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Farago, Jason. "William Wegman: the 'dog artist' who still leads the pack." *www.theguardian.com (The Guardian)*, 15 April 2016.

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William Wegman and four-legged friend. Photograph: Tim Mantoani

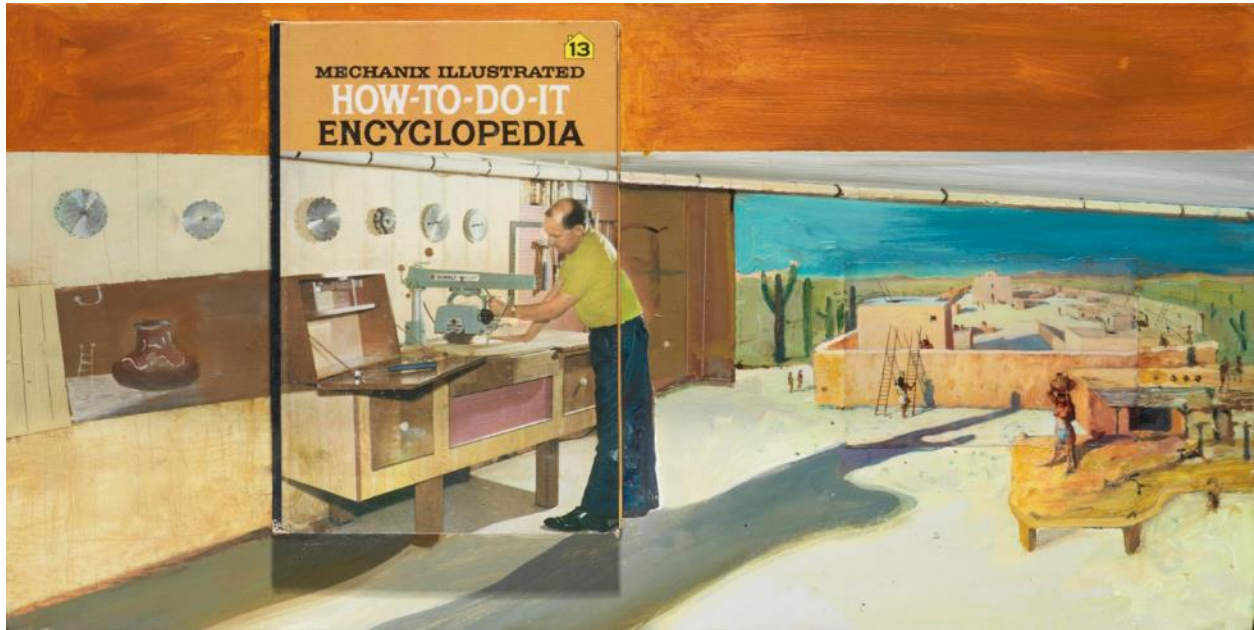
You can always fudge whether a painting or a sculpture is successful. With a joke you can't: no laugh, no achievement. So the work of William Wegman, one of America's most sympathetic artistic polymaths, has its own proof of accomplishment – the smile on your face.

A painter and an early pioneer of video art, Wegman went on to explore commercial photography and ended up something of a celebrity, with his Weimaraners in duffel jackets and roller skates appearing everywhere from wall calendars to Sesame Street, and obscuring the rest of his work. He has an above-the-artistic-average tolerance for both humor and commerce, yes. But photography has never been his only medium, and his dogs have never been his only muses.

Wegman, 72, is the subject of an eccentric, vivid and downright outstanding exhibition on view now at Sperone Westwater gallery in downtown Manhattan – which once again confirms that the man known too long only for his canine capers is in fact one of America's canniest and cleverest artists. It features more than a dozen of his "postcard paintings", for which Wegman selects bland or uninspiring photographic missives, pins them to the panel, and then translates their shapes and spaces into droll compositions that feel one part Edward Hopper, one part Bauhaus, and one part lysergic hallucination.

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A second New York show, at the smaller gallery Magenta Plains, pairs new paintings with some of his slyest drawings of the 1970s. Both shows coincide with the publication of a banging new monograph devoted to his wily works on panel – which features contributions from the New Yorker veteran Susan Orlean and from Bob Elliott, one half of the deadpan comedy duo Bob and Ray, who died earlier this year.



*How To Do It #13*, 2015. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

“There will often be one card that seems promising – something challenging, something fun,” Wegman tells me when I pay a visit to his home and studio, a three-story bunker-cum-funhouse in Chelsea. “I don’t want the card to be so complete that you don’t need any more. With the landscapes, they suggest their form. There’s the water and there’s the sky, and the challenge is how do you get up and down. But with the interiors, you have to ask: what sort of room is this going to evolve into? I got excited in one case about the real ugliness of an interior: the clashing colors, the weird shapes.” He has untold thousands of postcards, shoved into suitcases and scattered on several tables, most of them hilariously dull. I flick through a few of them – barns, waterfalls, third-tier suburban hotels – while one of Wegman’s dogs nuzzles at my crotch.



*Inside Outside*, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

In most of the paintings a postcard sits at the center of the composition, and colors and lines bleed from the card on to the panel with bizarre consequences. Angles become so acute that perspective starts to fail. The extruded spaces remind one less of classical European perspective than of Chinese and Japanese ink painting, whose axonometric format encourages you to read multiple spaces across a composition. Much of the wit in Wegman’s paintings comes from the horizontal fusion of plural spaces as one moves left to right: in one a hallway tumbles into a dining room, which then comically disintegrates to accommodate a pinned postcard of the abstract painter Hans Hofmann.

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Wegman studied painting at art school, but in the mid-1960s the medium was coming under sustained attack by the American avant-garde, who questioned its continued relevance. “I remember going to an exhibition of Frank Stella, at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis. One of the black paintings was there – minimalism wasn’t really called that yet – and it was so powerful. My art teacher said, ‘This isn’t art, because it’s symmetrical.’ That had a big effect on me. And when I got to grad school, there was a really tough collision with the establishment, both through Vietnam and through teachers who were really threatened by students saying ‘Painting is dead.’”



*Hopper Origami*, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

It was during his MFA studies that Wegman first picked up an early video camera – the same Sony Portapak that Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman and other pioneering American artists were importing from Japan. “We had them at the University of Wisconsin, so I had video by 1968. They used to use them in the sports department to practice your golf swing. There was a painter who had lacquer poisoning and could no longer paint – and he was making these *horrible* videos with dancers, multiple-camera things. I borrowed his.”

Like Nauman, who used the Portapak to document feats of repetitive, distressing endurance, Wegman trained the camera on himself in his studio. Unlike Nauman, he edited.

“Nauman used the whole 30-minute reel-to-reel. The thing that was different about my work is that I accepted, even strove, to have a beginning and end. That was, in that period, almost a dirty word. Narratives were considered not so cool. Having a beginning and an end seemed kind of radical. Even when I was in grad school I had a really torturous pull between high and low.”

It helped that he had, as a studiomate, one of the great artistic performers of the 20th century: Man Ray, the floppy-eared Weimaraner who became the Liv Ullmann to his Bergman. Long before the world of contemporary art became besotted with “interspecies alliances” – in which animals, most notably in the work of Pierre Huyghe, challenge archaic notions of what it means to be human – Wegman and Man Ray were collaborating on artworks in which the rigors of conceptualism got wrecked on the shoals of canine indifference. In the enduring masterpiece *Milk/Floor* (1970-71), Wegman gets on all fours and gurgles milk

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like a Naumanite body artist, dribbling the white stuff into a line on the ground – only for Man Ray to interrupt, lap up the spilt milk, and then smack the camera with his snout. Or else they went in for anthropomorphism, and reveled in the implicit absurdity. In *Spelling Lesson* (1973-74), Man Ray sits at a kitchen table and grimaces slightly when Wegman grades his writing test: “When it came to *beach* you spelled it B-E-E-C-H....”



Summer Show, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

“Whether I liked it or not, he came to my studio and got into everything,” the artist says now. “It was accidental, but Man Ray was very charismatic. He really wanted to do it. I didn’t want to become a ‘dog guy’, so I was extreme about what I would let out. But the dog was like the Son of Sam: he sort of made me do it. He was speaking to me always: *Bill, let’s go to the studio!* That’s what my dogs do now too.”

He has two of them these days, the animated Flo and the mellower Topper, who wander freely over the Wegman compound. They hop on the freight elevator with us as we descend to the basement, stocked with an opera house’s worth of costumes from photoshoots over the years: tutus, hockey jerseys, clown costumes. Wegman grabs a stool, which Flo hops upon eagerly, her curves as elegant as a Brancusi.

Among the more surprising discoveries at Wegman’s home and studio is his mammoth collection of classical music recordings. “I probably have more CDs than anyone in the world,” he jokes, but he might not be exaggerating that much. His paintings and postcards share the room with thousands of recordings, and not of the easy-listening kind. Twentieth- and 21st-century classical music dominates, especially the

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spectralism of Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey. The severity and spikiness of much modern music seems at odds with Wegman's playful style, but he finds it keeps him from getting too arrogant. "I find that I get too grandiose listening to Romantic music when I'm working. It seems to be from my era, so it's feasible. Whereas in the bedroom I have lute music."



*Ladies of the Mall*, 2014. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

And even in music, he correctly insists, the ambitions of great art have enough room for a joke or two. "Haydn is funny, if you really know your music and you know what a musical joke is. Whereas most of the painting that was considered whimsical, like Klee, you didn't really laugh at. My videos were funny, because events unfold in time. The paintings are too big to laugh at – they're *funny* like a French person would say, *funny* as in interesting. You can be funny in a drawing or in a video, but in a painting you can't really be funny."

*William Wegman: Postcard Paintings is at Sperone Westwater, New York through 23 April. William Wegman is at Magenta Plains, New York through 24 April. William Wegman: Paintings is published by Abrams.*