

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman (b. 1943, Holyoke, MA) received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston and an MFA from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His work has been exhibited extensively in both the United States and abroad, including solo exhibitions at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1982); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1988); Whitney Museum of American Art (1992); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2001); and The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2002). The retrospective "William Wegman: Funney/Strange" was held at the Brooklyn Museum, and traveled to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach; the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover; and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus (2006-07). In 2018, the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized "Before/On/After: William Wegman and California Conceptualism." In 2018-2021, "William Wegman: Being Human," a large-scale survey exhibition of Wegman's photographic work, traveled to venues including Palais de L'Archevêché, Arles; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand; MASI, Lugano; Photomuseum den Haag, The Hague; and Seoul Arts Center, Seoul, Korea. Wegman's work is in many important public collections including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Monographs by Wegman include *William Wegman: Paintings* (Abrams, 2016) with essays by Martin Filler, Amy Hempel, Robert Krulwich and Susan Orlean and *Being Human* (Chronicle/Thames and Hudson, 2017) edited by William Ewing. His most recent publication, *William Wegman: Writing by Artist* (Primary Information, 2022), edited by Andrew Lambert was accompanied by exhibitions at Sperone Westwater Gallery, NY and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, LA in the spring of 2022. William Wegman lives and works in Maine and New York.

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BY VANITY FAIR PHOTO DEPARTMENT

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PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM WEGMAN. SPERONE WESTWATER, NYC.

Art in America

Who Took the Dogs Out?: William Wegman at Sperone Westwater

By Emily Watlington  June 14, 2022 4:44pm



William Wegman, *OMG*, 2021, acrylic and charcoal on wood panel, 40 by 60 inches.

COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

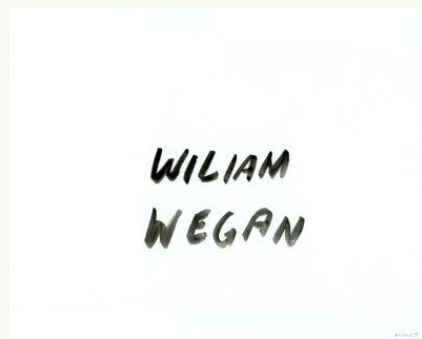
At first glance, [William Wegman's](#) survey at [Sperone Westwater](#) in New York might read as an attempt to remind viewers that, despite his reputation as reigning dog portraitist, Wegman is in fact a serious artist. The exhibition coincides with the release of *William Wegman: Writing by Artist*, published by Primary Information and edited by artist-curator [Andrew Lampert](#) (a contributor to this magazine), who also curated the show. Of the more than 70 works on view, most are black-and-white, and only a handful of videos feature his signature canines. The works look, on the surface, nothing like Wegman's iconic oversize Polaroids of Weimarers, often shown sporting silly human outfits. The dogs—being, well, dogs—are never in on the joke. Their indifferent expressions and drooping jowls convey an endearing oblivion, undercutting the ostentatiousness of the tableaux. (The Weimarers are immortalized in a mosaic in New York's 23rd Street subway station on 6th Avenue—hands down, the best subway art in the city.)

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM WEGMAN. SPERONE WESTWATER, NYC.

Instead of those familiar images, the show includes many drawings on paper, as well as a couple of paintings on canvas or wood panels and vintage videos on cube monitors. These formats look more obviously white cube than do the Polaroids, or the Sesame Street segments that featured Wegman's pets, and brought him greater fame when they first aired in 1989. But this other work is just as goofy, thank goodness. The burn is just slower, mostly because, often, reading is required. One drawing, *Wiliam Wegan* (2017), shows just the artist's name styled in bold letters, written with an impassioned swiftness using ink and a brush. As in the work's title, he misspelled his own name on the page, as if caught up in the heat of the moment, or dabbling, as often he does, in some twinly persona. Any pretension affiliated with an artist's signature is wholly undermined by the missing "l" and "m." Meanwhile, a 1972 graphite doodle depicts two cartoonish men—one with a pipe, the other with a cigarette—captioned with the scribbled phrase TWINS WITH INDIVIDUAL TASTES. Who knows whether this was intended as an artwork or just a joke he jotted down, and who cares? It's funny.

Countless jokes populate the works, but one stands out, and not just because it's repeated in two of the videos on view, once in black-and-white, and once in color. In *Peck and Chuck* (1972) and *Peck & Chuck B* (1976–77), Wegman points his camera at two different pieces of lumber and states that he wanted to find out how much wood a woodpecker could peck compared to how much wood a woodchuck could chuck. It turns out, he concludes in a monotonous voiceover and without citing any evidence—save the same two scraps of wood on screen—that a woodpecker could peck as much as a woodchuck could chuck, relative to each creature's size. Echoing the Weimarers' deadpan expressions, Wegman's tone is serious and dry despite the absurd premise.

I confess that one other zinger got me good: *OMG* (2021), a painting of what has become an increasingly familiar scene—a suburban house that has just been ravaged by some climate catastrophe. The front wall and exterior are totally wrecked, but a few posts hold up the roof. That red roof, plus the largely intact garage off to the right and the recognizable window in the pile of rubble, are the main clues that the painting is not some chaotic abstraction. Sleek arrow buttons are painted on the left and right sides of the canvas, and when I first saw the image on Sperone Westwater's website, I clicked the right one, duped into believing it was part of some slider, then was stuck taking in the scene a little longer.



William Wegman, *Wiliam Wegan*, 2017, ink on paper, 8 ½ by 11 inches.

COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK



William Wegman, *Peck & Chuck B*, 1976–77, video, 27 seconds.

COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

Maybe it's because I'm experiencing the most intense spring fever of my life, which is, I'm sure, in some way pandemic related, but I left the gallery feeling amped by Wegman's lightheartedness, as if I'd just come from joking around with an old friend, even though I've never met the man. The show re-created those moments that make life, well, enjoyable. This felt necessary, and refreshingly humble, especially when compared to a more prevalent contemporary artistic M.O.: subjecting strangers to one's seemingly singular vision of the world and/or how it ought to be (even though it's probably ending). It certainly helps that many of the works Lampert decided to include seem unconcerned with being "art" at all. And for this irreverence, they're all the better, making the self-righteous didacticism that so easily follows the pretense of an "artistic vision" seem, by contrast, profoundly egomaniacal. Sometimes, amid an endless slew of banal catastrophes, a little humor feels like all we've got.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM WEGMAN. SPERONE WESTWATER, NYC.

BOMB

William Wegman by Andrew Lampert

Perhaps best known for his iconic photos of Weimaraners, William Wegman has been making conceptual work and "laugh-out-loud art" since the 1960s.

Jul 25, 2022

[Interview](#)

[Art](#)



Bubble Up, 1981, ink on silver gelatin print, 7.25 x 7 inches. Images courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted.

Considering the state of the world as of late, we could all really use an injection of William Wegman to cure our woes. At least that's what I discovered when I took on the dream job of editing *William Wegman: Writing by Artist*, which was just published by Primary Information. The book project got started before the Covid lockdown, and in the dark days that followed, I found my downed spirits being hoisted by the mood-enhancing weirdness of Wegman's laugh-out-loud art. For many around the globe, he is the iconic Weimaraner photographer, but those in the know have long recognized Wegman as one of conceptual art's most prodigious practitioners. His perception-bending photographs from the late 1960s and 1970s remain remarkably fresh after all these decades, and his canonical, deeply enjoyable early videos helped to define the burgeoning medium. In the ensuing years, Wegman incorporated drawing—and later, painting—into his expansive and prolific practice, and while moving forward he rarely ever looked back.

As the title indicates, the new book focuses on Wegman's writing; however these are not your typical artist statements or aesthetic theses. While I was initially focused on assembling a substantial grouping of the delirious texts he typed in the 1970s, what I came to realize is that words run throughout Wegman's output in all mediums, from back then up to the present. The book brings together a career-spanning swathe of largely unseen work that was excavated from boxes in the artist's New York City studio, which is where we met to discuss our shared passion for humor, wordplay, and music.

—Andrew Lampert

Andrew Lampert

With your early writings, it seems like you typed these things, got them out of your system, then walked away and moved on.

William Wegman

Yeah, the writings are a lot like my drawings.

I don't remember making them. A photo of a dog or a painting I'll remember. But the drawings and writings just occur spontaneously when I'm sitting in front of a piece of paper at my desk. As soon as I'm up and away, they're gone, and I don't really remember them. That's what makes it exciting, because I can find them again and go, "Oh, look at that." Yesterday I opened the book to the potato drawing and I laughed so hard that tears were flowing out of my eyes. It was embarrassing because it was my work and I didn't remember it!

AL

The typed texts in this book mostly come from the 1970s, but you continue to draw up to this day. When do you work on the drawings? Your studio is set up for photography and painting, but the drawings seem like something that you're not doing in that setting. They're more solitary.

WW

They're always done at the desk in my studio, an old partners' desk that I got at a Salvation Army near my hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts. I've hauled it everywhere since I found it in 1970. So everything happens on that table. My typewriter is set up there, my drawing paper, and a pencil. . . . Simple, ordinary.

AL

All of that work is made at one desk?

WW

Pretty much. I don't like to write on the bus or in the park or other places.

AL

You're not just struck by inspiration walking around with a pad of paper?

WW

No, and I don't wake up in the middle of the night and write things down. Although I do wake up in the middle of the night.



Is Cough a Word?, 1982, pencil and watercolor on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

AL

When you started exhibiting drawings in 1973, what was the landscape like for artists drawing? It seems like that was the middle of a minimalism/post-minimalism period and that your particular style of drawing would have been aesthetically verboten.

WW

I'm not really sure. Back then, I was showing videos and photos at Sonnabend Gallery and elsewhere. It seemed to me that one more thing was needed, and when I started to do the drawings, my work felt complete. Photo, video, drawing—simple, perfect, portable. I considered myself a minimalist conceptualist for better or for worse, and these drawings were minimal so they fit that category nicely.

AL

Would you say that you are still a minimalist today?

WW

Absolutely not. I completely shattered all of that. That's gone. Sadly, the messy and bulky prevails. I think an artist needs a manifesto that states what you won't do more than what you will do. It's good to have rules and so forth, which I did, and later I got bored and broke them.

AL

Your conceptual approach took root when you were in school and you really flourished during your early California years. Before moving to New York in 1973, you were already showing alongside other conceptualists and minimalists. Did you think of the photos and videos you were making as satirizing this scene?

WW

Not really, not satire. I'm not sure how to describe it.

AL

There's a big difference between satire and parody. And there's also just tongue-in-cheek humor.

WW

The reason that humor appealed to me is that early on I would show my work, and someone would say, "It's interesting." Then a little later, when I would show my photos, videos, and drawings and someone would burst out laughing, I knew they really got it. I was looking for clarity in my work. I had to "get" it myself.

AL

Interesting is such a stand-in word. You know, the idea that humor is a lower form of expression is ridiculous. There is such a wide realm of art that is so flat, it doesn't elicit any type of reaction. When work is funny, or even sad, people tend to have a prejudiced reaction, as if it is somehow easy. But making work that people viscerally respond to is actually hard.

WW

Not for me. When I first started working, I was really striving for clarity. What I liked about my videos was that my mother would like them, my neighbor would like them, anybody would like them. Whereas with other works of mine, you'd perhaps have to know something, be schooled in something. The videos just seemed to break through. That's something very strong.

AL

Your work deals so much with signs and symbols. Did you pay attention to things like semiotics and other critical theories?

WW

Yes. I'm a big intellectual. BFA, MFA.



LEARN TO DANCE WITH MODERN ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT

Learn to Dance with Modern Electronic Equipment, 1973, silver gelatin print, 14 x 11 inches.



Eckhard Puzzin, 1992, ink on silver gelatin print, 14 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

AL

I edited your new book by arranging the works into thematic sections, one of which is more directly about language. It includes a few rebus drawings where you use figures in place of words. It takes a little effort, but they are very legible in terms of their meaning. I feel like the clarity you seek is what makes your work feel universal; lots of people can see it and get it. You aren't talking to a limited art-world audience—knowing about French theory doesn't matter, even if the work can be analyzed through that framework.

WW

Those theories are interesting and can be really useful, I suppose.

AL

I'd imagine that they were also part of the conversation in that era. You studied painting as an undergraduate at MassArt in Boston, right?

WW

Yes. Then I went to the University of Illinois, and that's when I broke into other areas.

WW

Yes. Then I went to the University of Illinois, and that's when I broke into other areas.

AL

Were you at the University of Illinois when John Cage was there?

WW

I spent most of my time at the music school and the Department of Electrical Engineering . . . Anywhere but the painting department. I had a fellowship to work with engineers on interactive environments. I'm not joking.

AL

Was that like pairing you up with scientists?

WW

Yeah. I would think up something and we would build it together. My graduate thesis was an interactive environment where you would walk through, and things would fall on you or drop down or light up. I really thought that was much more ambitious and much cooler than painting. I had to stay back a summer to get my MFA in painting.

AL

(laughter) Oh, really?

WW

Truly.

AL

What were you doing with the music school? Did you know Lejaren Hiller?

WW

I met him. He wrote the *Illiad Suite* at Illinois. The first work composed by a computer I think.

AL

Right. And he did *HPSCHD (Harpsichord)* with Cage.

WW

There was a lot going on in the music school that was radical. I was close to the composer Salvatore Martirano, who was open to collaboration. You could do something, and someone else would do something else, and we'd all be there interacting, so to speak. I made gigantic inflatable sculptures with lights and sounds . . . Very '60s.

AL

You were mixing your mediums, that's for sure. Were you already working with photography as well?

WW

Not really. I picked up photography when I first started teaching at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1968/69. I needed to somehow document these outdoor pieces I was doing, like floating things down the Milwaukee River. I made one funny piece where if someone flushed their toilet, the backyard would rise.

AL

That's beautiful.

WW

I hooked something up to the plumbing system so the toilet would flush and the earth would raise a little bit.

AL

It was your earth piece! Gotta bring that back.

WW

Okay! I'll go do that now. See you later.

(laughter)

AL

Where in Wisconsin were you?

WW

I lucked into a great position as a visiting artist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with Richard Artschwager, Malcolm Morley, Robert Morris, and John Chamberlain. You know who was there too? Borges! I thought I had discovered him but when I went to his lecture, the place was packed. "What, you know him?" Godard was there that year. It was a pretty interesting place.

AL

Wow!

WW

It was really exciting. I would do these things like throw radios off buildings and record the sound. I had something that dripped from the top floor all the way to the bottom floor so that when you walked up the stairways things would kind of go past your eyes. I was teaching conceptual art to grad students. For a twenty-two-year-old, it was a pretty cool position, right?

AL

The coolest.

WW

I would take the class to watch pigs being slaughtered at the Oscar Mayer plant. We watched the artificial insemination of cows. We discovered these emergency fire escape chutes at the university. You would jump through a trap door and be sent flying out into a parking lot. These had been closed since the '40s, but we discovered them and used them, and were sort of arrested as we were flying into the parking lot.

AL

Oh my God. How did you land that gig?

WW

The head of the department there liked my work and thought he'd take a chance. I was hoping to get a faculty position but that certainly didn't happen. I did a show called *Leftovers* where I took the work that students abandoned at the end of summer and put it in the exhibition hall, lit it perfectly. It looked beautiful, as good as the good stuff, but they thought I was making fun of the department. Plus I never went to faculty meetings. I didn't realize that you had to do that to keep your job. Luckily, I got a one-year position at Cal State–Long Beach. It was for the best. I moved to LA. I got a dog and named him Man Ray.

AL

And the rest is history . . . But teaching one class can't do much for your budget—then, or especially now.

WW

I was floating on like \$7,000 a year or something like that. When your rent was only \$225 or \$100 a month, you could basically manage.

AL

Were you reading a lot back then?

WW

Yes. I was reading Borges and the Bible. I remember describing myself as a crystal to the draft board.

AL

You just told them that you were a crystal?

WW

Yes. It was when I moved to LA that my funny work started to come out. Also my writing really happened then. I got a typewriter and found the Princess Cruises stationery. One of the things I was doing at that point was photos with text underneath. I would type the text, photograph it, and then print it with the image. I didn't want to write on the photograph; it had to be purely photographic.



Untitled ("I'm interested in knowing . . ."), 1970–71, typewriting on Princess Cruises stationery, 11 x 8.5 inches.

AL

Were your texts used as scripts for the early videos?

WW

I would write a little bit for the video text but usually not—because I found it best to think up a premise, turn the video equipment on, shoot something, look at it, try it again, and figure out what to do. If it was written down, it would become too stilted and too boring.

AL

It's fascinating that your writing ends up having more of a relationship to your drawings and photos than to video, where one would think of text working as a script. Did you completely abandon painting at that point?

WW

Yes, I never thought I would get back into painting.

AL

Your drawings are so expressly funny and often strange. I'm wondering if you were ever a fan of comics, or whether you were thinking about Saul Steinberg or other cartoonists like that?

AL

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WW

Not really. One thing I noticed about my drawings versus cartoons is that the cartoonist had a recognizable style and before you even saw the joke you knew what the joke was because of that style. You get ready for the kind of shaky line that this person does or the squiggly line that another one does. I found that my strategy, which I developed after a little while, was to change directions so you couldn't predict or know what might happen, and that this might result in more surprising things.

AL

Well, that definitely happens in the often-asynchronous marriage of language and image in your drawings. The cognitive dissonance—or maybe the distance—between words and images is what makes me think of the drawings as an extension of your writing more so than comics.

WW

I love Roz Chast, and I like lots of cartoonists, but I don't feel like I'm one of them. But other people might think I am. I don't know.

AL

Well, you don't have characters.

WW

That's it.

AL

You don't have anything that recurs. I have a cartoonist friend who regularly submits her work to the *New Yorker*, and she often makes the cut. There is one day a week when all the comic artists submit their portfolios with eight to ten pieces. If they don't choose any of your works you can't resubmit them, they're done. I can't think of a worse profession.

WW

That's harsh. My dealers weren't too happy when I would bring in another fifty drawings for them to catalog, because it took more time than their staff was willing to spend on putting the number on the back and entering it into the book. I remember Horace Solomon saying, "We have enough drawings." Then Ileana Sonnabend was really upset with me because I wouldn't let her frame anything. The drawings couldn't be framed; they were just pinned up. And the photographs couldn't be framed; they were just pinned up. That was part of the sort of minimalist conceptual period when it was really important to be strict and stern.



OMG, 2021, acrylic and charcoal on wood panel, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.

AL

What broke you out of it?

WW

I'm a painter, and I always was. Of course I had given it up because painting was dead and I wanted to be alive, so I stopped. But I kept dreaming: If I was painting, what would it be like? By the early '80s people were painting again.

AL

Once painting was allowed again?

WW

Yeah, painting was happening, David Salle, Julian Schnabel, and everyone. So I sheepishly did a painting on one of those Fredrix canvases that you can buy, but I painted on the back of it. A farm scene with a telephone pole and a broken telephone line. I did this painting in Maine, far away from the art world. A secret vice. Then I just got used to it and had fun with it.

AL

The paintings you've been doing from the mid '80s onward are stylistically all over the place, you've made so many different moves, but while working on this book with you and curating your exhibitions at Sperone Westwater and Marc Selwyn Fine Art that will accompany the book, I found that, no matter what medium, you continually work with many recognizable sets of themes. I built the book around these, rather than trying to go for a chronological approach or some other structuring device. One can see how the themes play out across your videos, photos, drawings, and paintings.

WW

It's fascinating to me that you notice that. I'm not sure I do, but it's interesting that you think I do.

AL

I'm sure it's hard for any of us to see what our own patterns are like. For instance, you have done a lot of work about architecture.

WW

Architecture has always been something that gets in there. I don't know why.

AL

A lot of the writing feels like jokes for an abstract Bob Hope routine, like if you were a gag writer and you were coming up with one-liners for his USO show. And some of them are really abstract, like poetry. Were you a poetry reader?

WW

No, not at all.



Okay but should have used conte crayon throughout, 1975, pencil and conte crayon on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches.

AL

You're just kind of a quasi-poetry writer.

WW

Yeah.

AL

What have you been reading lately? Last time we talked you were reading *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis. Did you finish it?

WW

I did. I loved it. It is certainly worth rereading.

AL

You like big books.

WW

I do. I don't like short little ones. In art school I read *Remembrance of Things Past*, *War and Peace*, *Ulysses*. I liked that. The first short thing I liked was Borges's *Labyrinths*, which had a big influence on me.

AL

I love that you read this heavy stuff and then the work you make is all about clarity. You also listen to classical music while you work.

WW

Yes.

AL

Always?

WW

Yes. Since I first became overwhelmed by it in my last year of high school. I heard *The Four Seasons* on the radio. It was a really corny Vivaldi piece, but I was just like, Wow, what is that? I had goosebumps. And then I heard Bach's *Partita no. 6* played by Glenn Gould, and that gave me goosebumps, too. I went to art school in Boston and they had amazing radio stations at MIT and Harvard. They would devote whole programs to exploring the sonata form, for example, or the entire work of one composer. It was really deep; it wasn't just a little of this, a little of that, like FM stations. It was heavy and exciting, and I became a Glenn Gould addict.

AL

Did you see him live?

WW

I saw him in 1964 at the Gardner Museum, where he didn't perform; he just stood next to a piano and talked. It was really maddening, but quite entertaining at the same time.

AL

Right, like there's a piano up there, but not to be played. I saw Charlemagne Palestine do something like that once at Sonnabend. He hadn't performed in New York City in however many years, and they had a Bösendorfer for him, which has the extra keys he needs to get into the lower depths. He ranted the whole time about how New York doesn't respect artists and didn't touch the piano once.

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WW

He used to play for me occasionally at his place on Chambers Street.

AL

Were you also into pop music?

WW

No, pop music was great in the '50s, but by the '60s it was terrible.

AL

You and I both share a love of Morton Feldman. When did you find him?

WW

I met him when I was at the University of Illinois and remember seeing him on stage talking to John Cage. He was pretty magnetic.

I recently got a recording of his five-hour *String Quartet no. 2*. It kind of cleanses the palate to listen to something like that. And I was listening to a lot of spectral music five or six years ago and that was really exciting.

AL

Like who?

WW

Gérard Grisey. And Tristan Murail, another composer who was teaching at Columbia.

AL

Do you get inspiration from listening to music while you're working?

WW

No. I just have it on. For a while, I made sure that when I was painting, I was only listening to twentieth-century music, because I didn't want to get distracted and start painting the wrong century. Or if things are too overwhelming and too wonderful you kind of interpret your own work as being the cause of that.

AL

It infiltrates your mind.

WW

For a moment you think you're great.



Mad, 2021, acrylic and charcoal on wood panel, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.

AL

I recently bought a new stereo and had this experience the other day when I put a record on while I was trying to work. The speakers are so much better than what I had before, and I became completely overwhelmed by the music. I stood frozen in place with a book in my hand for two minutes because I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

WW

What were you listening to?

AL

A duet album by the great South African jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and bassist Johnny Dyani. I must have been standing in the sweet spot, almost where the microphone was when they were recording it. In a way it felt like the music was being aimed directly at me, and while it was on I couldn't do anything else.

WW

Wow.

AL

I've found that I can't work anymore at all with music that has words. I used to be able to, but now I can't get anything done.

WW

Lately, I've been listening to Monteverdi and Gesualdo madrigals while I'm painting. I went through a big Monteverdi period about twenty years ago, and now I'm back into that. And I do love William Byrd as well as Fayrfax, Tallis, Gibbons, Brahms, Scriabin, and Bach. I have twenty million CDs, all classical.

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AL

The new paintings that you're doing, what are they about?

WW

I became interested in images of wrecked houses or cars or boats. Disasters from the internet—an irate contractor bulldozed the condos he built somewhere in England when he didn't get paid. A car drove into Mr. Plueger's kitchen, it had to be boarded up. A truck smashed into Pete's Convenience store in Iowa. . . . I'm also working on drawings on plywood—some look like they should be on paper like *New Yorker* cartoons, but they're drawn on big chunks of wood. I've also been making more of my postcard paintings. Recently, they're mostly these beautiful motel cards. Working upstate for the past three years has led to quite an array of directions and that's okay, I guess.

AL

So many directions. This book is different from a lot of your other publications, certainly the books in the last number of years. In terms of your audience, what do you think the reaction will be?

WW

I have no idea. I'm really happy with the book. You did a great job curating it. The most puzzling thing about it, I guess, is the cover. You know, it's very misleading.

AL

The cover is indeed confusing. I had some friends over to my house, and I didn't point it out to them. It was just sitting on my table, and it really confused a couple of people.

WW

It's very perplexing, isn't it? Perfect.

Clocking in at 352 pages, the book is made up of materials primarily from the 1970s and 1980s. There isn't a page number in sight after the introduction, and at times it can feel less like a curated volume than a self-guided rummage through Wegman's archives. This looseness is by design, as Lampert freely admits: "No attempt whatsoever has been made to place works in chronological order because there is no way to conclusively know when they were created." More production work could have been done to brighten or darken some of the scans so the reader doesn't have to squint at Wegman's pencil lines and paint strokes. But these are small matters when you're looking at so many treasures. Page after page of text, some typed, some written by hand, and images drawn, photographed, and painted reveal again and again Wegman's seemingly bottomless inventiveness and humor.



William Wegman/Primary Information

William Wegman: *The times we spent together were well spent*, 1982

Each of Wegman's texts is a small world, easy to read in the same monotone he uses in his films with his dogs. One handwritten note delivers an insane twist:

Dear Eve

School is very difficult here in Virginia. I am very smart however and also being the teacher I get high grades.

In another, he drops a truth bomb with the smug confidence of someone who does all their own research online:

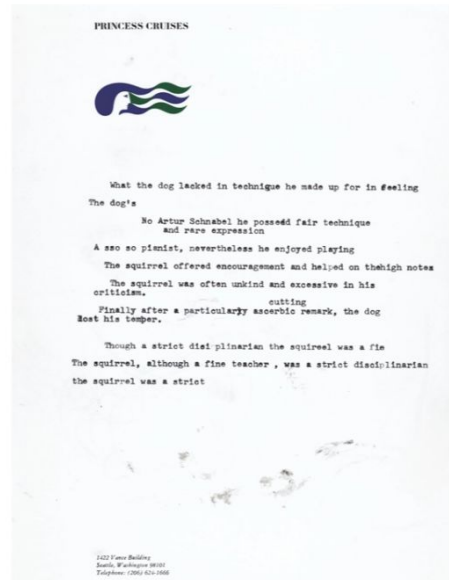
"DRY GOODS" SPELLED BACKWARDS IS WOULD BE "SLOPE GOOF" IF "DRY GOODS" WERE SPELLED "FOOG EPOLS."

Wegman, delightfully, got his hands on a stack of Princess Cruises stationary. The corporate logo, a woman gazing to the right, her green and blue hair blowing in the same direction, lends his typewritten assertions a demented authority. Some highlights:

A Travel Agent's job is never done. Each flight departure is a little like a death in the family. The group excursions are devastating.

A Travel Agent's job is never done. Each flight departure is a little like a death in the family. The group excursions are devastating.

Are you the man they call TRACTOR? I was told to look you up when I got to the city and that you might be able to ~~move some stuff for me~~. plow my garden and help me move some stuff plow something for me

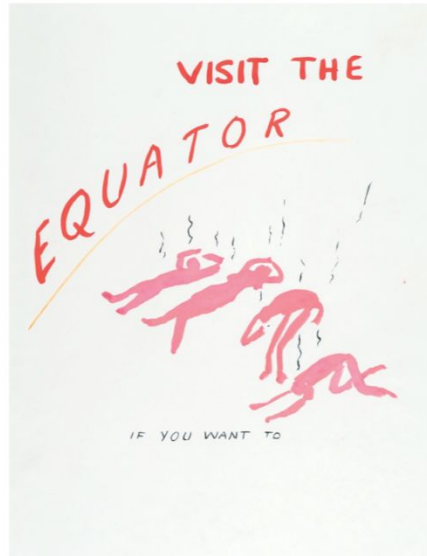


William Wegman/Primary Information

William Wegman: *Untitled* ("What the dog lacked in technique he made up for in feeling..."), 1970-1971

This flat, non-sequitur humor anticipates the unplaceable tone of humorists like Jack Handey, whose signature "Deep Thoughts" ran on Saturday Night Live in the 1990s (a classic: "Instead of mousetraps, what about baby traps? Not to harm the babies, but just to hold them down until they can be removed."), and the meme-like scenarios of Chris (Simpsons artist). That same fearless defiance of reality and logic appears throughout his drawings, even in his loosest work. In one hand-painted composition, the text reads "VISIT THE EQUATOR / IF YOU WANT TO" while pink figures writhe on the ground in the heat.

In the collection's introduction, Lampert reveals his (and maybe Wegman's own) unease with what to call these combinations of images and text. He cites Gary Larson and *New Yorker* gags, but locates Wegman's result "somewhere between a cartoon and a koan." It's okay to call these what they really are: most of this book is full of joyfully weird cartoons. In this medium Wegman rivals absurd greats like Glen Baxter, David Shrigley, and B. Kliban.



William Wegman/Primary Information

William Wegman: *Untitled* ("Visit the equator..."), undated

Like other fine artists such as Saul Steinberg or Faith Ringgold, Wegman makes good use of the tools of comics and cartooning to convey the power and hilarity of his visual imagination. A two-page spread depicts a "sandwich beverage" (a scribbled sandwich with a straw sticking out of it) and on the facing page a watercolor diagram of a BLT being assembled, with plywood in place of the bread. Another image, of two blue-eyed, brown-haired boys wearing matching blue shirts, is captioned "NOT TWINS BUT CLOSELY RELATED," as though to reassure against a *Shining*-style situation. An unfinished portrait of a woman announces with that Wegman-brand certainty: "Does this look like you? As far as I'm concerned it does." Facing an enormous public sculpture rivaling Hudson Yards' Vessel in monolithic dumbness ("5 MILLION DOLLAR SCULPTURE / PEOPLE LOVE IT"), onlookers announce their approval: "great," "cool," "awesome." One apparently Italian onlooker shouts from a rooftop: "*Bolissima*" [sic].

Wegman often offers solutions to problems that don't and have never existed. In one cartoon, a boy in a sweater gestures to a floating sheet of paper that says "Hi Folks: My name is Hans Pototow. Just think of 'Hands-Potato' and it's easy to remember. I am a newsboy." (With his other hand, he gestures to a sheet of paper that says simply, "NEWS.")



William Wegman/Primary Information
 William Wegman: *Size of a Pea, Size of a Golf Ball*, c. 1970

Unnecessary problem solving is a rich tradition in cartooning, and the book leans into Wegman’s particular approach, opening with a design for a device that screams “better mousetrap”: a dust pan with arrows pointing toward dust, grip, and a small piece of cheese, while a mouse gazes toward the arrangement. What self-described “pantoologist” Jerry Moriarty once wrote about Ernie Bushmiller, the creator of the much-beloved *Nancy* comic, rings true about Wegman and his work, too:

Bushmiller was a systems inventor. When his brain couldn’t comprehend an established system, he created a new one to replace it.... Nancy’s kitchen chair is too low for the table, so she puts each chair leg in a high heel shoe from Aunt Fritzi’s closet. Sluggo can’t get a square mirror to hang straight on the wall, so he hangs a round mirror. Nancy makes do, Sluggo makes do, and Ernie Bushmiller made do. This went on every day for 50 years.

Wegman makes do as well, through an endless array of ways to think about and reimagine the world. And we’re lucky to have them at all: he lost a significant amount of his work to a studio fire in 1978. This loss gives potency to another observation of Lampert’s, that Wegman’s compositions “possess a sense of immediacy, as if the whole thing was forced out of Wegman’s head via his hand before the idea could evaporate.” *Writing By Artist* can serve as a guide for other artists who are willing to venture into humor and cartooning on the sly. ●



FOR A MOMENT HE FORGOT WHERE HE WAS AND JUMPED INTO THE OCEAN

William Wegman/Primary Information

William Wegman: *For a Moment He Forgot Where He Was and Jumped into the Ocean*, 1972

The New York Times

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William Wegman's "The Great Indoors" (2013), at Sperone Westwater. WILLIAM WEGMAN, Sperone Westwater, New York

William Wegman, 'Postcard Paintings'

By KEN JOHNSON

Two terrific shows highlight the recent and early works of William Wegman, one of America's smartest and funniest artists: "Postcard Paintings," at Sperone Westwater, and, at Magenta Plains, older works on paper. (Neither exhibition includes any of the comical photographs of Weimarers that made Mr. Wegman famous in the late 1970s and '80s, and that's O.K.) The "Postcard Paintings" are based on a seemingly dumb idea. They're made by adhering tourist-type postcards to panels and then using a brush and paint to extend to a much broader area whatever is depicted in the postcard — a landscape, a restaurant interior, skiers skiing, a well-known artwork. Large multipanel works involve disparate postcards glued to different parts of the whole.

These pieces have curiously vertiginous, spatial effects as your focus zooms in on the miniature scale of the postcard imagery and out to its painterly extrapolation. Some paintings depict postcard images on walls that fold this way and that, as if in a museum of dreams. In one of the simplest and most poignant, a man is working at an old desk in a bare gray room with five large windows overlooking a rocky seacoast. One view is a postcard reproducing a seascape painting, while the others are Mr. Wegman's loosely painted variations. Called "Inside Outside," it's an oddly melancholic yet thrilling meditation on the limits of consciousness.

Except for one large postcard painting, the Magenta Plains show consists of drawings, collages and altered photographs from the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Many are laugh-out-loud funny. "Dream House," a modern dwelling rendered in brushy orange watercolor, has some features labeled, including "living quarters," "penthouse" and, circled for emphasis, "torture chamber." It's a good example of the element of surprise that is one of the most important ingredients of both art and humor.

Sperone Westwater

257 Bowery, at Stanton Street, Lower East Side

Through April 23

Magenta Plains

94 Allen Street, at Broome Street, Lower East Side

Through April 24



Mr. Wegman's "No Answer" (1984), at Magenta Plains. William Wegman, Magenta Plains and Sperone Westwater Gallery



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'THE DOG REALLY CONFUSED THINGS': ANOTHER SIDE OF WILLIAM WEGMAN

BY *M. H. Miller* POSTED 04/21/16 11:24 AM[Share](#) 226 [Tweet](#) 14 [Pinterest](#) 2 [sharethis](#) 246

William Wegman, *Inside Outside*, 2014, oil and postcard on wood panel.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

William Wegman bought his first dog in California after responding to an ad in a Long Beach, California newspaper that said, "Weimaraners \$35." He called the new pet Man Ray. Wegman had trained as a painter, but as a graduate student at the University of Illinois Champagne-Urbana in the mid-1960s, he abandoned the medium, he says, due to the popular notion at the time that painting was dead. He turned his attention to photography and video, and the dog kept wandering into his shots.

"He'd get in the way, but he looked really amazing," Wegman told me recently. "So I found some things for him to do." Most of his work didn't feature Man Ray, but the dog quickly became a kind of signature. "Maybe one in ten videos or one in twenty had a dog, and the rest had other stuff. But certainly people didn't say, Oh, you know the guy who does the videos with the chair? No, I was the guy who does the videos with the dog."

A different view of Wegman's career is on display through this weekend at two galleries in New York: [Sperone Westwater](#), exhibiting the artist's so-called postcard paintings, and [Magenta Plains](#), which has a selection of his drawings, mostly from the 1970s. Wegman picked painting up again in the mid-'80s, after 20 years of avoiding the form. He got back into it by painting a telephone pole near a barn in Maine, where he has a house, but he made the work on the back of a canvas. "I didn't want

anyone to know," he said. "I wasn't going to communicate to anyone that I was painting. I was going to do it in private. But that didn't last long."

The paintings at Sperone Westwater all have postcards as their focal point. The cards, which include scenes that Wegman paints around or extends, were sent by friends over the years, and their variability causes the artist to shift styles from canvas to canvas. A postcard of an Edvard Munch painting that depicts a man on a rocky beach turns into a gloomy portrait of artistic suffering, with Wegman placing the man forlornly at a desk inside a beachfront house. A John Travolta lookalike standing outdoors in a flashy leisure suit becomes a jumping off point for geometrical abstraction. Wegman told me that a critic once said of him, in a not entirely friendly way, that his paintings looked like he "put art history in a blender," an idea he's decided to run with in a more literal way here. He openly admitted to me that his technical skills as a painter are limited. "I'm not that good, really, it's just the card makes it look like I'm really good. That's a trick in itself—setting the table to make the card do the work."



William Wegman, *Hopper Origami*, 2014, oil and postcards on wood panels.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

During our interview, Wegman walked with me to Magenta Plains, which is around the corner from Sperone Westwater. He lives in Manhattan, but he keeps a house in Maine, and he looked vaguely prepared to disappear into the wilderness at any moment. He had a sturdy mountain bike with him, which might have helped in this endeavor. On Delancey Street, we passed a man walking a Weimaraner, and Wegman stopped to admire it silently. Man Ray is long gone, but he now lives with two different Weimaraners. "As far as the breed standard, the two that I have now are probably most likely to win Westminster—not that I show them," Wegman told me, like a proud parent.

Magenta Plains is run by the artist David Deutsch, an old friend of Wegman's. They met in the '70s, when they were both living in Los Angeles. Wegman described Deutsch a "my fishing buddy in L.A." In the show, there's an old photo of the two of them, seated at a table in 1972, each with shoulder-length hair. Wegman has scribbled words all over it, mostly the names of various plays, ranging from *Macbeth* to *Evita*.

L.A. is where Wegman came into his own as an artist, honing his conceptual chops with friends like John Baldessari. There's an oddly personal feeling to the show at Magenta Plains, like that of an artist going through an old box of works he'd forgotten about in the basement. Like the postcard paintings, his drawings demonstrate a surprising range. A simple ink drawing of a man standing over a stove, flames rising out of the top of his head and the caption BURNING WITH DESIRE FOR HOME COOKING recalls the sarcastic spirit of Raymond Pettibon. Other drawings are minimalist exercises in geometry. Some look like *New Yorker* cartoons. There are several hints at the era of self-love in which they were made. A sloppy doodle of a man looking out from behind a curtain has the caption OFTEN WHAT LURKS BEHIND THE CURTAIN IS OUR OWN GLOOMY SELF SO CHEER UP.

I had earlier asked Wegman if he was intentionally trying to distance himself from the videos and

photographs for which he's best known—if he thought the dogs were maybe overshadowing him.

“It's really important when you're a young artist to find yourself and you do that more by saying what you won't do than saying what you will do,” he told me. “So you find your way, and that's what I did. Somehow, the dog kind of really confused things. He came along, and I was that. And I never thought I'd become that, but I guess I did. So I had that thing going, whatever it was. It almost had a life of its own.”

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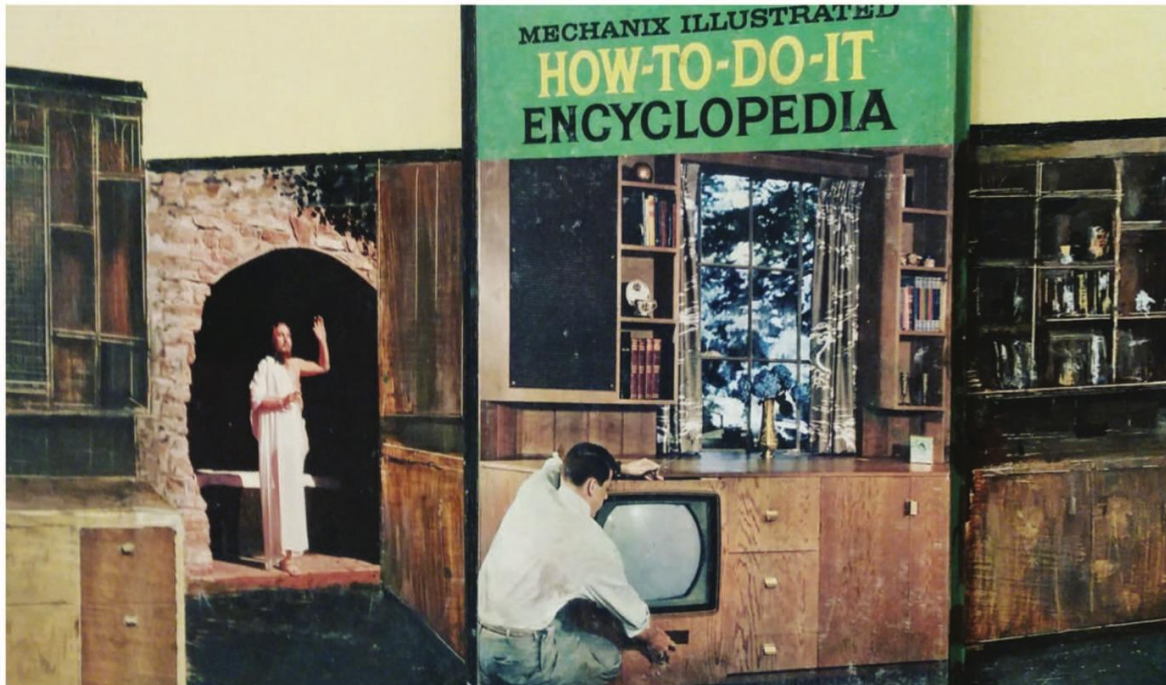
FEATURED

WILLIAM WEGMAN

BLOUINARTINFO

More Bite Than Bark: William Wegman's Other Side

BY Scott Indrisek | March 30, 2016



Detail of a work in the "Postcard Paintings" exhibition at Sperone Westwater.

(Scott Indrisek)

[William Wegman](#) resides with his family in a sprawling, multi-floor live/work domain in Chelsea. It's the house that dogs built — specifically, the emotive Weimaraners that the artist has photographed, often garbed in human clothing, for decades. But Wegman has quietly and significantly amassed an oeuvre, stretching back to the early '70s, that has nothing to do with man's best friend. A series of exhibitions in 2012 helped broaden the understanding of Wegman's larger practice: "[Hello Nature](#)," a retrospective at Bowdoin College Museum of Art; a selection of drawings presented at [Salon 94 Freemans](#); and "[Artists Including Me](#)," a solo painting show at Sperone Westwater. This month, New York has another chance to take in Wegman's comic genius and serious artistic chops, with barely a dog in sight.

First, there's "[Postcard Paintings](#)," also at Sperone Westwater, through April 23. These small- and large-scale paintings on panel exploit a simple conceit: a cheap postcard used as the centerpiece of a larger composition. The postcards themselves are of various types — sourced from museum gift shops and holiday destinations alike — and they offer Wegman both a prompt and a cheat. While the postcards are collaged onto the surface, these works aren't collages; the cards, whether depicting a famous [Edward Hopper](#) canvas or a romantic waterfall, act more like a conversation starter, while simultaneously (and

subtly) doing the heavy lifting of building a composition. By focusing the eye on the often photographic, found image, Wegman tricks the viewer: the painted passages around the postcards achieve, via osmosis or some form of vampirism, a clarity and grace that they might not have on their own. In the best works, it's difficult to discern the boundary between postcard and painting. What Wegman essentially does is build up a frame or environment for the postcard to live or float within. The surrounding paintings are often architectural in nature, depicting unreal spaces whose planes and perspectives are all out of whack (reminiscent at times of the exploding angles and walls of Leipzig School painter [David Schnell](#)).

Often the juxtapositions are played for laughs, as Wegman extends the postcard imagery out past the frame (a station wagon goofily distended, in one instance). Two or three or more postcards can coexist in a single painting, creating worlds within worlds whose contradictions amuse and confuse. These more complicated works are impressive, but Wegman does just as well when he keeps it simple — as in a small painting based around a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge, which becomes an abstracted landscape populated by purple mountains and boxy cars. A series of paintings on the gallery's second floor break form by including books, rather than postcards — namely a series of vintage how-to home-repair guides, bulkily affixed to the panel's surface — giving Wegman additional chances to land sly visual puns.

The “Postcard Paintings” are a charming mixture of the serious and the silly, a mood that carries over into the second Wegman exhibition, at [Magenta Plains](#) on the Lower East Side through April 24. Here we get drawn-on photographs and drawings, many of them in the form of perverse or absurd cartoons. As with the postcards, photographs are a “way in” for Wegman here — his doodles and defacements act to finish the existing image. In one of the most striking (and disturbing) works, from 1979, we see a young girl, her face — only half of it retroactively lipsticked in ink by the artist — poised at the edge of a kitchen table, which is bare save for a bone-shaped dog biscuit. The effect is a discomfiting combination of the commercial and the erotic, of wholesomeness and fetish.

But the main event at Magenta Plains is the drawings, which generate strange laughter. (Fans of [Glen Baxter](#) will feel right at home.) In one, resembling a captionless New Yorker cartoon, a Native American woman, her baby snugly papoosed on her back, converses with a yellow-blazered society lady. In another, a man and a woman sit in an apartment that's literally raining money from the ceiling; on the wall hangs a Wegman dog portrait (it's unclear whether the man in the frame is Wegman himself, flush with canine cash, or simply a money-hungry collector). In his sketches and studies and one-offs the artist wanders casually from the puckish — photos of Bruins hockey players with lipstick and thick eyelashes drawn on their faces — to the sweetly sentimental, as in a washed-out purple landscape depicting ducks in migration. “More my impression than actual rendering,” reads a line of text below the painted scene. “(how I felt).”

Art in America

GUTS



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everyday girlhood in the '90s—an *Ever After* VHS tape figured as a mattress, a glittery Jellies makeup organizer as a pool, and hearts and stars throughout—among materials representing alternative” artifacts like Dario Argento movies and “Liquid Television” cartoons. On top of narrating the pursuit of subculture from a suburban remove, Lee’s references prod and make a mess of the shifting and often contradictory roles that young women are expected to play—daughter and bride, creative and muse, thoughtful subject and scopic object.

While the dolls serve as armature for their accessories, they don’t seem hollow. All the care behind Lee’s materials adds up to the idea of wearing a thing deeply. Her papers and plastics recall just how much something like a poster can matter to a young person; they also point to the dense negotiations of race, class, and gender that can undergird a person’s visibility and expression. Lee’s taste for the edgy compounds this knot, reveling in the joys and pains of deviance from standard scripts. For her generation, the internet turned such teenage experiments of affiliation and disidentification into a public ritual: the bedroom became not just a stage but a broadcasting booth for identity formation. In their glass cages, the Jennys seem to wonder: how best to unleash the freak?

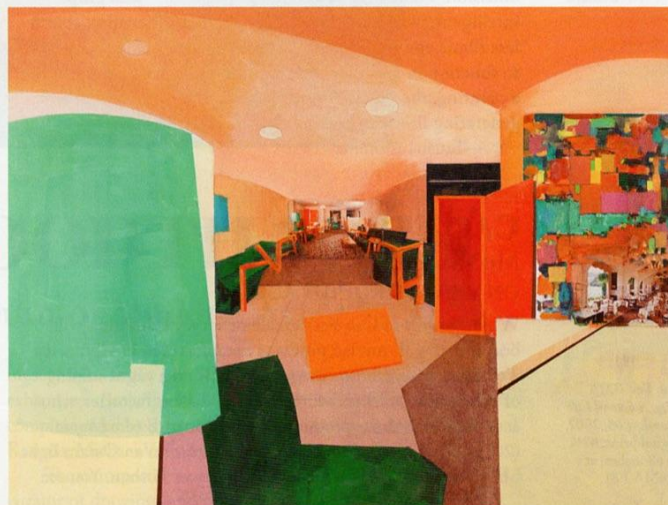
Those familiar with *Mommy*, or the conversations around it, are likely to associate Lee’s name with sincerity and gut-punching confessionalism. The film’s narration and editing team with media tropes turned achingly personal; Lee demonstrates how, within our digital remix culture, an image or phrase need not be unique to ring true as one’s own. While intimate citation was also the force behind “Fufu’s Dreamhouse,” such emotive heights are more difficult to reach in the white cube, with its habits of distanced observation, than in the more immersive space of cinema. In the gallery, sincerity has a higher hurdle; there, Lee seemed comparatively remote, even wry. But whether her insights came across clearly for viewers might be beside the point. As any diarist knows, secrecy is liberating—and as an Adidas ad blanketing one Jenny’s wall reads: “SUPERSTAR DOES NOT CARE WHAT THE OUTSIDE WORLD THINKS / SUPERSTAR DOES NOT LIVE LIFE INSIDE THE BOX.”

—Nick Irvin

WILLIAM WEGMAN Sperone Westwater and Magenta Plains

Although William Wegman made his reputation as a photographer who combined wry humor and conceptualism, his two recent exhibitions showed him to be an accomplished painter with a sophisticated, highly individual style. The concurrent presentations at Sperone Westwater and Magenta Plains focused on, respectively, his recent “postcard paintings” and his early works on paper. Wegman made his first paintings based on postcards in the early 1990s, and his method has remained consistent ever since: he selects postcards from a large collection he keeps in his studio, glues them on top of wood panels, and fills in the empty spaces around the images with painted marks, shapes, and figures. Despite this narrowly defined set of procedures, the resulting paintings differ greatly from one another in composition and mood.

Among the biggest of the paintings at Sperone Westwater was the sixteen-foot-wide triptych *The great indoors* (2013), which shows a panoramic view of a vast interior—a strange mix of an airport terminal and an international art fair. Several alcoves in the sides of the great hall contain different landscapes—a desert, a lake, snow-covered mountains—and the floor and ceiling of the space are packed with colorful semitransparent blocks, their rapid foreshortening emphasizing the magnitude of the place. Peering closely at the vanishing point of the painted interior, viewers will discover that the entire construction expands out from a single postcard floating around the middle of the central panel, depicting a cozy room decorated in green. Similarly, the landscape imagery springs from several different postcards, the photograph at the core



of each scene elaborated on in loose, confident brushwork. Avoiding literal depiction or detail, the artist relies on compositional logic and precisely matched colors to make the hybrid images fully believable.

The spatial and visual acrobatics of paintings like *The great indoors* are anticipated in earlier canvases on view, such as *Aerial* (2008). Although measuring only fifteen by twenty inches, it contains three different postcards—bird’s-eye views of a medieval town and a rural landscape, and a photograph of a market with a few buyers wandering between fruit and vegetable stalls. With fluid brushstrokes and a superb sense of color, Wegman has blended the three incongruent images into a single bleak landscape, the painted green and orange background wrapping around the postcards like a clump of moss. *Licensed vendor* (2011), meanwhile, strangely distorts and stretches out a colorful image of a European town before dissolving the scene in a periphery of mud-colored paint. The most fantastic of Wegman’s postcard paintings appear oddly convincing: they have the logic and persuasiveness of dreams. In the paintings, as in dreams, a few vivid details stand out from a foggy, ambiguous,

William Wegman:
Lobby Abstract,
2015, oil and
postcards on wood
panel, 30 by 40
inches; at Sperone
Westwater.

or chimerical background, tricking the mind into accepting the whole construction as entirely credible.

Among Wegman's works on paper at Magenta Plains were altered photographs dating back to the 1970s and a selection of humorous drawings and cartoons from the 1980s and '90s. The best works in the show highlighted the ambiguousness of seemingly straightforward images; several appeared to presage Wegman's recent paintings. In *Miranda (Girl with Milk Bone)*, 1979, the artist used gouache to apply fake makeup to a photograph of a girl, turning half of her face into a lascivious mask clashing disturbingly with the rest of her smiling face.

While neither exhibition included films or photographs featuring Wegman's Weimarers, the impact these dogs had on his work makes their presence felt, despite the prudent omission. Weimarers have been Wegman's ideal props—intelligent, playful, and malleable, capable of creating countless filmic and photographic situations. The postcards appear to function in a similar way: each holds in itself a nucleus of a painting, the photograph anchoring the composition and generating limitless possibilities for image making.

—Tatiana Istomina

CAO FEI

MoMA PSI

ON VIEW THROUGH AUG. 31

While viewers of Cao Fei's excellent survey exhibition will be familiar with myriad products manufactured in China, it's likely that few will have considered, beyond a vague inkling of anonymous workers toiling away in distant factories, who actually makes those products. For her video *Whose Utopia* (2006), the Chinese artist embedded herself in an Osram light-bulb factory in the Pearl River Delta city of Foshan. You see

impressive, robotic machines cranking out lightbulbs for the global market, and close-ups of workers at their meticulous, excruciatingly repetitive tasks. Cao befriended some of these mostly young workers, learning of their lives and of their hidden talents and passions. Everything changes with the video's second part: "Factory Fairytale." One worker suddenly appears as a costumed ballerina, dancing in the factory, and she is downright magical. A middle-aged male employee shows himself to be a surprisingly fluid dancer. Another young man strums an electric guitar; perhaps he yearns to be a rock star. As these workers temporarily assume fresh new identities and briefly realize their passions, regimented factory life converges with a more liberated kind of existence.

Born in Guangzhou in 1978 and based in Beijing, Cao has absorbed the realities of contemporary China in transition. Themes of rampant industrialization and commercialism, an openness to global pop culture, and a willingness to challenge social roles and restrictions, especially gender roles, abound in her work, which spans video, performance, sculpture, photography, and internet projects. *Haze and Fog* (2013), set in grayish, heavily polluted Beijing, is a zombie movie largely sans zombies. Upscale citizens, however, in ultramodern yet generic apartments, seem moribund in their collective materialistic funk. When the bloody, chomping zombies finally appear, near the end, it's a relief, not a fright; something's got to give in this tension-filled anti-paradise. In the video *Cosplayers* (2004), young devotees of Japanese anime and video games, dressed in riotous costumes, move through Guangzhou, fighting each other and also, occasionally, city residents, but they seem alienated and adrift.

There is a profound social engagement in Cao's works, which occurs partly by way of her reimagining of cities. In 2007, she began constructing an island metropolis called RMB City in the online world of Second Life, using an avatar named China Tracy. While this virtual city has a utopian streak, it is also gritty, conflicted, and strewn with references to actual China, including the Oriental Pearl TV tower in Shanghai, Chairman Mao statues, and the imposing Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing (which here sports a giant bicycle wheel at its top). It's the setting for several remarkable machinimas (films made within virtual environments), such as *i.Mirror by China Tracy (aka Cao Fei)*, 2007, a quasi love story involving hesitant yet heartfelt encounters between China Tracy and Hug Yue, the handsome, young, piano-playing avatar of a sixty-five-year-old San Francisco man.

La Town (2014) is an epic video about a dystopian future city rife with discord and decay, but one that discloses moments of tenderness and loveliness. This faux city was constructed from intricate tabletop sculptures—depicting natural landscapes, buildings, airplane crashes, and ecological disasters, and populated with plastic figurines—that are shown in vitrines in a separate room. Elsewhere are several of Cao's grainy early videos. *Imbalance 257* (1999), made while she was still a student, shows her peers at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts engaged in various activities—drinking, teasing one another, having a manic conversation in a bathroom, watching porn, and practicing Qigong. Portraying young people who are at once assertive and vulnerable, opinionated and confused about their identities and futures, the video offers a look into the raw, restless origins of Cao's work.

—Gregory Volk

Cao Fei: *RMB City: A Second Life Planning 05*, 2007, digital print, 47¼ by 63 inches; at MoMA PSI.



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MEN'S STYLE

A Tour of William Wegman's Studio in Chelsea

My Space

By STEVEN KURUTZ APRIL 6, 2016



SLIDE SHOW | 7 Photos
A Tour of William Wegman's Studio in Chelsea

Shawn Brackbill for The New York Times

Name William Wegman

Age 72

Occupation Artist and author, most recently of "William Wegman Paintings"

Location Manhattan

Favorite Room Mr. Wegman lives in a fortresslike building in Chelsea that was formerly a day school, a space he shares with his wife, Christine Burgin, and two Weimaraners, Flo and Topper.

What was your greatest artistic breakthrough in this room? I think dealing with postcards. I attach them to the canvas. I go off from the edges and try to make them get lost in the surface.

Are these paintings works in progress? All these things are here because I'm still working on them. Paintings get built slowly. They're easy to start, impossible to finish.

This white chair held together with duct tape must have a story. This chair in particular was in a piece called "Throwing Down Chairs," so it got kind of smashed. John Baldessari, who took over the studio space I had in Los Angeles when I left for New York, mailed it back to me. It was really cool that he would do that.

You moved to the city in 1973. What were your first studios like?

My first space was \$200 a month for 2,500 square feet. Briefly, I had 7,000 square feet for \$350 a month, down below the Trade Center. I don't know if I could really manage it now. I didn't love New York when I came here. I really thought I'd be going back to L.A., where I lived a block from the beach with my dog, and I was really happy. I was never really happy in New York.

Are you still unhappy in New York? Moving here changed that. The other key thing is I started playing ice hockey, and I'm a couple of blocks from the Chelsea Piers. I also have a hockey net up on the roof here where I shoot pucks.

You're known for using your dogs in your work. How are Flo and Topper as models? Flo gives you a lot of psychology. When she's up there, she's thinking. When he's up on something, he's just there. Like a mountain goat.

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 ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

ART + AUCTIONS

A Closer Look at William Wegman's Picture-Perfect Postcard Art

Weimariners helped make the photographer and artist famous, but for his most recent work, it's three-by-fives that inspire him

TEXT BY [NATASHA WOLFE](#) · Posted April 15, 2016



Hopper Origami by William Wegman
Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater

New York City–based artist William Wegman and his postcards are having a moment. Wegman, well-known for his whimsical portraits of his beloved Weimaraner dogs, has three concurrent exhibitions on view now: In New York City, [Sperone Westwater](#) has mounted “William Wegman: Postcard Paintings,” on view through April 23, and [Magenta Plains](#) is exhibiting the artist’s works on paper until April 24; [Marc Selwyn Fine Art](#) in Beverly Hills opens April 16 through May 28. In addition to these exhibitions, a new book about the artist, *William Wegman: Paintings* ([Abrams](#), \$45), is out now with a foreword by noted architecture critic Martin Filler.

We sat down with the painter and photographer to discuss one of his favorite pieces, *Hopper Origami* (2014), on view at Sperone Westwater. For this large-scale, three-panel work, Wegman used 1970s-era Italian postcards (including two of Edward Hopper paintings). “In a general way, I start near the middle and go off from there,” says Wegman. “More typically, there’s more than one postcard, and it’s about trying to make a connection—a way to get from one place to the next.”



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



“It started with an interior scene by Edward Hopper in the center. And then I created other spaces where I inserted these other postcard ‘characters’ into this environment and tried to bridge them. They connect with the horizon through the window in the Hopper. From there, I veered off even further.”



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



“The ski instructor scene in the upper middle of the painting is the ta-da moment. Otherwise it’s a lot of landscapes and scenes.”



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



“It’s all about moving the eye from one scene to the next. The cards get transformed and embedded, and you kind of accept it.”



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



"I adhere the postcards up with goeey gum that goes on the back, and then I can move them around. When it's time to anchor them, I photocopy the backs, then I glue them with paper glue and they're stuck to these wood panels."



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



"I've been collecting postcards for 20 or 30 years, starting with my first ones in Maine [where Wegman spends his summers]. Friends from Sweden and L.A. have since given me their entire postcard collections to use."



Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



“I haven’t had to buy any postcards in a long time; I have thousands. I started to organize them into groups a while ago, and they’re stored in suitcases now.”

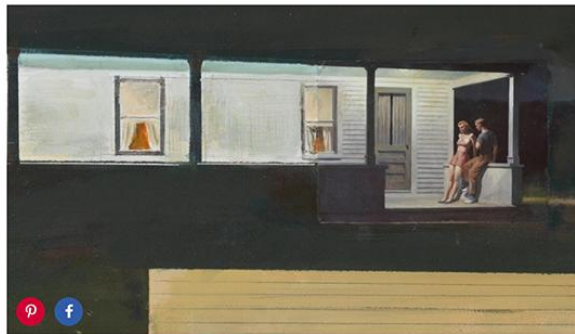


Photo: Courtesy of William Wegman and Sperone Westwater



“I’m not that interested in capturing these works of art by other artists and calling them mine. I like to find a home for them, and I’m happy playing around with them. They’re reproductions, not the originals.”

Explore [William Wegman](#) [Postcard](#) [Photographer](#) [Artist](#)

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Art and design

William Wegman: the 'dog artist' who still leads the pack

Famous for his works featuring his Weimaraners, the artist has two new shows dedicated to his postcard paintings - and they're just as delightfully droll

Jason Farago

Friday 15 April 2016 12.01 EDT

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William Wegman and four-legged friend. Photograph: Tim Mantoani

You can always fudge whether a painting or a sculpture is successful. With a joke you can't: no laugh, no achievement. So the work of William Wegman, one of America's most sympathetic artistic polymaths, has its own proof of accomplishment - the smile on your face.

A painter and an early pioneer of video art, Wegman went on to explore commercial photography and ended up something of a celebrity, with his Weimaraners in duffel jackets and roller skates appearing everywhere from wall calendars to Sesame Street, and obscuring the rest of his work. He has an above-the-artistic-average tolerance for both humor and commerce, yes. But photography has never been his only medium, and his dogs have never been his only muses.

Wegman, 72, is the subject of an eccentric, vivid and downright outstanding exhibition on view now at Sperone Westwater gallery in downtown Manhattan - which once again confirms that the man known too long only for his canine capers is in fact one of America's canniest and cleverest artists. It features more than a dozen of his "postcard paintings", for which Wegman selects bland or uninspiring photographic missives, pins them to the canvas, and then translates their shapes and spaces into droll compositions that feel one part Edward Hopper, one part Bauhaus, and one part lysergic hallucination.



How To Do It #13, 2015. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York



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A second New York show, at the smaller gallery Magenta Plains, pairs new paintings with some of his slyest drawings of the 1970s. Both shows coincide with the publication of a banging new monograph devoted to his wily works on canvas - which features contributions from the New Yorker veteran Susan Orlean and from Bob Elliott, one half of the deadpan [comedy duo Bob and Ray](#), who died earlier this year.

"There will often be one card that seems promising - something challenging, something fun," Wegman tells me when I pay a visit to his home and studio, a three-story bunker-cum-funhouse in Chelsea. "I don't want the card to be so complete that you don't need any more. With the landscapes, they suggest their form. There's the water and there's the sky, and the challenge is how do you get up and down. But with the interiors, you have to ask: what sort of room is this going to evolve into? I got excited in one case about the real ugliness of an interior: the clashing colors, the weird shapes." He has untold thousands of postcards, shoved into suitcases and scattered on several tables, most of them hilariously dull. I flick through a few of them - barns, waterfalls, third-tier suburban hotels - while one of Wegman's dogs nuzzles at my crotch.



Inside Outside, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York



In most of the paintings a postcard sits at the center of the composition, and colors and lines bleed from the card on to the canvas with bizarre consequences. Angles become so acute that perspective starts to fail. The extruded spaces remind one less of classical European perspective than of Chinese and Japanese ink painting, whose axonometric format encourages you to read multiple spaces across a composition. Much of the wit in Wegman's paintings comes from the horizontal fusion of plural spaces as one moves left to right: in one a hallway tumbles into a dining room, which then comically disintegrates to accommodate a pinned postcard of the abstract painter [Hans Hofmann](#).

Wegman studied painting at art school, but in the mid-1960s the medium was coming under sustained attack by the American avant-garde, who questioned its continued relevance. "I remember going to an exhibition of [Frank Stella](#), at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis. One of the [black paintings](#) was there - minimalism wasn't really called that yet - and it was so powerful. My art teacher said, 'This isn't art, because it's symmetrical.' That had a big effect on me. And when I got to grad school, there was a really tough collision with the establishment, both through Vietnam and through teachers who were really threatened by students saying 'Painting is dead.'"



Hopper Origami, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York



It was during his MFA studies that Wegman first picked up an early video camera - the same Sony Portapak that Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman and other pioneering American artists were importing from Japan. “We had them at the University of Wisconsin, so I had video by 1968. They used to use them in the sports department to practice your golf swing. There was a painter who had lacquer poisoning and could no longer paint - and he was making these *horrible* videos with dancers, multiple-camera things. I borrowed his.”

Like Nauman, who used the Portapak to document feats of repetitive, distressing endurance, Wegman trained the camera on himself in his studio. Unlike Nauman, he edited.

“Nauman used the whole 30-minute reel-to-reel. The thing that was different about my work is that I accepted, even strove, to have a beginning and end. That was, in that period, almost a dirty word. Narratives were considered not so cool. Having a beginning and an end seemed kind of radical. Even when I was in grad school I had a really torturous pull between high and low.”



Summer Show, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

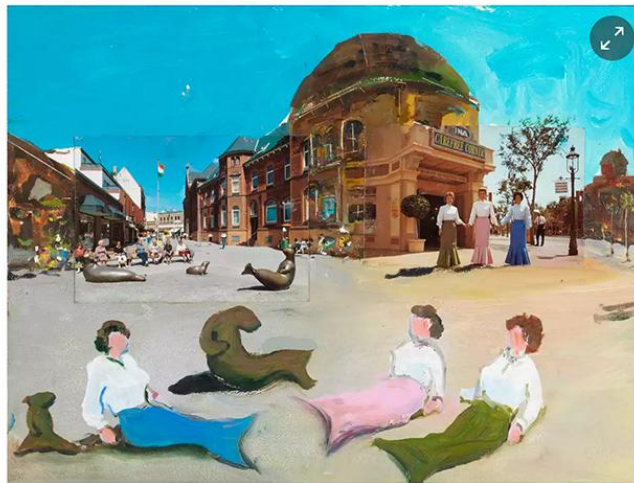


It helped that he had, as a studiomate, one of the great artistic performers of the 20th century: Man Ray, the floppy-eared Weimaraner who became the *Liv Ullmann* to his Bergman. Long before the world of contemporary art became besotted with “interspecies alliances” - in which animals, most notably in the work of Pierre Huyghe, challenge archaic notions of what it means to be human - Wegman and Man Ray were collaborating on artworks in which the rigors of conceptualism got wrecked on the shoals of canine indifference. In the enduring masterpiece *Milk/Floor* (1970-71), Wegman gets on all fours and gurgles milk like a Naumanite body artist, dribbling the white stuff into a line on the ground - only for Man Ray to interrupt, lap up the spilt milk, and then smack the camera with his snout. Or else they went in for anthropomorphism, and reveled in the implicit absurdity. In *Spelling Lesson* (1973-74), Man Ray sits at a kitchen table and grimaces slightly when Wegman grades his writing test: “When it came to *beach* you spelled it B-E-E-C-H ...”



“Whether I liked it or not, he came to my studio and got into everything,” the artist says now. “It was accidental, but Man Ray was very charismatic. He really wanted to do it. I didn’t want to become a ‘dog guy’, so I was extreme about what I would let out. But the dog was like the *Son of Sam*: he sort of made me do it. He was speaking to me always: *Bill, let’s go to the studio!* That’s what my dogs do now too.”

He has two of them these days, the animated Flo and the mellower Topper, who wander freely over the Wegman compound. They hop on the freight elevator with us as we descend to the basement, stocked with an opera house’s worth of costumes from photoshoots over the years: tutus, hockey jerseys, clown costumes. Wegman grabs a stool, which Flo hops upon eagerly, her curves as elegant as a Brancusi.



📷 Ladies of the Mall, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

Among the more surprising discoveries at Wegman’s home and studio is his mammoth collection of classical music recordings. “I probably have more CDs than anyone in the world,” he jokes, but he might not be exaggerating that much. His paintings and postcards share the room with thousands of recordings, and not of the easy-listening kind. Twentieth- and 21st-century classical music dominates, especially the spectralism of *Tristan Murail* and *G rard Grisey*. The severity and spikiness of much modern music seems at odds with Wegman’s playful style, but he finds it keeps him from getting too arrogant. “I find that I get too grandiose listening to Romantic music when I’m working. It seems to be from my era, so it’s feasible. Whereas in the bedroom I have lute music.”

And even in music, he correctly insists, the ambitions of great art have enough room for a joke or two. “Haydn is funny, if you really know your music and you know what a musical joke is. Whereas most of the painting that was considered whimsical, like Klee, you didn’t really laugh at. My videos were funny, because events unfold in time. The paintings are too big to laugh at - they’re *funny* like a French person would say, *funny* as in interesting. You can be funny in a drawing or in a video, but in a painting you can’t really be funny.”

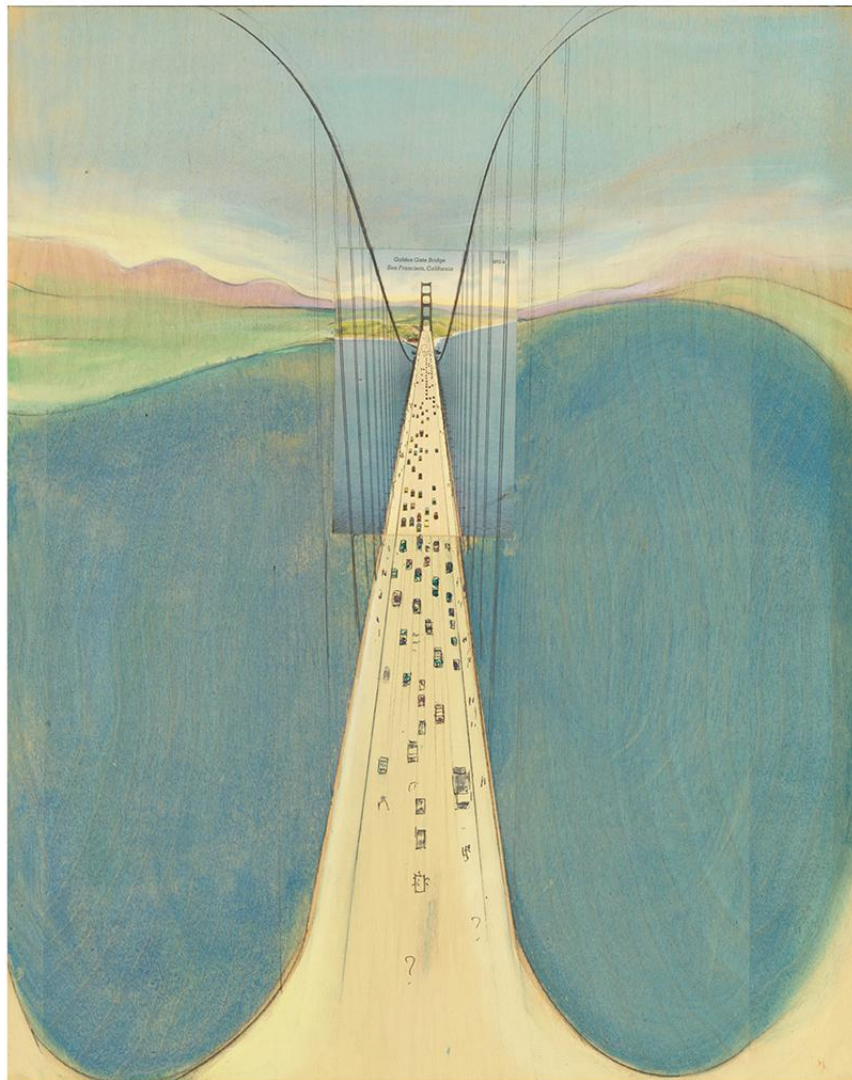
HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

William Wegman: More Than Weimaraners In Wigs

by Carey Dunne on April 20, 2016

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William Wegman, "Bridge in Question" (2012), oil, ink, graphite, and postcard on wood panel (all images courtesy William Wegman Studio and Sperone Westwater, New York)

Among a particular generation of [Sesame Street](#) and [Saturday Night Live](#) viewers, artist [William Wegman](#) is known almost exclusively for his goofy photos and videos of his pet Weimaraners dressed up in human clothing. Before he was a dog photographer, though, Wegman studied painting, a practice he's continued, prolifically, to this day. [William Wegman: Postcard Paintings](#), now on view at Sperone Westwater, highlights some of his lesser-known but equally funny and imaginative works in oil. The show coincides with

the publication of *William Wegman: Paintings* (Abrams), a new monograph featuring essays by Amy Hempel, Robert Krulwich, and Susan Orlean.

Wegman is an avid collector of vintage postcards, picturing everything from ski resorts and famous artworks to Italian restaurants and bad '80s fashion. To create his *Postcard Paintings*, Wegman glued some of these postcards onto wood panels, then painted fantastical scenes beyond their borders, elaborating on the printed images. The conceit could become a shtick in the hands of a lazier artist, but Wegman executes it with his signature humor and an impeccable handling of composition and color.



William Wegman, "Reinstallation" (2013), oil and postcards on wood panel (click to enlarge)

It's art about art, but in a way that's fun, not pedantic or particularly meta. That's thanks to his brand of absurd comedy, made famous by [Fay Ray the dog as Little Red Riding Hood](#) — Wegman is a master of the visual punchline. One work, for instance, depicts a woman smirking in a gallery, surrounded by postcards that feature gold-framed portraits of dead white men in powdered wigs; she's planning to hang a couple portraits of women alongside them to even the score. Another is a cheeky high-low mashup: in a gallery hung with postcards from famous art museum gift shops — including images of Picasso's "Weeping Woman," Goya's "Saturn Devours His Son," and Edvard Munch's "The Scream" — Wegman slips in a treacherous winter wonderland by Thomas Kincade and a souvenir postcard from Yosemite National Park.



William Wegman, "Inside Outside" (2012)
(click to enlarge) (click to enlarge)

In some paintings, Wegman goes maximalist with the postcard conceit, creating MC Escher-like plays on our perception of space. In one architectural composition, the walls of a seemingly never-ending hallway are hung with progressively smaller paintings (postcards), creating a study of perspective and dimension that feels Cubistic. But the quieter paintings are some of the most poignant. In a hazy

lavender landscape painted around a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge, cars fade into question marks and dollar signs. Another features a landscape postcard with a man's fragmented head that becomes a painting hanging on the wall of the man's bleak office. It's a melancholic illustration of the dissonance between fantasy-driven art and bland reality.

These are Matryoshka dolls of composition: the postcards become paintings within paintings. The best pieces are also games of camouflage, so expertly are the postcards blended into their surrounding scenes. Together, the works suggest a kind of infinite regress, a *Powers of Ten*-style zoom-out in which the earth itself is finally revealed as a picture on a postcard — perhaps in a galaxy shaped like a Weimaraner in a wig.



William Wegman, "Lobby Abstract" (2015), oil and postcards on wood panel



William Wegman, "The Great Indoors" (2013), oil and postcards on wood panel



Installation view, 'William Wegman: Postcard Paintings' at Sperone Westwater (2016) (click to enlarge)



Installation view, 'William Wegman: Postcard Paintings' at Sperone Westwater (2016) (click to enlarge)

William Wegman: Postcard Paintings continues at Sperone Westwater (257 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 23.

Sperone Westwater William Wegman

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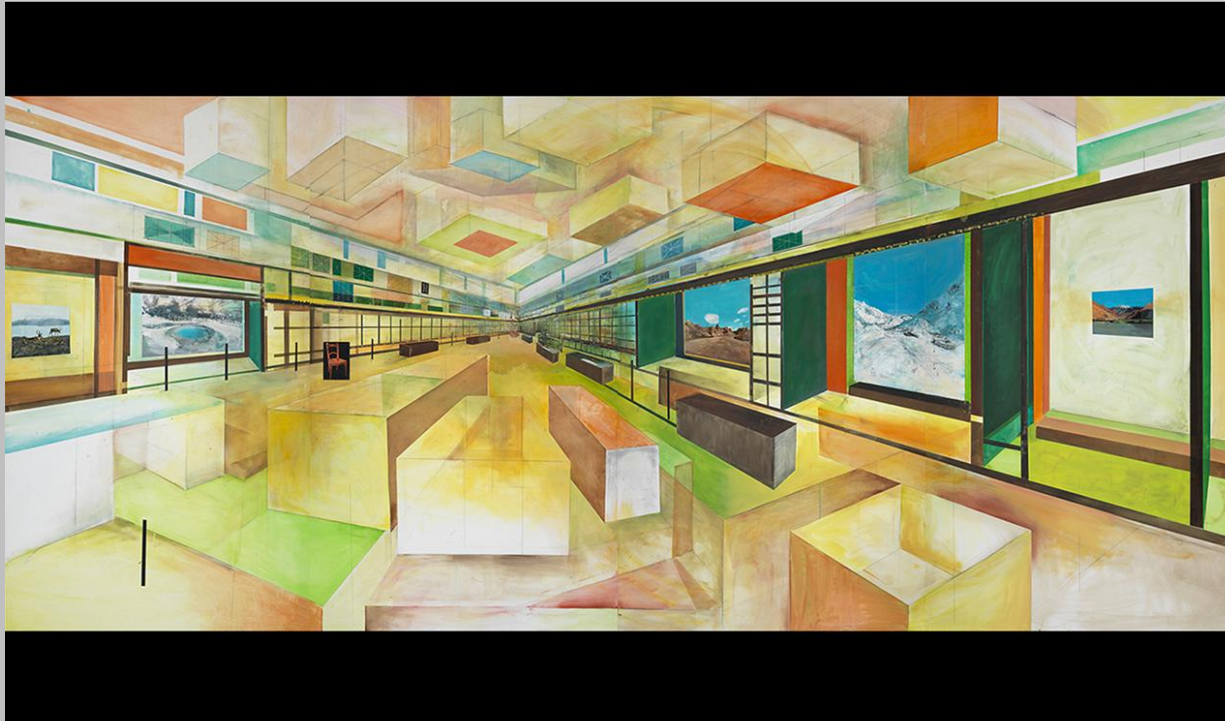
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WILLIAM WEGMAN PAINTINGS

Wegman's colorful "Postcard Paintings" in new shows and a book



ABOVE: THE GREAT INDOORS (2013), OIL AND POSTCARDS ON WOOD PANEL, 72 X 192 INCHES. HOME PAGE/ART PAGE: MIES AND CORBUSIER ON VACATION (2015), OIL AND POSTCARD ON WOOD PANEL, 30 X 40 INCHES. BOTH BY WILLIAM WEGMAN; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK.



BY: HOWARD KARREN

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Best known for the photographs he has done over the years of his beloved Weimaraner dogs in unforgettable anthropomorphic poses and costumes, William Wegman was actually trained as a painter. "I studied painting in art school," he says, "but by the time I graduated in the 1960s, painting was dead." So he took up photography and video instead, achieved extraordinary success, and then decided to return to painting in the '80s. He's also a collector of vintage postcards, and while working on a book project he decided to use actual postcards within his paintings as a way of meshing real and imaginary space, photography and painterly effects. These "Postcard Paintings" are being highlighted in a solo show at the Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York, through April 23, and a satellite show at another New York gallery, Magenta Plains, through April 24. But even if you miss these exhibits, you can enjoy a wide selection of Wegman's work in the newly published *William Wegman: Paintings*, from Abrams Books, which includes commentary by radio comic Bob Elliott, *New Yorker* writer Susan Orlean and others.

To create his postcard paintings, Wegman typically mounts one or more vintage postcards onto a wood panel, then expands the landscape or subject within them onto the surrounding area, blending them visually and, often, ironically. In *Mies and Corbusier on Vacation* (below and on Art page), for example, he takes a postcard of a Miami sunroom and uses the modernist pattern on the floor to envelop the scene in a spiraling web. In *Lobby Abstract* (below), he uses two vintage hotel postcards and incorporates them into an interior with a Hans Hofmann painting, with its distinctive “push and pull” of color. And in *The Great Indoors* (top), a 16-foot-wide panorama, he sequences several postcard scenes into a giant room with windows, a fantasia of architecture and perspective.

“I’ve always been interested in things that make you wonder: What could be just outside the field of view?” Wegman said in a recent interview. “What could be just outside the edge of the postcard? I remember finding a watercolor postcard in my grandma’s collection that was done of Provincetown Harbor. I tried to remember what else was in that scene....”



Mies and Corbusier on Vacation (2015), by William Wegman, oil and postcard on wood panel, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Lobby Abstract (2015), by William Wegman, oil and postcards on wood panel, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Reinstallation (2013), by William Wegman, oil and postcards on wood panel, 48 x 72 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Gallery Openings (2015), by William Wegman, oil and postcards on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches.
Courtesy of the artist, Magenta Plains and Sperone Westwater, New York.

TAGS: CREATING ARCHITECTURAL SPACE WITH PAINT, GIANT PANORAMAS, INVENTIVE MIXED MEDIA, NOT LIMITED TO WEIMERANER PHOTOGRAPHY, PHOTOGRAPH POSTCARDS EXPANDED AS PAINTING, POSTCARDS INTEGRATED INTO PAINTING, WEGMAN ALSO A PAINTER

COMMENTS

