

# The New York Times

Friday, April 1, 2016

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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 Weimaraners 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

ARTISTS



## '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

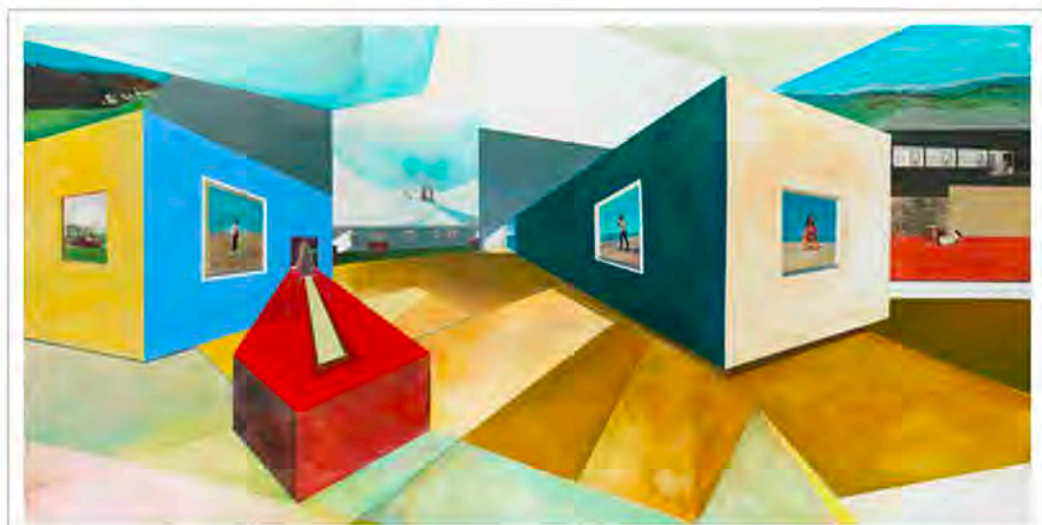
William Wegman bought his first dog in California after responding to an ad in a Long Beach, California newspaper that said, “Weimaraners \$35.” He called the new pet Man Ray. Wegman had trained as a painter, but as a graduate student at the University of Illinois Champagne-Urbana in the mid-1960s, he 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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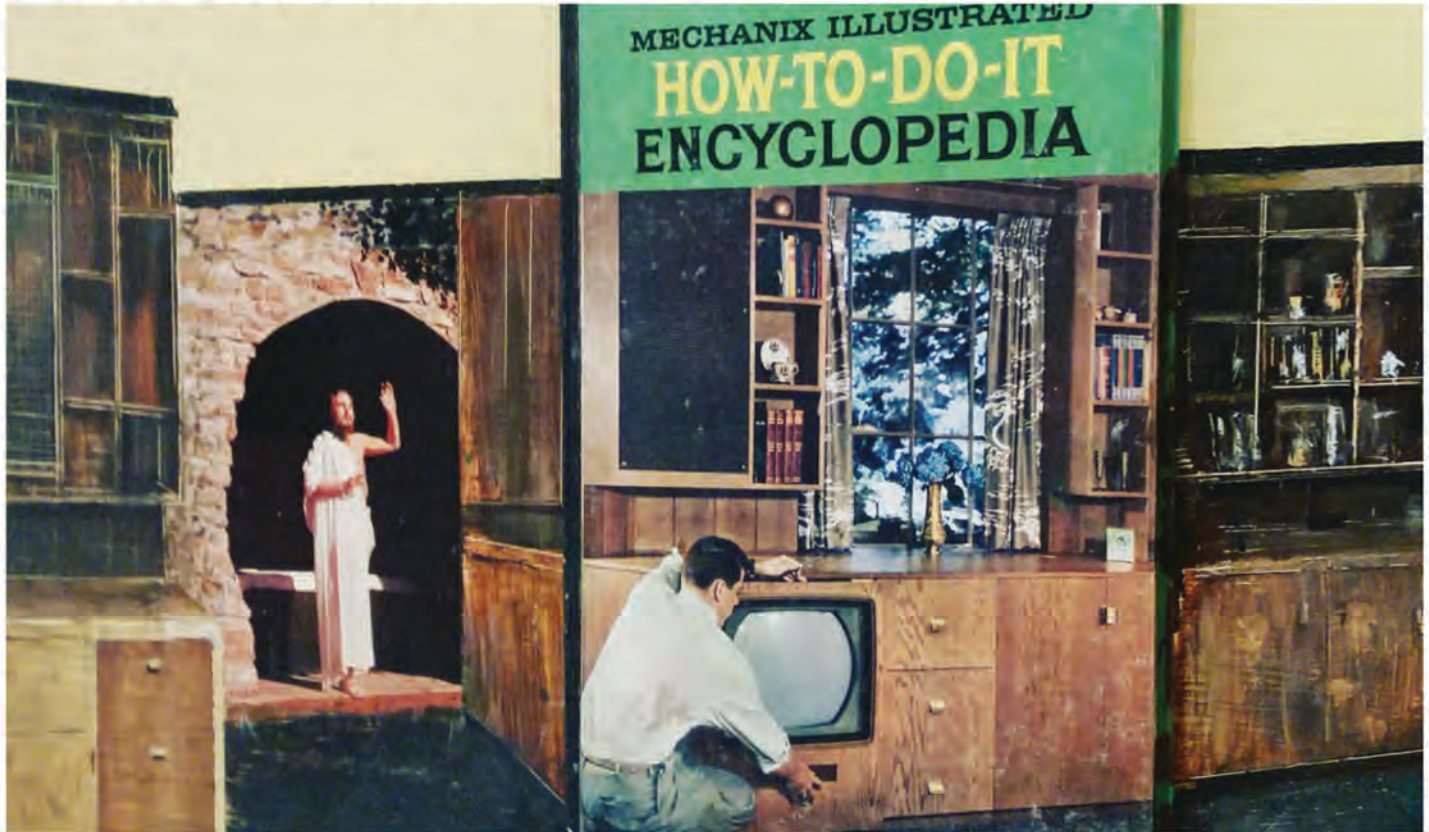
FEATURED

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 scopio 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 teem 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 Weimaraners, the impact these dogs had on his work makes their presence felt, despite the prudent omission. Weimaraners 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 PS1

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

Cao Fei: *RMB City: A Second Life Planning 05*, 2007, digital print, 47¼ by 63 inches; at MoMA PS1.



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.

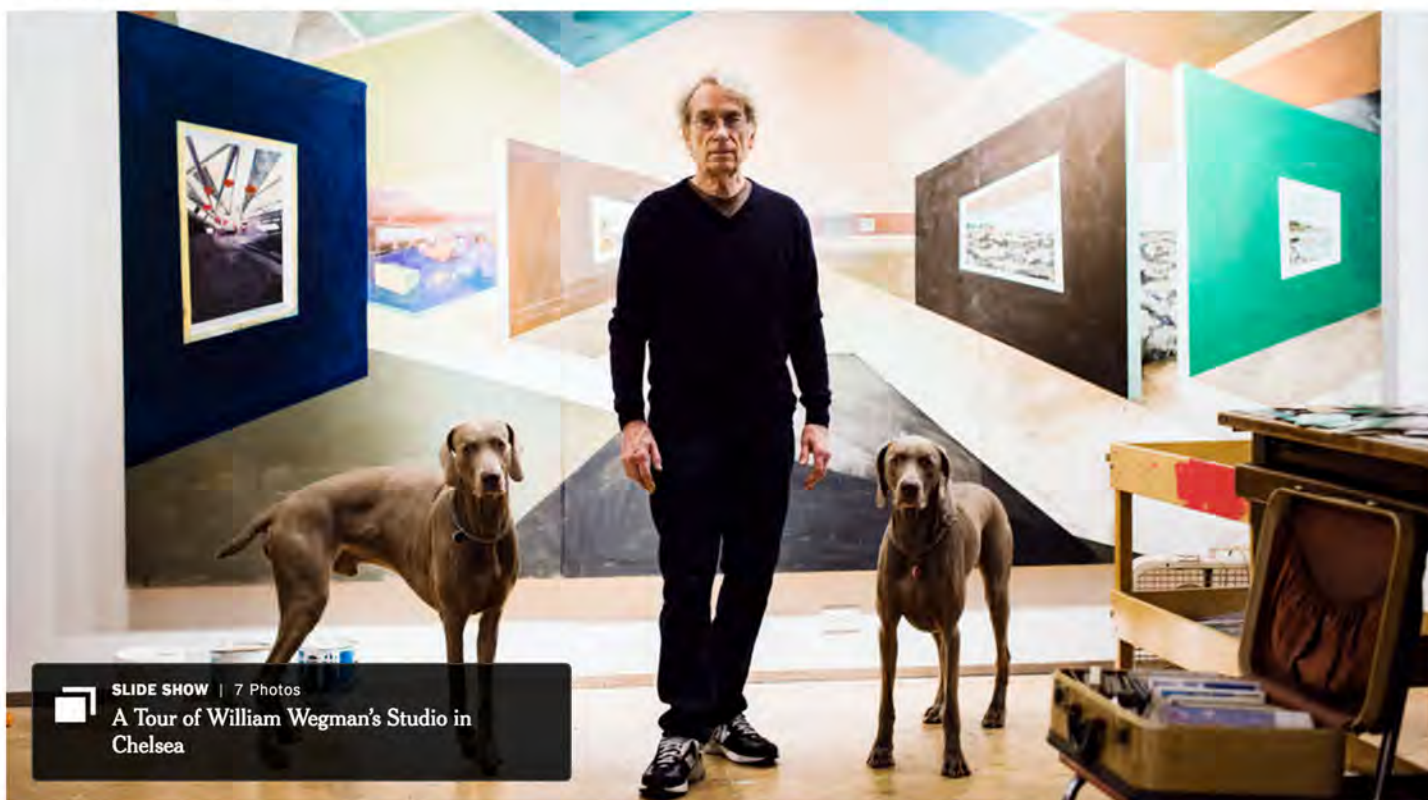
—Gregory Volk

## 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.

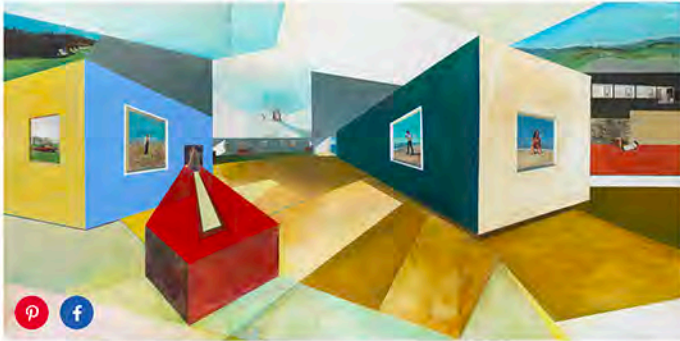
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## ART + AUCTIONS

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

Weimarans 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 gooey 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

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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



Shares 120 Comments 1

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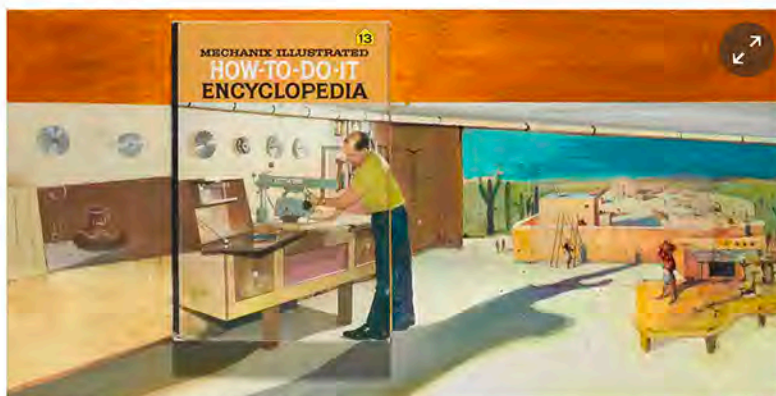


William Wegman and four-legged friend. Photograph: Tim Mantoani

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



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.



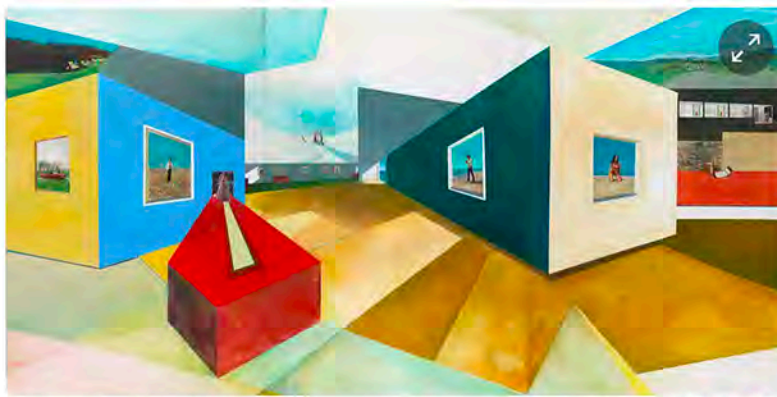
Inside Outside, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York



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.'"





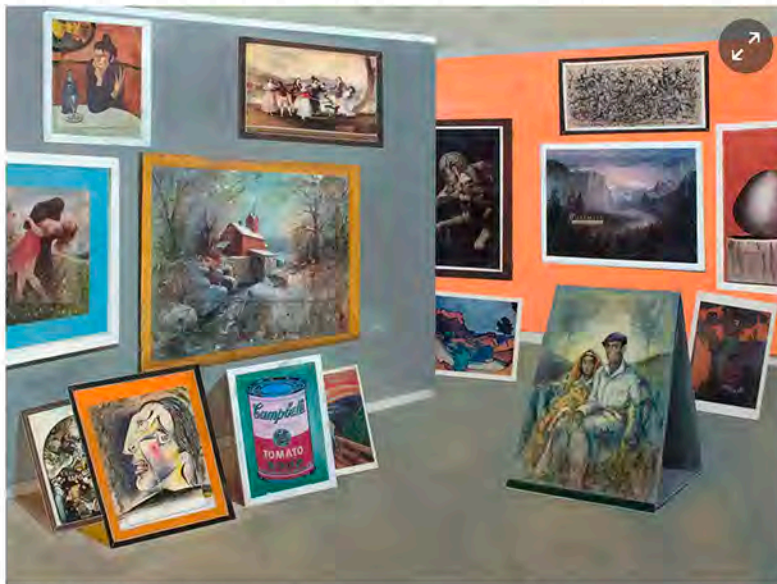
📷 Hopper Origami, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York



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.”

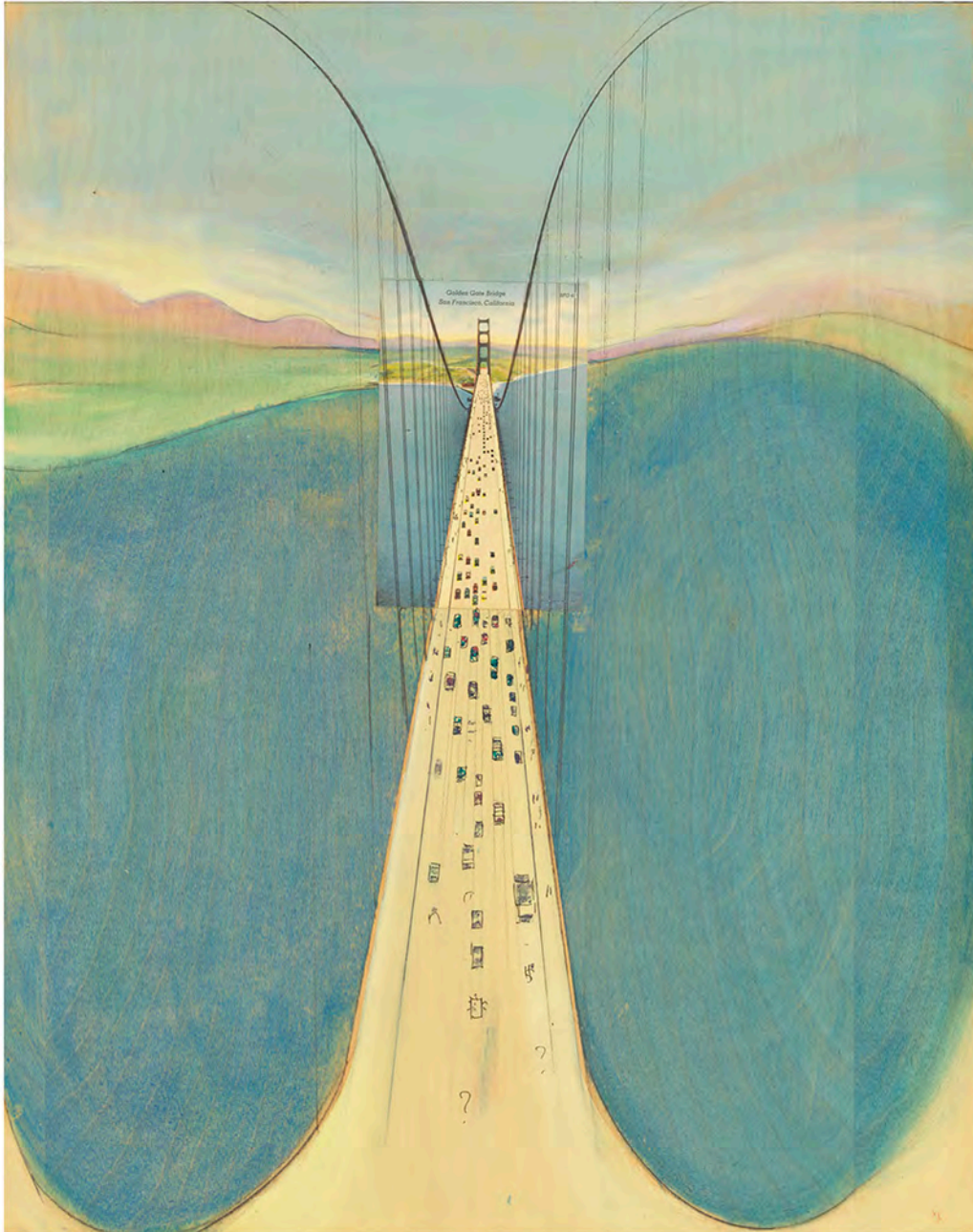
And even in music, he correctly insists, the ambitions of great art have enough room for a joke or two. “Haydn is funny, if you really know your music and you know what a musical joke is. Whereas most of the painting that was considered whimsical, like Klee, you didn’t really laugh at. My videos were 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.”

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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## 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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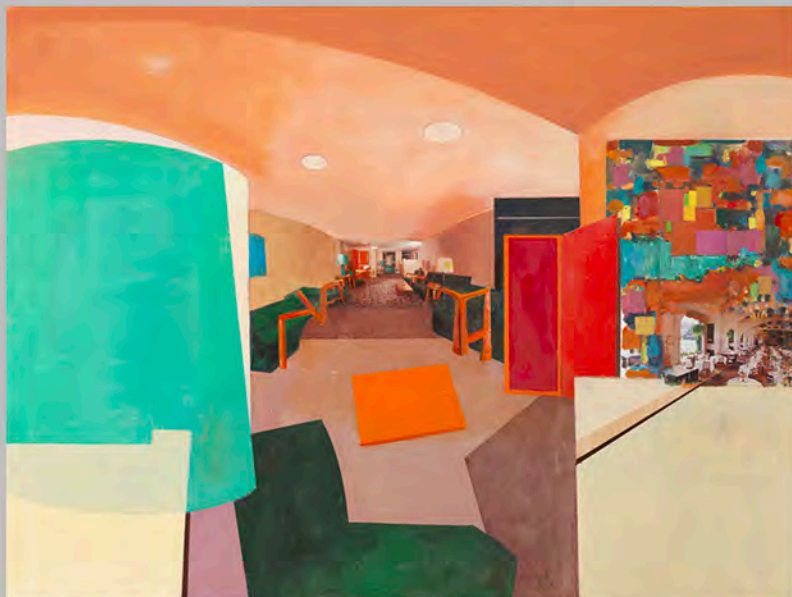
Best known for the photographs he has done over the years of his beloved Weimaraner dogs in unforgettable anthropomorphic poses and costumes, William Wegman was actually trained as a painter. "I studied painting in art school," he says, "but by the time I graduated in the 1960s, painting was dead." So 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.

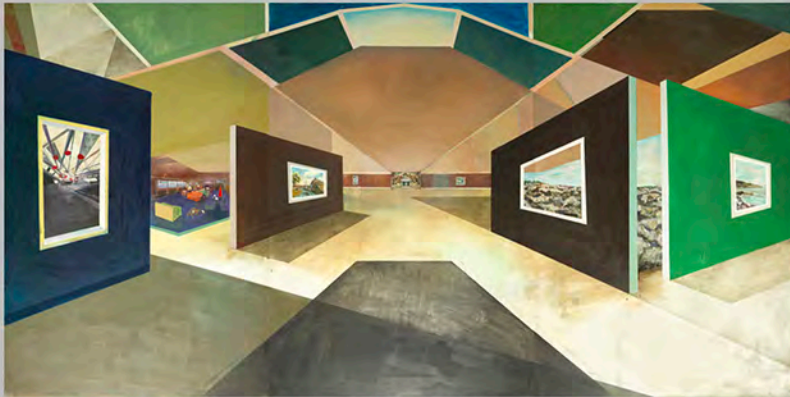


*Lobby Abstract* (2015), by William Wegman, oil and postcards on wood panel, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.





*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

