WEGMAN, WILLIAM

American

William Wegman is prolific and multifaceted with career achievements as a conceptual artist, pioneer video artist, filmmaker, creator of books, painter, draftsman, and collagist. He is best known, however, for critically and commercially successful photographs of his Weimaraner dogs.

Wegman acquired his first Weimaraner in 1970 and named him Man Ray, after the seminal expatriate American photographer. Ever loyal and in need of attention, Man Ray repeatedly walked into the artist’s photo or video shoots; realizing the dog had tremendous camera presence, Wegman began to incorporate the canine into his projects including the Man Ray Portfolio (1982). Man Ray was his favorite subject until the dog’s death in 1982 (The Village Voice named Man Ray 1982’s “Man of the Year”). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Wegman was ambivalent about the commercial success of the Man Ray photographs, feeling that he was not considered a serious artist, “nailed on the dog cross” and known only as “the dog guy.” He later embraced this success realizing that the animal works offered endless opportunity for expression and enabled him to explore many other types of projects. In 1986, when Wegman felt again ready to work with Weimaraners, he bought Fay Ray, with whom he would work until 1995 and who would give birth in 1989 to another generation of Wegman models, Battina, Crooky, and Chundo. Wegman photographed the pups growing up in order to train them as models—resulting works include Puppy Planter (1989) and Young Chundo (1990). From Batty came Chip, Wegman’s primary subject in the new century.

The breed’s ability to stand on point makes the dogs excellent models as they can hold poses for a long time. Wegman often dresses up his dogs and constructs absurd realities through makeup, props, and elaborate sets and costumes. The Weimaraners are incredibly expressive and capable of conveying a wide range of emotions. For example, in the 28 headshots comprising Fay Day (1995) the dog seems to convey among other distinctive “feelings”: alertness, sadness, fear, and bemusement. Recognizing differences in the dogs’ personalities and ranges of expressions, (he called Man Ray “stoic, passive, noble, and wise” and Fay Ray “part Greta Garbo and part Joan Crawford”), Wegman casts his dogs for different photographic “roles.”

Though his works with dogs are his best-known, Wegman has always made many other types of works. His photography runs the gamut of genres, from magazine covers of celebrities to conceptual works. An early example of his conceptual investigations is Family Combinations (1972), a set of six photographs including portraits of Wegman, his mother and father, and three superimposed combinations that is a pseudoscientific, physiognomic study that is simultaneously compelling and absurd. Reduce/Increase (1977) is a similarly silly drag portrait of the artist that is superimposed with inked notes (as if to a photo-lab) to “increase” feminine hips and bust and “reduce” his neck, shoulders, and waist—a note to “shave” the legs is the droll punch line.

Maintaining the conceptualist vein in his oeuvre, since the 1970s Wegman has incorporated found photographs and postcards into many paintings and drawings to critique the tenets of photographic looking. In these works, he extends landscapes and objects or creates fictional situations beyond the photographs’ edges. In Our Forefathers, Etc. (1996) he broadens the photographed space of the Lincoln Memorial to include a hand-drawn, ink-washed extended horizon and a female tourist reflexively “photographing” the statue/postcard.
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The popularity of Wegman's photographs is largely attributable to the deadpan and idiosyncratic humor of these works that the artist calls "pathetic irony." While the humor has allowed broad audiences (including those for televised video screenings on Saturday Night Live and The Tonight Show) access to his works, this wittiness often involves visual and verbal puns that undermine the "seriousness" of conceptual art and postmodern theory. *Building a Box* (1971) is a series of nine images that show Wegman "hammering" and "sawing" wood and a finished box, but constructing nothing in the sequence. This work pokes fun at Robert Morris's conceptual masterpiece, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), while requiring deep looking from the viewer to figure out this pictorial pun.

Humor is evoked in Wegman's works with dogs through gentle humiliation of his subjects, the transformation of his dogs into other animals or clever anthropomorphism. For instance, *Frog/frog II* (1982) features Man Ray posed in green snorkeling flippers, green makeup on his fur, and googly ping-pong ball eyes, opposite an anatomically correct prop frog. *Blue Period* (1981) mocks the gravity of Picasso's depressive works as a seemingly forlorn Man Ray is posed against a blue backdrop, and along with an acoustic guitar and framed *Picasso's Blue Period* (1981), the artist is posed against a blue backdrop and framed with a blue backdrop and framed with a blue backdrop.

Since 1989, Wegman has juxtaposed the heads of his dogs on the bodies of human actors through creative use of costumes and props. This device is used to great effect in his later videos and "fashion" photographs—for instance, *Trainer* (1999) in which the heads of models wearing haute couture are replaced by "pouting" bewigged canines. *Becoming* (1991) is a hilarious sequence of three large-format Polaroids showing a human woman holding and donning a dog head in exchange for her own. Other "fashion" works, such as *Feather Foot* (1999), which shows a leg and paw in a high-heeled shoe, focus on the incommensurability of human clothes and animal bodies.

Wegman's work with dogs has been enormously popular with children; the artist has responded by creating many photographic monographs; for example, *William Wegman Puppies* (1997), and storybooks, comprised of many narrative photographs for example, *Cinderella* (1993), for younger viewers. Other works for children include video segments for *Sesame Street* (1989-present), releases for home video, a feature film, *The Hardy Boys in Hardy Gold* (1994), and even an installation in the Children's Museum of Manhattan (2002).

WILLIAM V. GANS

Biography


Individual Exhibitions

1973 *William Wegman*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California
1982 *Wegman's World*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and traveling
1989 *William Wegman*, Maat de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint-Etienne, Saint-Etienne, France
1990 *William Wegman: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs, Videotapes*, Kunstmuseum Luzerne, and traveling
1997 *William Wegman*, Isuzu Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan, and Museum 'eki', Kyoto, Japan
1998 *William Wegman*, Rooseum, Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden
2000 *William Wegman*, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California

Group Exhibitions

1969 *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland
1972 *Documenta 5*, Kassel, West Germany
1978 *The Altered Photograph*, Institute for Art and Urban Resources at P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York
1982 *Venice Biennale—Aperto 82*, Venice, Italy
[Private Collection. Reproduced with permission of the artist]
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1990 Photography Until Now; Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
1995 Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California
2002 Art Inside Out; The Children's Museum of Manhattan, New York, New York

Selected Works
Family Combinations, 1972
Reduce/Increase, 1977
Man Ray Portfolio, 1982
Frog/Frog II, 1982
Puppy Poozer, 1989
Becoming, 1991
Fay Dar, 1995
Deposition, 1997

Further Reading