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## *Jeff Wall's Unique Photographic Vision*

*With a show of new work opening at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, the elusive photographer Jeff Wall opens up about his singular process*

By Elisa Lipsky-Karasch (September 4, 2015)



CLOSE UP | Jeff Wall at work. PHOTO: JESSE CHEHAK FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

ONE HUNDRED MILES into the desert north of Los Angeles, at the intersection of two crumbling roads that are slowly re-assimilating into the ruddy, sunbaked earth, a flimsy, black folding umbrella—the kind that sells for \$7 at a drugstore—fends off the high-noon rays from its perch on a metal stand. Beneath its shade, a tall man in a blue dress shirt and black jeans climbs onto a ladder, oblivious to the 85-degree heat. He peers through binoculars, concentrating intently on two land surveyors working about 15 yards in front of him and, beyond, the scrubland extending to the horizon. The binoculars are balanced atop an accordion-like, oversize black camera. After a moment, the man triggers the shutter by squeezing a small piston with a precise flicking motion that calls to mind Roger Federer's net game. Then he lifts his head, runs his fingers through his chin-length gray hair and removes the exposed sheet of film from the camera before sliding in another. "Rotate one inch to your right," he directs the surveyor who is kneeling and facing him. He pauses. "There. Let's go for it."

This is Canadian photographer Jeff Wall patiently pursuing his prey—the fleeting instant when a surveyor's hammer rises and begins to fall toward a metal stake in the ground—attempting to capture the precise moment when nature is transformed into property. But unlike generations of photographers who, for the most part, recorded human experience as it unfolded before them (Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Robert Frank among them), Wall painstakingly stages the scenes he shoots. This particular tableau is based on a memory fragment that has been percolating in his mind for a while. To enact it, he found this spot on the outskirts of California City (orienting his Linhof Master Technika camera away from two bluffs that were

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dismissed as “too picturesque”) and hired the two surveyors, Art and Joe, who are assiduously marking the same patch of dirt over and over again.

Today, the third day of the shoot, Wall works between noon and 1:30 p.m., when the “hot desert light” is at its most dramatic. From the approximately 120 essentially identical images that will result, a mere handful will be deemed “right.” And after a period of months, only one will be processed—Wall oversees this himself, after years of frustration with labs—and blown up to a single print. In October, it will practically take over an entire wall of his longtime gallerist Marian Goodman’s New York headquarters, as part of his first show of new work there in nearly four years. (Her London gallery will also show Wall’s new work, beginning on October 29.)

“When Jeff’s pictures succeed, they succeed in a way that nobody else’s do—it’s a kind of art that no one else practices,” says Peter Galassi, the former chief curator of photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, who co-curated a traveling retrospective of Wall’s work in 2007. “It’s the willingness to go so far based on, well, intuition.”

Wall, 68, refers to his approach as “cinematography” or “near-documentary,” and has been practicing this technique since the ’70s, when his epically proportioned, realist work first wrested attention away from the die-hard conceptualists. His opening salvo was 1978’s *The Destroyed Room*, an image of a woman’s trashed bedroom that referenced Romantic-era painter Eugène Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Since then Wall has been credited with shifting the course of photography itself—as well as art history—with his luminous, oversize images of deceptively quotidian scenes that often make allusions to everything from canvases by old masters to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. His work has influenced legions of photographers (including Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff) as well as musicians like Iggy Pop, Sonic Youth and Sia, who for her memorable performance in February at the Grammys replicated the hundreds of light bulbs and humble apartment setting of Wall’s seminal 1999–2000 work, *After “Invisible Man”* by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue. “I seek to create a kind of magical realism in my work, and his work has that feeling,” she says.



OPEN ROAD | Property Line, a new work by Jeff Wall showing next month. “I am interested in the line between land as nature and land as property,” he says.  
PHOTO: ‘PROPERTY LINE’ BY JEFF WALL

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Although he works in a medium that is mechanized, replicable and ephemeral—many photographic prints are unstable and have a shelf life between a decade and 30 years unless they are preserved in museum-quality conditions—Wall has advanced the notion that photography can be as singular and permanent as great painting, or even literature. Meanwhile, he has embraced technological advances and unusual formats—most notably in the late '70s when he began using light boxes like those from bus-stop advertisements to display his work (a practice he has since discontinued). Such artistic mastery has earned him the prestigious Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography (also bestowed on Cartier-Bresson, Lee Friedlander, William Eggleston and Nan Goldin); and, in addition to being shown at MoMA, his work was the subject of a 2005 retrospective at London's Tate Modern. A major exhibition of nearly 40 of Wall's masterpieces recently made its final stop at Denmark's avant-garde Louisiana Museum. "Photography had never gotten its due as an art form, but he was one of the people who contributed greatly to its acceptance," says Goodman.

"He worked against the grain to develop the photographic genres into areas that it had utterly rejected or ignored," says Sheena Wagstaff, chairman of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's modern and contemporary art department, who also curated the Tate Modern show, along with Theodora Vischer, then at Basel's Schaulager. "Now, globally, he has really affected the way people see the world through the lens."

Wall remains something of an artist's artist, despite all the admiration, the accolades and the soaring prices. (A 1992 photomontage, *Dead Troops Talk*, sold for \$3.7 million at Christie's in 2012, a record for Wall's work at auction.) "I'm not that much of a public artist—people wouldn't find me that interesting," he says. "I'm just my work." Wall adds, wryly: "Sometimes I discuss it until people's eyes start glazing over—and then, at that point, I stop."

When he is not talking about his work, Wall is immersed in it, describing his mentality as "hovering—just trying to be alert, trying to be attentive." During the ride back to Los Angeles (where he spends three months of the year with his wife, Jeannette, whom he married in 1967), a fellow passenger whips out an iPhone to identify a roadside landmark. "What happened to just wondering?" Wall playfully chastises. For him, the contemplation of an idea is as important as the finished product: A concept might gestate in the back of his mind for years before he decides to develop it further. "Photography is supposed to be instantaneous, and I have nothing against that," he says later. "But for me, the plasticity of the process, where things turn into something else, comes from the time I spend on it."

Over the course of a year, Wall might make only three or four images, with production costs that can sometimes run as high as \$100,000 apiece. For one shoot, he meticulously reconstructed a nightclub's gated exterior inside a studio, down to the gum stuck to the sidewalk. (Wall calls it a replica, not a set, because the latter implies illusion; "In films or theater, a brick wall could be painted canvas, or it could be plastic bricks. I don't do that, unless I wanted it to look that way," he notes.) On another shoot, he hired a woman to live for months in the apartment where he would eventually photograph her. To add verisimilitude to the cellar apartment in After *"Invisible Man"*, now part of MoMA's permanent collection, he and his assistants prepared food on a countertop, though any traces of their efforts are barely visible in

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the final image. Such precision has earned him the label “control freak” from some critics, a description that makes the mild-mannered Wall bristle. “It’s not a very good term, because it means that you are applying control that’s excessive,” he says. “Was Mozart a control freak because he wrote every note of his music? What should he do, write only some of the notes? Well, John Cage thought that, and then you have the Cageian idea of chance music, which is cool, and Mozart, also cool. So who’s the control freak, and what does it matter?”

Wall’s brain is a compendium of art historical and cultural knowledge—if his mind is a memory palace, his canonical references form the foundation, the walls, the floor. “I make [my pictures] for my next attempt to say something about my relation to the canon of art,” he says. In the surveyors image, for example, one detects traces of Robert Adams’s depictions of the changing Western landscape of the ’70s, or perhaps even the realist French painter Jean-François Millet’s *The Gleaners*, which made protagonists of peasants in wheat fields. Other times the references are more overt: A 19th-century Japanese woodcut, *Ejiri in Suruga Province*, by Katsushika Hokusai, is the basis for one of Wall’s best-known works, 1993’s *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, for which he spent over a year assembling a digital montage of more than 100 photographs, using actors to pose as four pedestrians in a modern transposition of the original. “He holds himself to very high standards,” says his gallerist, Goodman, who has worked with Wall for 26 years. “The intellectual acuity and curiosity, his lifelong study with his own media—it’s really impressive. It’s not just a personal path that he’s on; it is a scholar’s work about the complexity of the field, always searching for its potential.”



‘I call it cinematography—I’ve just detached it from filmmaking,’ Wall says of his process. PHOTO: JESSE CHEHAK FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

ALTHOUGH IN HINDSIGHT it might seem that Wall was destined to be a virtuoso in his chosen medium, this wasn’t always the case. “I sort of slithered into photography, in a kind of tormented, backwards way,” he says, sitting in the restful, rambling 1928 house in L.A.’s leafy Hancock Park that he and Jeannette acquired three years ago and have been slowly decorating. The creamy walls are largely devoid of art, both to afford Wall a bit of mental space (“Too many artworks are hectic in a house,” he says) and because they are still deciding what might go where. (Even his books are kept hidden inside cabinets, not on open shelving, since Wall finds “all the spines endlessly distracting—you keep reading the titles and then you keep thinking about that book.”) The formal garden has a shaded brick patio and an ornamental, clipped boxwood hedge, which, like the rest of the house, is largely Jeannette’s domain. “I feel it’s my duty to maintain it,” she says. The peaceful, verdant setting seems like a reward after spending

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four decades in the same house near the beach in Vancouver, which he and Jeannette still own, in part to be close to their family (the couple has three sons) and to Wall's studio and photo-printing lab.

When he was a young boy growing up in the Canadian city, Wall says, his parents (a doctor and a stay-at-home mother) "weren't hugely interested in the art thing." But they subscribed to the Abrams Art Book series, which every month delivered color monographs on masters such as Rembrandt, El Greco and Paul Cézanne to their door. Wall pored over the reproductions, and by the time he was a teenager, he was as familiar with Robert Frank's seminal 1958 photo book, *The Americans*, as Bruegel's 1562 epic painting *The Triumph of Death*. "I got to know art from that. I always responded to it," he says, "and that's what I wanted to do."

For the next few years, he spent hours each day at the desk in his bedroom, creating sketches and cartoons (some of which he has kept, including a drawing after Rodin now displayed on a living room side table next to a piece by fellow Vancouver artist and old friend Rodney Graham). When he was 16, his father converted a backyard toolshed into a makeshift studio for Wall, where the extra space allowed him to paint oversize canvases—a situation he compares to color-field master Morris Louis working in his D.C. dining room. When he graduated from high school, instead of attending the local Vancouver art school (now called the Emily Carr University of Art & Design) he opted to pursue an art history degree at the University of British Columbia, thinking that his already considerable momentum would carry him forward as an artist. It is a decision he still regrets. "I was too self-centered, too overconfident, too in a hurry. It was a childish, immature thing to do," he says. "Going to university and studying art history was nothing, because that just means reading books about artists that you like."

In the late '60s, Wall had a sudden change of heart and dropped painting and drawing altogether. "I don't even know how to explain it," he says now. "Had I been more mature I would not have abandoned things as hastily." A generation of artists was then engaged in an ongoing fight to break free from traditional constraints by systematically stripping things down. Ad Reinhardt was painting canvases inky black, while Joseph Kosuth simply printed dictionary definitions of words like *art*, *water* and *definition* on his before dispensing with canvases altogether. "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," Sol LeWitt wrote in his 1967 rallying cry, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. "Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good." Something in this environment, Wall says, "spoke to me. I took reductivism very, very seriously." He rejected depictions of reality to such an extent that he began painting clear varnish directly onto the wall. His father gave him his first camera, a Nikon F, the era's equivalent of a point-and-shoot, and Wall used it to take "pseudo-conceptual" photos. "It was exciting to intellectualize that for a period. As a heedless young person, I revolutionized myself, because it was the '60s when people did that—I just did it."

After he graduated from college in 1970, he was offered a place at the prestigious Courtauld Institute of Art in England, which he accepted "to get to London. I never had any intention of finishing any thesis," he says, breaking into a laugh. By then, he had met and married Jeannette, a striking Englishwoman with dark auburn hair. Though the couple reveled in the cosmopolitan environment, Wall didn't make any art, apart from dabbling in a bit of filmmaking and

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screenwriting. “I was in sort of a postconceptual hiatus of not knowing quite what to do, and that lasted quite a long time. I didn’t have a *métier*. I wasn’t going to be a conceptual artist; I had burned my way through that,” he says. When he wasn’t doing his own art, “I was probably miserable to be around,” he says, describing his mind-set as: “Irritable and tormented. Malaise. Neuroses.”



Photographer Jeff Wall  
PHOTO: JESSE CHEHAK FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

ONLY LATER, well after Wall had returned to Vancouver with his young family in the mid-'70s, did he realize that in London, “I wasn’t studying art history; I was studying myself.” By then, he had become an art professor, teaching briefly at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design before settling at Simon Fraser University. (He later took a post at the University of British Columbia, stepping down in 1999, and continues to mentor his assistants on a frequent basis.) Returning to his old turf sparked something in him. Despite the era’s antipathy to studio work—painting and sculpting seemed too limited and smacked of the more vocational decorative crafts—he soon found himself back inside. For Wall, returning to the studio “triggered something about the relation between painting and photography,” he says. “I probably did then get the idea that pictorial art was significant in a way I had tried to fight against,” he adds. “I fought and I lost, and I knew I’d lost.”

Without his own studio or even his own camera, Wall borrowed equipment and space from friends in order to work. Although he and Jeannette separated in 1978 (the couple later reconciled), that year she loaned him the clothes that he used in *The Destroyed Room*, which literally stopped traffic when it was installed in a Vancouver gallery window. The next year, he took inspiration from a painting he knew intimately from the galleries of the Courtauld Institute, Édouard Manet’s 1881–1882 masterpiece, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Calling his own photograph *Picture for Women*, Wall mimicked the composition of Manet’s painting but gave primary focus to his camera reflected in the mirror, between the female model calmly looking outward and Wall himself, who appears off to the side, taking the photo.

Apart from painting’s layered complexity, Wall had also picked up another of its important elements—its “singularity,” as he calls it. In the beginning, unlike other photographers, he

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produced his images in an edition of one (with perhaps one other artist's proof that he held onto—these days, he might make three or four). "I feel like the actual artistic part of photography is concluded when a negative is made into a positive—a print," he says. "The only reason to make a second print is a social reason like reproduction or publication. I have no artistic need to make more than one." For reasons of convenience, or to lend to exhibitions, today he makes anywhere from two prints (for immense, 6-by-10-foot images) to eight (typically for smaller pieces). He jokingly justifies this practice by reaching into the grab bag of the canon: "Duchamp said, and I think this is a pretty great comment, 'The notion of original goes up to eight.'"

As Wall engaged further with his own artistic practice throughout the late '70s and early '80s, a photography scene was beginning to emerge around him—a loose group of contemporaries who would come to be called the Vancouver School (including, among others, Rodney Graham and Ian Wallace). Meanwhile, he began visiting New York regularly, where Graham, by then an active conceptual artist and writer, acted as a sort of ambassador. Wall kept up on other emerging artists, and while it was reassuring to him that they were also interested in returning to figurative work, his head wasn't turned. "I wasn't blown away by Cindy Sherman to the point that it had an effect on what I was doing," he says. "I knew what Robert Longo was up to or David Salle. That's not what I was doing, but I had the context of knowing both what was going on at the moment and historically."

Instead, he remained focused on his own work, which often captured minute human moments in a poignantly empathetic light, such as 1982's *Mimic*, in which a white man pulls the corner of his eye upward in cruel mockery of an Asian passerby. In 1999's *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, a lone janitor cleans the landmark space as dawn is breaking; 2011's *Boxing* is based on Wall's own memories of play-boxing with his brother in his childhood living room. He seems to operate on the faith that, as long as he's thought through his idea carefully enough, a certain alchemy will occur. "As soon as things go in motion," he says, "you have spontaneity." Wall's habit of politely offering such conversational footnotes in the most gentlemanly manner only serves to heighten one's sense of his considerable intellect.

"He's so smart, most of the people who work with him—I mean curators—are afraid of him," says Galassi, the former MoMA curator. "I would say 90 percent of the writing about Jeff is a kind of half-baked worshipful repetition of things that he wrote a long time ago and much of which he doesn't believe in anymore."

"He is so precise about how you encounter and how you see his images, that when you are a curator installing his work the responsibility is really enormous. I was terrified," admits Wagstaff of the 2005 retrospective she oversaw. After she walked Wall through the exhibition, he told her, "You know, I couldn't have done it better myself." Wagstaff still sounds relieved recounting the story, saying, "It was one of the best things that anyone has ever said to me as a curator."

Indeed, Wall seems to respond more to his own internal critical process than to any external pressures. "I was criticized once for being too afraid to take real pictures in the real world," he says. Rather than become demoralized, he simply applied his typically meticulous deductive

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reasoning. “I thought, OK, well, let’s say I’m just a fraidy-cat. What about Franz Kafka? He was pretty afraid. He was neurotic. He was weak. It doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t be a very good artist even if you were guilty of all the things you were accused of being. Why would you not be good? There’s no way that one kind of artist is good, another kind of artist isn’t.”

Just the same, Wall acknowledges that bad art does exist. “The main thing about art is the quality,” he says. “Part of the pleasure of experiencing art is judging it. That’s part of the deal—you can’t turn it off. That’s good; that’s better.” At times, he even questions his own contribution. “I’ve seen people who clearly imitate me, and they’re so terrible it’s embarrassing. That makes you feel like your influence is baleful and negative,” he says. “There must be something wrong with you.”

The skyrocketing art market, however, is not a yardstick that he is particularly concerned with. “To me it’s actually beside the point. The price of something rare is always going to be high. Singularity creates an odd value that is not according to the normal value of commodities—it’s way outside of it,” he says. (His labor-intensive process necessarily limits the number of works he can create. “I produce as many works as I can,” he says. “I’m not trying to restrict production.”)

Mostly, Wall maintains a belief in the affirmative power of art. “I think it’s sad that art isn’t for everyone—not every person seems to have the character or sensitivity to respond to aesthetic things,” he says. “That’s kind of lamentable because maybe it would be a happier world.” He adds, “I know it from my own experience. My life is much, much better than it would have been if I hadn’t had contact with the arts. I hope that I can keep going forever. I like doing what I do.”



The Destroyed Room, 1978  
THE DESTROYED ROOM, 1978, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX, 159 X 229 CM,  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Picture for Women, 1979  
PICTURE FOR WOMEN, 1979, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX, 142.5 X 204.5 CM,  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

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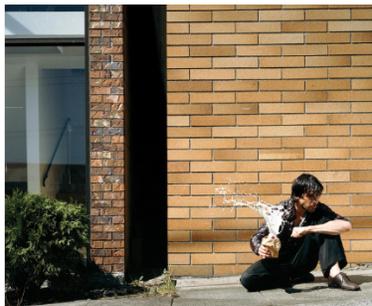
A Sudden Gust of Wine (after Hokusai), 1993  
A SUDDEN GUST OF WIND (AFTER HOKUSAI), 1993, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX,  
229 X 377 CM, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue, 1999-2000  
AFTER 'INVISIBLE MAN' BY RALPH ELLISON, THE PROLOGUE 1999-2001, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX,  
174.0 X 250.5 CM, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Overpass, 2001  
OVERPASS, 2001, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX, 214.2 X 273.3 CM,  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Milk, 1984  
MILK, 1984, TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX, 187 X 229 CM,  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

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