



Beyond the threshold *Jeff Wall*

By Sheena Wagstaff (May 1, 2005)



Jeff Wall, *A View from an Apartment* (2004-5) Tate © Jeff Wall

Sheena Wagstaff travels to downtown Vancouver and discovers how the urban environment has found its way into the work of the acclaimed Canadian artist Jeff Wall.

Jeff Wall owns a complex of studios in one of the oldest neighbourhoods of Vancouver. His workspace is in an area of this far-western Canadian city where the frontier stops abruptly at the ocean. It is now home to many who have come literally to the end of the line. For the small and less visible population of Asian immigrants, this doesn't deliver the brave new world they were promised. They struggle to go about their lives in a desolate landscape of abandoned buildings, shuttered storefronts and shabby rehab centres. To pass through this district on a daily basis, as Wall does, is to witness a wretched theatre of abject humanity, where each circle consumed by its particular affliction – the homeless, the junkies, the hookers and those who prey on them – enacts its ritualised and dismal transactions to a certain finale, enlivened occasionally by a spectral young girl gripped by the wild contorted spasms of a crack dance.

Thus, it is at Wall's studios that one arrives chastened, appreciative of the fact that his engagement with social issues in some of his pictures never inclines towards sentimentality, but is always allied through his tough-mindedness to an urgent concern with issues of pictorial structure – and, equally, where we as viewers stand in relation to one of his photographs. This remains as true of early works such as *The Storyteller* 1986, *Mimic* 1982 or *Trân Đức Ván* 1988, as it does in *Overpass* 2001 or *Fieldwork* 2003. It is also a surprise to realise that, by passing through the city's sprawling infrastructure, one can easily identify the places in Wall's pictures at

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the same time as their being representative of a generic idea of overlooked urban wasteland or unremarkable suburban vistas.

Two buildings are separated by an alley, its west-east orientation studded by huge timber H-frames spanning the road, each supporting a tangle of live electricity cables – a familiar sight in older parts of Vancouver. Wall's studios – a large traditional darkroom in one building, and a large clean space with expansive light tables and a computer station in the second – house the requisite equipment that allows him to make the huge transparencies and photographs for which he is renowned. Each space is dedicated to the function determined by the machines it houses: this is a no-frills operational studio.

A couple of blocks away, a third small warehouse has a jumble of props and furniture, remnants of the artist's sets and other parts of his productions. In the main space, five prints of a new black-and-white photograph entitled *Burrow* are about to be mounted on to two conjoined aluminium sheets. By the time we arrive there, Wall's meticulous and congenial assistant, Owen Kydd, has already treated each of the metal panels to extensive filling and sanding. However, there is still more work to do, as suggested by Wall's detection – by touch – of the faintest hint of a join.

But the main focus of Wall's attention during my visit was the resolution of two new lightbox works called *Still Creek, Vancouver, winter 2003* and *View from an apartment*, each in different stages of completion. When finished, both will be the result of his process of creating a single picture by digitally combining and adjusting a multitude of photographic images shot at different times on location and in the studio, often over a long period.

Driving through a manicured residential area set high above the timber depots and factory warehouses which line the busy estuary, Wall draws up outside a small apartment block. We climb the stairs to the top and he unlocks the door to reveal a one-bedroom flat, its living room in comfortable disarray, evidently the clutter of living in a restricted space. A small lounge area, its low central table festooned with fashion magazines intermingled with half-finished drinks and plates of food, is adjacent to an ironing board, from which a neat pile of napkins has been removed to a table beyond. The room offers a muted mix of styles, colours and textures, evocative of the living quarters of a young woman in a nascent stage of determining her own taste. Dominating this scene is a monumental and breathtaking view through a picture window over the estuary and surrounding topography, stretching right back to the landscape's horizon. Wall cautions me not to touch anything. We are, he tells me, standing on the set for *View from an apartment*.

Having already seen low-resolution test images of the final composition of the work, in which a young woman walks towards us from the ironing board while her friend is absorbed in reading a magazine on a sofa across the room, I ask him about the origin of the idea for the picture, noting that its apparent subject – the event enacted by the women – might equally suggest the alternative title *View in an apartment*.

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Jeff Wall

I don't know where pictures originate, they are just there at some moment. Of course, I know when they are set off by something I've seen, but even when I am seeing what later becomes a picture, I am not sure I am seeing a picture, or if I am just seeing something happen and I am not photographing it. *View from an apartment* began, I think, by the recognition that most of the interiors I've photographed are quite closed in, such as *Stereo* 1980, *Insomnia* 1994, *Jello* 1995, or *Volunteer* 1996. I don't like to repeat myself and so I wanted to do an interior that was open, that included an outside. So I began looking for one and found this apartment. Once I got it, I had to have something taking place inside, and that could have been just about anything. I visited it shortly before the previous tenants moved out. They were a nice young couple and I thought, well, too bad they're moving, I could just photograph them as they are, that would be fine. That set it as involving young people. I found a young woman to start off and asked her if she wanted to be single or attached to a partner. She said single, so that was that. She furnished the place as if it were hers over a period of three or four months.

Sheena Wagstaff

In many of your pictures, there is an aperture, a threshold or a dark hole (as in both the new works *Burrow and Still Creek*) denoting another space. In *View from an apartment*, two pictorial worlds are depicted, one within the other, one inside and one outside, each framing a reconstruction of the world, each representing a different reality, each with its own logic of illumination. Would you characterise such a traditional allegorical motif, perhaps a riff on the Platonic cave-view, as being on equal terms as its use as a pictorial device?

Jeff Wall

A picture is normally devoted to depicting a space extending back from its surface. The surface is a threshold itself, but we don't tend to look at it that way, especially with a photograph, where the surface is invisible, or almost invisible, and where you can't really locate the picture plane the way you can in painting. When you're looking at a picture you are feeling that you are really seeing something, seeing it in a way you can't see it in the world itself. I guess that is true, but it is more interesting to depict something in a way that the viewer feels he or she is really seeing, but at the same time suggest that something significant isn't being seen – that the act of picturing creates an unseen as well as a seen. This can't be done explicitly, it can only be suggested somehow. Internal thresholds are one of those hints.

Sheena Wagstaff

Since the 1990s you've relied on computers to help with the montage technique you established years ago. They allow you digitally to blend the documentary aspect of photography with artifice and performance, which you have described as analogous to cinema. I have been struck by the fact that whenever you show me the pictures stored on your computer database, you constantly isolate and magnify small areas of the background or groups of objects. There are many of them in *View*. It has made me realise that each work is a fascinating composite of still lifes or isolated figures, a mesh of many self-contained images made at different times. And yet it seems to me that the sense of time in the narrative event of *View* is quite different from that of, say, *Still Creek*.

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Jeff Wall

What you say about the details is interesting. There's an inherent conflict between the particular things that go into a picture and its unity as a picture, as a composition, if you want to put it that way. I like the idea that the picture as a whole reconciles and unifies the elements that have gone into it, and therefore succeeds in being what we judge to be a good picture. But it can't succeed too well, or something of those elements is weakened. Call it their autonomy from the impulse to unify. I think it's best when the elements are both wrapped up in the whole in some beautiful way and yet stick out a bit, holding their own despite the picture.

Sheena Wagstaff

When you studied in London at the Courtauld from 1970 to 1973, a key work in that collection was Manet's *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère* 1881–2, which you have described as the source for your early *Picture for Women* 1979. At that time you were very interested in the pre-history of Modernist painting, especially aspects of its pictorialism as exemplified by Manet. Of course, it was he who not only made deliberate allusions in his paintings to the art of the Old Masters, but also played with the illusion of space. We have talked about a champion of Manet, the art historian Michael Fried, whose thesis in his seminal essay 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) pitched literalness and theatricality on one hand against radical abstraction and anti-theatricality (or absorption) on the other. More recently, Fried – who also has an avowed interest in your work – has rethought what he originally cited as the significance of Manet's art, describing his revolutionary canvases of the 1860s as rejecting anti-theatricality in favour of what Fried calls 'facingness' – a self-conscious illusionistic pictorial engagement of the subject with the viewer. Would you characterise your recent work in similar terms?

Jeff Wall

Manet painted people who seem to be looking at you but ignoring your presence, such as the barmaid in *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*. They are not off in their own space, absorbed in their own affairs, they are facing you. Moreover, the picture itself is structured in order that that should be so. The picture has 'facingness' too, not just the figure in it. This facing you but not acknowledging you is a form which says something about modern life, where people are more detached from one another than they might have been before. That's the social, cultural aspect. But the more artistic aspect is that the depiction shows something – say, a person – neither absorbed and oblivious to your presence as a viewer, nor recognising your presence, and doing that whole dance, as in many theatrical Baroque paintings. Again, it's a threshold situation: the thing depicted doesn't choose to acknowledge the viewer, who is none the less made present in the structure of the depiction. That's an interesting situation. I've always liked that, just the way I've always liked Manet and Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', since I first read it in *Artforum*.

Sheena Wagstaff

As we sit looking back through works, you often appraise your pictures qualitatively. What constitutes good picture-making? And is it the same as the art of picture-making?

Jeff Wall

Evaluation of quality is the core of the pleasure of the experience of art; the simultaneous pleasure of enjoying something intensely and of recognising that it is a good work. I always

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judge my pictures – daily, hourly, all the time. Even though it’s disappointing to have to say “that one is not good”, or “not as good as that one”, it is still a pleasure to go through that process and experience a work afresh. Nothing has been as destructive to the condition of art as the idea that qualitative judgment is unimportant, and that art is important for cultural reasons. Art can only be important if it is good, because if it is good, it pleases us in ways we don’t anticipate and don’t understand, and that pleasure means something to us even if we can’t specify what, exactly.

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