

# The New York Times

ART REVIEW | 'WILLIAM WEGMAN'

## Beyond Dogs: Wegman Unleashed

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The retrospective of William Wegman's multifarious career that opened yesterday at the Brooklyn Museum simultaneously confirms why Mr. Wegman hasn't always received the respect he deserves and why he deserves it. The short explanation — on both counts — is that he has been too innovatively funny for too long and on too many levels (visual, verbal, commercial and arty) for people to see the serious artist behind the inveterate jokester. He's also been funny in too many mediums for his achievement to be easily grasped.

And, of course, there is the dog issue. By this I mean the silken, compliant, implicitly comical Weimaraners who have been featured in some of his best videos and photographs, starting in 1970 with an unusually photogenic puppy named Man Ray. The appealing collaborations between artist and dog eventually led to calendars, greeting cards, children's books, commercials and appearances on "Sesame Street" and the "Late Show With David Letterman," which have all confused his art-world audience, while also earning him a much larger one.

So let this be said: dogs or no dogs, Mr. Wegman is one of the most important artists to emerge from the heady experiments of the 1970's. Despite a somewhat helter-skelter presentation, the nearly 230 artworks and nearly 100 quite short videos in "William Wegman: Funny/Strange" offer a total immersion in the fruits of his inquiring mind and sardonic eye. They anoint him as the most accessible and, in his own way, richly human of all Conceptual artists.



Courtesy Senior & Shopmaker Gallery  
"Strippy" (2001)

inspired by the Surrealists, as the name of his most famous dog suggests, but also by the radio comedians Bob and Ray and those late-night television commercials made in situ by the owners of used-car dealerships and appliance stores.

Initiated by the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy Andover in Massachusetts, the show has been selected by Trevor Fairbrother and is accompanied by a book by Joan Simon, curator at large at the Whitney Museum of American art. Over all, it teems a bit too much with small, framed items. My initial reaction — in a moment of trans-species free-association — was that absorbing the show might be akin to herding cats. But the energetic mixing of media enables you to follow Mr. Wegman's ideas as they migrate from one form to another.

The show includes a generous sampling of his videos, setup photographs, wittily captioned drawings, once-over-lightly Color Field history paintings and postcard-happy painted panoramas. All these, along with his general do-it-yourself style, have influenced decades of artists, the youngest of whom are insufficiently familiar with the scope of his work. Best of all, this show proves that there is much, much more to his achievement than dogs.

In his long and productive career, Mr. Wegman has remained as true as any of his legendary 1970's contemporaries to the belief that the artist's job is to make something that doesn't look like art. For most of his career — longer than that of most artists his age — Mr. Wegman, 62, has fearlessly tolerated looking silly, inconsequential or sentimental while making his art with whatever, or whoever, happened to be handy, starting with himself.

He has favored wordplay and visual puns of all varieties, disruptions of our eye-to-mind coordination and unexpected punch lines. He was

Mr. Wegman has also been guided by an entertainer's instincts: an infallible sense of the comic potential — and thus the pathos — of everyday ideas and objects. In this he is aided by a short attention span, a deadpan manner and a deep-seated penchant for frugality that wastes neither time, materials nor gestures. He has assiduously avoided mastery while operating with the economy of a total pro, and there is something intensely comforting in his comportment.

Mr. Wegman was born in Holyoke, Mass., in 1943 and grew up drawing. He studied painting at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and then joined what he called "the piece movement." While earning a graduate degree at the University of Illinois and then teaching for three years at the University of Wisconsin, he specialized in temporary installation pieces that required advanced planning, assistance and quantities of non-art materials. Toward the end of his Wisconsin sojourn, he began to yearn to work alone in the privacy of his studio, and realized that video and still photography could be his liberation.

Mr. Wegman secured his place in art history when he became the first person to prove that video art could be laugh-out-loud funny. He accomplished this in 1970, the year he moved to Los Angeles. There he became friends with the artists Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, who were not without wit themselves.

Mr. Wegman was no slouch in front of the camera: he sang with his stomach, appeared in nothing but underpants and handbags (in his role as a door-to-door pocketbook salesman) and demonstrated how a stick and a metal chair might be construed as the latest massage equipment. But his best-known video efforts starred May Ray, who quickly became his collaborator, model and muse.



Collection of the Artist

"Bob and Ray" (1996)



Brooklyn Museum

"Furniture" (1985)

The videos in the Brooklyn show include the 62-second "Milk/Floor" of 1970-71, a brilliant little ode to Process Art performance. It opens with Mr. Wegman crawling backward on all fours, dribbling a line of milk from his mouth onto the floor. He disappears through a doorway, and seconds later, Man Ray emerges, moving forward (on all fours), efficiently lapping up the milk, until his nose hits the camera with a thud and the screen goes black. This video fulfills the first rule of classic humor: it is funny every time you see it.

Man Ray also figured prominently in black-and-white photographs, but the dog's greatest moment arrived two years before his death in 1982, when Mr. Wegman began working with a large color Polaroid camera. Knowing that his dog was aging and ailing, the artist set about making portraits of him in various guises and poses; the critic Sanford Schwartz compared the series to Robert Frank's classic book of photographs, "The Americans," in its emotional fullness and range. On the scale of Hollywood studio portraits, the photographs bring to mind famous images of Garbo, Harpo, Carmen Miranda and others. The show includes an image of Man Ray seen in profile in a diptych, tinted silver and gold like a Warhol starlet. He's seen again being dusted with flour, which conjures up falling snow, a spotlight or perhaps heavenly rays.

The show offers many of Mr. Wegman's small, dashed-off captioned drawings from the early 70's. Thurberesque in word and image, these include "Toddler Holds Couple Hostage" and "X Ray of Peach in Dish," whose title justifies the continuation of the circle that is the plate through the circle that is the peach. This cryptic, weirdly spectral image personifies the sensibility encoded in the show's title: an artist who renders funny strange by misspelling it.

Even the most devoted Wegmaniac may be surprised by the variety and extent of his altered photographs, notable for their wonderfully upfront dumbness. In "Cat's Cradle," the subject appears between the artist's upheld hands not as string, but as a series of cuts in the surface of the photograph; it is all the more strange for seeming — for about a second — to cast an elaborate

shadow on the wall and floor. "Attack Dog" was once, all too obviously, an image of a Weimaraner leaping to catch a Frisbee; the animal is now chomping down on the arm of a quavering de Kooningesque figure.

Just as Michelangelo described his carving process as liberating figures from stone, Mr. Wegman releases the jokes trapped in the images he comes across. In the small, thrift-shop-like gouache on collage titled "Bob and Ray," he ruthlessly converts an innocent family Christmas card into a tribute to his favorite comedians, and then, above the mantelpiece, he adds the familiar painting by Man Ray, the artist, of floating lips. In the pretzel-like compositions of his panoramic postcard paintings, Mr. Wegman simply extends the images from panoramic postcards out across the canvas until they have to be reconciled with the extensions emanating from other postcards.



"Blue Period" (1981)

Brooklyn Museum

contemporaries match. He may also be the last artist to hitch a ride on the Pop Art train as it pulled out of the station. Drawing on an even broader, more pedestrian range of Americana than the Pop artists did, Mr. Wegman refused to absorb these elements into high art, or even meet them on their own terms. Instead, he refashioned them into substandard versions — crude, lame and infinitely touching — that lay bare their hucksterism and their sincerity. He has not only embraced Americana, but he has also become part of it, and lived to tell the tale.

*"William Wegman: Funny/Strange" is at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, (718) 501-6134, through May 28.*

Mr. Wegman's art can seem scattered, but, in fact, he rarely leaves anything behind. The cluttered, mostly green composition of a 1985 painting titled "Furniture," for example, echoes both the humdrum tables and chairs of his videos, and his pre-video installation pieces. It also suggests, as do several canvases here, interesting links to irreverent German painters like Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger.

The show closes with some new dog Polaroids that are among the best Mr. Wegman has done since his Man Ray days and emphasize the affinity for color that emerges whenever he abandons black and white. "Strippy," for example, uses a puzzled Weimaraner as an armature for torn strips of brightly colored paper. Its formal verve continues in Mr. Wegman's most recent Polaroids, on view through April 8 at the Senior & Shopmaker Gallery in Chelsea, in which sheets of luminous colored Plexiglas muffle and multiply the Weimaraners' bodies and soulful faces. The Sperone Westwater Gallery, also in Chelsea, is showing a selection of early and recent work that encapsulates the span of the Brooklyn show, through April 22.

Mr. Wegman has done it, as the song says, his way. What he lacks in weight and depth when compared with artists like Richard Serra, Mr. Nauman and Robert Smithson, he more than makes up for with a sustained lightness whose profundity sneaks up on you.

His best work juggles the many balls of Post-Minimalism — process, language, performance — with an amateurish finesse that few of his