideologies through a formal language of line, shape, volume, and color. Rather than try to impart explicit beliefs, however, Schütte's spaces are for contemplation. "My works have the purpose of placing a crooked question mark in the world," he has said.

Schütte often uses his art to traverse the political and cultural landscape—as in *Die Fremden* (*The Strangers*, 1992), a group of brightly colored ceramic figures and vessels he first installed on the roof of a German department store. At the time, the dissolution of the Soviet sphere and wars in Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Africa had led to the migration of large numbers of asylum seekers to a recently unified Germany. Housing shortages and unemployment were widespread, and the newcomers were blamed and subjected to neo-Nazi attacks. Rebuffing these xenophobic responses, Schütte asked, “What defines a German, the passport, the blood, the country of birth, the language, or the mentality?”

The artist also raises questions about national identity in his *Fake Flag* series (2017–18). The heavy ceramic panels allude to the modernist monochrome painting tradition of the early twentieth century, but they also follow the three-color composition of the flags of many republics. Schütte’s flags don’t refer to real countries, however. They evoke the unstable border between the abstract and symbolic, which can have consequential effects on the world.