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**SFMOMA PRESENTS JEFF WALL RETROSPECTIVE  
Exhibition Surveys Three Decades of Innovation**

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is pleased to present the exhibition *Jeff Wall*, a retrospective survey of the artist's career from the late 1970s to the present, on view from October 27, 2007, through January 27, 2008. Co-organized by SFMOMA Director Neal Benezra and Peter Galassi, chief curator of photography, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, the exhibition features some 40 of Wall's major light-box photographs and four black-and-white gelatin silver prints, tracing his principal themes and pictorial strategies.



Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993; Tate, London. Purchased with the assistance of the Patrons of New Art through the Tate Gallery Foundation and from the National Art Collections Fund; © 2006 Jeff Wall

Wall (Canadian, b. 1946) is widely recognized as one of the most influential, adventurous, and inventive artists of his generation. Since 1978 he has worked principally with large-scale color photographs presented as transparencies in light boxes. His distinctive pictorial universe ranges from gritty realism to elaborate fantasy, drawing upon an unusually broad spectrum of sources that includes 19th-century painting, Conceptual art, narrative cinema, and modernist photography. The exhibition presents a selection of ambitious and celebrated works, including *Picture for Women* (1979); *Mimic* (1982); *The Storyteller* (1986); *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993); *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2000); *Tattoos and Shadows* (2000); and *In front of a nightclub* (2006), a newly promised gift to SFMOMA.

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he still lives and works, Wall began painting and drawing seriously as a teenager. He studied art history at the University of British Columbia, where he earned a master's degree in 1970 with a thesis on Dada in Berlin. At this time, Vancouver was rapidly becoming a vibrant artistic center, and by the late 1960s Wall's own work was closely attuned to the most recent developments in Minimalism and Conceptual art. In 1970 his *Landscape Manual* (1969–70), a 56-page

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black-and-white pamphlet of photographs and text, was exhibited at MoMA in *Information*, the influential survey of Conceptual art.

Wall was dissatisfied with his work at this time, however. He moved to London to pursue a doctorate in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and he soon stopped making art altogether. During his three years in London, he read widely in philosophy, the history and criticism of art and film, and the growing field of critical theory. He saw many films, and by the time he returned to Vancouver in the spring of 1973, he had decided to commit himself to filmmaking. Although he admired experimental cinema, his touchstone was postwar Neo-Realism in the broadest sense—films that used conventional narrative structures to deal imaginatively with everyday life.

Wall started teaching art and art history in 1974, and in 1976 he was appointed assistant professor at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver. None of his filmmaking projects had come to fruition, and he was eager to begin making art again. He had become close to the American artist Dan Graham and, like Graham, felt that the Conceptual art movement had reached an impasse. In the wake of the Conceptual art crisis, Wall aimed to rebuild the rebellious spirit of Modernism from the ground up. The distinctiveness of his art ever since has derived largely from the intensity with which he felt that mandate, his willingness to devote considerable resources of time and energy to entirely untested prospects, and his wide-ranging passion for and curiosity about images and ideas. The initial elements were certain aspects of cinema and painting, brought together in an unusual photographic medium.

Wall began working in the SFU studios, where, like a filmmaker, he could build sets, control lighting, rehearse actors, and otherwise create an entirely fictional image. He adopted the term “cinematography” to summarize his approach, which he believed could greatly enrich the potential of still photography. Another significant facet of Wall’s new aesthetic was his sense that post-Renaissance painting could serve as a vital resource for contemporary art. On his first visit to the Museo del Prado in Madrid in the summer of 1977, he was deeply affected by the work of Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Goya, and others, and he sought in his own art to emulate the commanding physical presence and pictorial power of Western painting’s grand theater of human figures in action.

In Wall’s view, color photography—then widely regarded as vulgar and commercial—was an ideal medium, in part because it distanced his work from the contemporaneous revival of figure painting that he regarded as a betrayal of avant-garde principles. Backlit transparencies had become common in advertising, and Wall embraced the commercial association as essential to the socially critical dimension of his art.

The initial phase of Wall’s light-box work is represented in the exhibition by *The Destroyed Room* (1978), *Picture for Women* (1979), and *Double Self-Portrait* (1979). The first two works allude to famous 19th-century French paintings by Eugène Delacroix and Édouard Manet, respectively, and were originally conceived to address the circumstance of women under capitalism. But the pictures’ pictorial sources, as well as their critical goals, have been thoroughly transformed through a complex admixture of Conceptual strategies and political and theoretical concerns.

The first photographs that Wall made outdoors, in 1980, were three panoramic landscapes—assertions that his art would not be limited to studio fictions. These straightforward views, like most of Wall's subsequent landscapes, belong to a long photographic tradition of examining man's presence in the land. The genre is represented in the exhibition by *Steves Farm, Steveston* (1980); *The Old Prison* (1987); and *Coastal Motifs* (1989).

Wall also left the studio to make such works as *Mimic* (1982) and *Milk* (1984), both of which were inspired by incidents that he had observed on the street. He hired nonprofessional actors and restaged these incidents for the tripod-bound, large-format camera that he needed in order to produce images adequately rich in detail for his large transparencies. This way of working, combined with a focus on people at the margins of society, has shaped a central vein of Wall's art ever since. He summarized the program as "the painting of modern life," a phrase associated with the work of Manet and derived from a celebrated essay by Charles Baudelaire titled "The Painter of Modern Life." In *Milk*, the liquid explosion caused by the man's abrupt gesture, set against the bleak geometry of the city, makes a vivid image of distress. As in Baudelaire's prose poems, the gritty reality of the street is transformed into a striking emblem of contemporary experience.

In the late 1980s Wall developed his modern-life imagery in two major pictures that step back to take in a broad view and incorporate a larger cast of characters: *The Storyteller* (1986) and *An Eviction* (1988; revised 2004). The former describes a gathering of indigent descendants of Canada's first peoples on the embankment of a highway overpass. Wall took the picture's theme and its title from an essay by Walter Benjamin that held up the premodern figure of the storyteller as an embodiment of, in Wall's words, "the memory of values excluded by capitalist progress." Although the artist has since questioned the socially progressive spirit of the picture, his many photographs that describe the marginal and dispossessed (e.g., *Overpass*, 2001) or acknowledge racial and ethnic diversity (e.g., *Trân Đức Vân*, 1988/2003, and *Tattoos and Shadows*, 2000) have achieved a sustained quality of genuine attention, unmarred by condescension or sentimentality.

In the early 1990s Wall's art developed in sharply divergent directions. One path led to fantastic and even bizarre scenes, often created with the help of digital montage. The artist had observed the growing sophistication of digitally altered imagery, and when the tools reached the level required by his large photographs, he began to make use of them. Among the earliest works in which he did so is *Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* (1992), in which slaughtered soldiers who have mysteriously awakened respond to their deaths in different ways. More than 13 feet wide, the picture invests the grandeur of Napoleonic history painting and cinematic epics of war with a highly particular fantasy.

The following year Wall digitally composed another, equally ambitious picture, but of a very different kind. *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993) transposes a scene from a 19th-century Japanese print into a cranberry bog outside Vancouver. Wall was fascinated by the challenge of recreating the print's striking visual impression of an invisible natural force.

The light-hearted *A Sudden Gust of Wind* could hardly be more different from *Dead Troops Talk*, or from the other new branch of imagery that Wall had initiated. At the same time that he was testing the limits of fantasy, Wall also explored the modern photographic traditions that he had first challenged. *Some Beans* and *An Octopus* (both 1990) and subsequent figureless pictures made both in- and outdoors embrace photography's fundamental capacity to transform raw fact into pictorial poetry.

In 1993—the same year he made *A Sudden Gust of Wind*—Wall made *Restoration*, a tour de force of photographic description that adopts a narrow panoramic form as if in emulation of its subject: a vast, walk-in panorama painted in the late 19th century, which in the early 1990s was in the first stages of being restored. From a position near the edge of the circular interior, the picture takes in a sweep of 180 degrees to revel in the interplay between surface and depth, between painterly and photographic description.

In 1996 Wall deepened his rapprochement with photographic tradition by beginning to work in black and white. Most of his pictures in that medium have been drawn from everyday life, including all four of the monochrome works that are presented together in a single gallery in the exhibition. The most significant new note here is the gloom and murk of darkness, luxuriously rendered in *Night* (2001).

If many contemporary photographers regard black-and-white imagery as hopelessly antiquated, artists in general might agree that illustrations of novels have been definitively relegated to the past. Wall's explorations of the latter domain consequently exemplify his distinctive ability to marshal the neglected past in the service of an uncharted future. The exhibition includes two such pictures. One makes gloriously visible the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, composing the novel itself in an underground lair illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs. The other is a small, seductive image (printed in 2005), drawn from Yukio Mishima's novel *Spring Snow*.

The exhibition is accompanied by two publications. *Jeff Wall* includes color plates of all the works in the exhibition; an interview with the artist by James Rondeau, curator of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago; and a richly illustrated essay by Galassi that traces the evolution of Wall's work and links his originality to the breadth and complexity of his artistic and intellectual interests. *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* is the first collection of Wall's essays and interviews to be published in English. The subjects of Wall's essays range from the work of Édouard Manet, On Kawara, and Dan Graham to the role of photography in Conceptual art. Both books are distributed through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada and through Thames & Hudson outside of North America. They are available at the SFMOMA MuseumStore or online at [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org).

SFMOMA will host an artist talk with Wall on Thursday, October 25, at 6:30 p.m., followed by a book signing at 7:30 p.m. Tickets to the talk are \$10 general and \$7 for members, students, and seniors.

*Jeff Wall* is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The San Francisco presentation is made possible by the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein.

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