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Paintings and Photographs, Introduction to "William Wegman"

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WILLIAM WEGMAN

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PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

When William Wegman began his career in the late 1960s, he like many young artists of his generation decided to abandon painting preferring instead to use photography and video to explore contemporary issues in art. Why abandon painting at this point? Painting, after all, had been under attack since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. Still its output has continued for centuries virtually without interruption. Perhaps it was because painting in the 60s seemed less exciting or less flexible than the new media and unable to satisfy the needs of artists and the public in a technological post-modern society. Against the aesthetics of post-modernism, painting as a medium affirms the values of originality and uniqueness. But these values had already been called into question decades earlier by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and others. The decision to abandon painting overlooks certain facts about its resiliency. Painting has had a long history of success as an art form within a broad range of diverse cultures. As Richard Wollheim has argued," If artists over the centuries had not succeeded in putting across what they wished to convey, they would have turned to some other activity.... Or their public would have asked them to do so."[1] At the conclusion of a lengthy book on painting, Wollheim's strongest argument for the continuation of painting is its survival as an art form.

Wegman took up painting again in 1985 after successful ventures into photography, video, and drawing. His initial contact with painting began at the University of Illinois where he graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1967. He was not a stranger to painting, even in these early days. In an anecdote recalling his student days in Boston, Massachusetts, he recalls enjoying the Colonial American and the Asian galleries of the Boston Museum of Fine Art. His favorite painting in the Colonial American wing is John Singleton Copley's eighteenth-century tableau *Watson and the Shark.* In the Asian section, two paintings especially attracted Wegman's attention: One was a thirteenth-century Kamakuri period handscroll, *The Night Attack on Sanjo Palace*, and the other a fifteenth-century landscape hanging scroll of

the Muromachi period. Wegman acknowledges the Kamakuri and Muromachi masters as an inspiration for his paintings.[2]

Wegman's paintings are disarming in their charm and apparent simplicity. Their stories are almost totally lacking in the violence found in European and American painters of a generation ago, such as the French painter Jean Fautrier (1898–1964) or the American Abstract Expressionist Painter Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). Fautrier portrays the victims of Nazi atrocities in France during World War II in a series called *Les Otages* presented in 1945. Pollock's post World War II gestural abstractions are driven by often violent inner strife. None of these sentiments are apparent in Wegman's paintings. Rather their dominant characteristics are derived from fantasy underwritten by a spirit of peaceful innocence. On the other hand, Wegman's paintings lack the wit and ironic humor that are so compelling in the photographs, videos and drawings. This is especially true of the large scale paintings, perhaps less so of the smaller paintings such as *Dollar Bill,* 1990. Perhaps it is a question of the differences in scale between the often large-scale paintings and the smaller frames of the other media. This is evident when comparing the early photographs, videos, and drawings of Wegman with the large paintings of the mid 1980s.

Of particular interest in the large paintings is Wegman's approach to pictorial space. The paintings consist of large textured colored surfaces with a minimum of linear structure. Most of the paintings include objects such as trains, airplanes, architecture— including bridges and building facades—all of which emerge out of a diffuse picture surface, for example in blue, gold, or reddish brown tones. In some instances, Wegman's paintings seem like the windows opening into external space, described by the Renaissance theorist and painter Alberti. For instance, his *Birds, Planes, and Ships*, 1989 reminds me of viewing the scene from an airplane window. However, the space in these paintings is organized according to atmospheric mood rather than geometric linear perspective characteristic used by the painters of the Renaissance.

Again the objects or narrative scenes, to the extent that such exist in Wegman's pictures, provide more than mere visual scaffolding for the fictive space. Rather, they cue the viewer's imagination inviting her/him to participate in the artist's dream-like fantasy. There is no fixed code of visual symbols or gestures approaching a language that the viewer must acquire in order to read and enjoy these paintings. Yet they provide a trail for the viewer to explore; perhaps Wegman's paintings are informed more by the mysterious canons of ancient Chinese and Japanese aesthetics than by Western painting traditions.

II.

Always in search of new directions for his art, Wegman once floated Styrofoam commas down the Milwaukee River in order to create a photograph.[3] Contrary to their initial appearance, Wegman's early photographs are far from simple as the floating comma project would suggest. They involve elaborate staging beyond the camera work and subtle dark room decisions. Even those photographs produced ostensibly to record his visual projects are highly sophisticated. In almost every instance, the viewer is directed to a subject matter staged exclusively for the camera. Sometimes his pictures feature human subjects. Often they are process-related images showing the artist (himself) engaged with a video camera or monitor. Otherwise, the photographs may feature a dog-centered narrative exploiting some human foible. Wegman's photographs are performatives, in the linguistic sense, rather than passive representations. Whatever narrative meaning one derives from the photographs emerges from the action embedded in the subject matter or in acts implicit in showing, or demonstrating a conceptual point.

Beyond the narrative possibilities there are other conceptual issues to consider. The photographs are executed with ample technical facility and in a unique style. If style is a matter of an artists' selecting a subject, developing a visual vocabulary, and choosing or inventing compositional means to explore the subject, Wegman has certainly developed his own unique style. At this point, it is difficult for anyone familiar with his work not to recognize immediately instances of his photography, even when they appear independently from a larger body of the work. If his pho-

tographs appear naïve when compared to traditional photography, it may just be a result of the artist's intent to comment upon photography itself. Or is their apparent naïveté merely an attempt to subvert the viewer's familiar experiences and conventional assumptions concerning photographs? In any event, Wegman offers conceptual alternatives to traditional approaches to art photography. Among the options he considers is the question of altered photographs. Drawing on, or coloring the surface of a photograph adds an autographic element to the mechanical camera and darkroom processes common to photography, and breaks down the barriers separating drawing and painting from photography. When Wegman began using a Polaroid camera to make his large format photographs of his famous Weimaraner dog Man Ray in 1979, his photography took on new dimensions of scale and surface resulting in heightened pictorial qualities. The Polaroids amplify the artist's Chaplinesque humor of the early smaller works and give his photographs a new social signifiance. These photographs capture the attention of a mass audience, as well patrons as in the art world.

III.

Drawings appear first in Wegman's work as sketches for videos or installations. Some would say that drawings are the pivotal elements in Wegman's artistic world, helping to define his approach to photography, video and eventually to painting.[4] As I have previously noted, drawing is also prominent in his altered photographs. They then became entirely independent of their supportive role in photographs and videos and were made as works in, and of themselves. Perhaps his drawings are akin to the saying of an oracle. The sibylline voice of the oracle at Delphi speaks with ambiguity through mysterious vapors from an underground mountain cave. She is often the bearer of shades of darkness, as well as profound and judicious wisdom. So it is with Wegman's drawings. The drawings reveal the wise and the foolish in human behavior. They can be disarmingly humorous, even banal pictorial ideas whose meanings dependent on references to mass culture. By challenging the strategies and assumptions of the avant-garde arts with satire, he distances himself from pretentious aims.

Like the floating commas set free in the river, Wegman's creative intuitions have freely attached themselves to projects in photography, painting, drawing, and also video. These efforts have established his place in the evolving practices of conceptual art of during the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. His work has met the challenges of an era when anything found objects, photography, words, video, and mixed media, as well as painting and drawing were available for making art. Wegman differs from many conceptual artists because his art is accessible through its emotional or logical poignancy to a wide audience. The message varies of course, depending on the experience and knowledge of the viewer. Virtually every piece, however provocative its didactic element is laced with humor and bespeaks a deep sense of humanity. *Curtis L. Carter*

[1] Richard Wollheim, *Painting As An Art*, The Mellon Lectures, 1984 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 357.

[2] William Wegman, untitled statement in *William Wegman*, exhibition catalogue, Tokyo, Isetan Museum of Art, May 29 – June 23, 1997 and Kyoto, Museum [E Ki], November 12–30, 1997, p. 6.

[3] David Ross, "An Interview with William Wegman", in *William Wegman,* edited by Martin Kunz (New York:Harry Abrams Inc. 1990), p. 15.

[4] Martin Kunz, "Drawings: Conceptual Pivot of Wegman's Artistic Worlds," in *William Wegman*, edited by Martin Kunz (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1990), p. 133.