

Jeff Wall. Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 25 - May 14, 2007

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In Front of a Nightclub, 2006
silver dye bleach
transparency in light box
226 x 360.8 cm
collection of the Pilara Family
Foundation

Jeff Wall

Museum of Modern Art, New York
February 25 – May 14, 2007

It is fitting that the Jeff Wall retrospective should be displayed on the sixth and top floor of the MoMA. For decades, photography collections had been relegated to the basement of museums. Photography, it was supposed, did not fit within the seamless narrative of modern painting, and many still questioned its authenticity as fine art. So it is striking that this artist, who has grappled with precisely these issues in his extensive photography project, should be celebrated at the apex of Yoshio Taniguchi's new building. Traveling up the crowded escalators, catching glimpses of Monets, Van Goghs, Pollocks, and Lewitts, one ascends to a body of work that seemingly has something to say about the artists passed on the way up.

The show exhibits forty-one pictures created by Wall over thirty years. It is organized chronologically, and each of the ten rooms showcases a visible theme: interiors, cityscapes, minimalist subject matter, and fantastical images all figure into the show. The breadth of subject matter and the baroque-like execution of these massive, luminous works (some as tall as ten feet) accentuate the plurality of directions in which the photographic image has been steered. It is by no means audacious to suggest that photography both is and can be many things, but it is worth pausing to recall – and this retrospective reminds us well – that Wall was among the first to bring these possibilities to the fore.

Most of Wall's pictures are backlit, illuminated transparencies. The result is a dramatic and sensational kind of picture not unlike the historical tableaux painted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century masters. It conveys an academic impulse that recalls Wall's background in art history and criticism. *The Destroyed Room* (1978) is a violent image of a woman's bedroom torn inside out. It is the first picture that we see upon entering the show. The compositional reference to Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* is well documented.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the picture's emphasis on the planned and manufactured image. The visible two-by-fours and plywood that make up the frame help to provoke imagery of building and design. How a picture is constructed – or, in this case, deconstructed – signals the beginning of a complex program that was to propel Wall into many philosophical investigations about the nature of photography and art making.

Wall is openly engaged with the grand tradition of modern art, that which witnesses the self-referential qualities of art or, as Michael Fried interprets T. J. Clark's writings on the subject, "that visual experience is equated with a loss of certainty about the very act of representation." Wall's pictures often look like documentary photography (referencing subject matter from the "everyday"), but are usually staged. He calls into question the common intuition that the photograph is a disinterested, neutral, value-free, recorder of reality. His photographs are often decidedly unclear – characters in his pictures position themselves with their backs to us; cityscapes are rife with perspective-killing bridges, walls, and overpasses. Wall compels us, in short, to cast doubt upon photography's "realism."

Despite self-portraits such as *Picture for Women* (1979) and *Double Self-Portrait* (1979), Wall's project is not primarily a private one. His work is not some sort of postmodern, idiosyncratic investigation. Rather, as demonstrated by the decisive gesture in *Milk* (1985) and *Passerby* (1996), or the precise, Vermeer-like study of light and colour in *A Woman Consulting a Catalogue* (2005), his pictures are epic and formal. Scenes are exactly cast, set, and shot (the artist is a notorious perfectionist), and the polished pictures reveal painstaking



unity. The pictures' formalism endows a critical distance between the viewer and the work, and despite the often-disturbing subject matter – I'm thinking here of *Mimic* (1982), or *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), or *Insomnia* (1994) – we are not asked to respond politically to them. The rigid character of Wall's technique does not encourage this.

Be that as it may, as we make our way through the retrospective, surrounded by grand pictures of large-scale cinematography, we catch glimpses of characters that are neither luminous nor grand. Wall's heroes – the poor, the marginalized, the apathetic – weave and stagger their way through his cityscapes. The show's newest work, *In front of a nightclub* (2006), depicts a slew of revellers and teenagers hanging out on the street. An old rose-seller emerges – quiet, unassuming, and keen to make a living – an up-to-date version, perhaps, of Baudelaire's hero, the flâneur. And smaller works, such as *Diagonal Composition* (1993) and *Staining Bench, furniture manufacturer's, Vancouver* (2003), depict quiet corners in a worker's space. Treating these insignificant areas with the same diligence as other epic works provides them with a critical importance. Wall's allegiance to the modernist project, evidenced by imitation of and a commitment to a formalist language, might best be elucidated in his own words: "People seem to be hoping that the image of capitalist modernity as the regime of unfreedom and empty suffering which has developed, in part, by the avant-garde critique has somehow been invalidated, and that therefore the whole language of this critique no longer holds good for investigating the world . . . [but] suffering and dispossession remain at the center of social experience." Despite all the scholastic quarrels of philosophers and theorists, Wall seems to be arguing, those at the margins of society will always be struggling for recognition. Standing in this position of privilege and power, surrounded on all four sides by these radiant pictures, we are forced to recall that we ourselves are an integral part of this system. But the inability to enter into a dialogue with his works is criticized by some, such as Terry Myers, who notes that "this subtle sense of repression feeds into my main concern that the work now seems to be mirroring – rather than resisting – the hegemony of dominant culture."

Staining Bench is the last work in the exhibition. Splats, drips, and splotches in rich hues of brown, oxblood, and black stain weave elegant patterns over the entire frame, reducing an otherwise three-dimensional space into a study in colour blocking and anti-perspective. The evocative picture naturally leads one to consider the abstract expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock, and as we leave the retrospective, back down the escalator, we can confront modernism and its challenges with new eyes.

Stephanie Gibson

1. Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15.

2. Jeff Wall, "Typology, Luminescence, Freedom: Selections for a Conversation between Jeff Wall and Els Barents," in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 200.

3. Terry R. Myers, "Up Against Jeff Wall," *New Art Examiner* 23, (October 1995), 23.

Stephanie Gibson received an M.A. in art history from Concordia University and currently works at the National Gallery of Canada.