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Review/Art; The Dog Days and Years Of William Wegman

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William Wegman has always excelled at the esthetics of nonchalance: casualness and humor are the hallmarks of his style. His tossed-off cartoon drawings of the early 1970's specialized in the non sequitur joke. His more recent paintings -- which might be called Color Field narratives -- marshal expanses of thin cloudy paint and tiny endearing images into tongue-in-cheek epics about agriculture, architecture, air travel and the like. As is well known, his most famous subject, a Weimaraner named Man Ray, began to be featured in videotapes and photographs, in the early 1970's, simply because he kept bothering Mr. Wegman while he tried to work.

Man Ray was by far the most malleable component of the artist's laid-back approach, the later fruits of which are on display at the Neuberger Museum at the State University College at Purchase. To please his master, the dog tolerated clothing, makeup, embarrassing postures and sundry props and situations (from fins to flippers to being dusted with flour). But the large-format color Polaroids that recorded these bothersome transformations are among the most inventive, touching and dignified images of animals ever made.

Something profound clicked between man and Weimaraner, and after Man Ray died in 1982 it was not surprising that he was succeeded in Mr. Wegman's oeuvre by other members of the breed. First came a female Weimaraner named Fay Ray and after the summer of 1989 and the arrival of her first litter a gang of four, five or occasionally eight of her offspring.

This brings us to the summer of 1990 and to what happens when an artist as innately relaxed as Mr. Wegman takes what he calls "a working vacation." The sojourn included Fay, several younger Rays, a large-scale Polaroid camera and a number of assistants; the site was a lodge in the Maine woods that the artist bought in 1988. The results, 26 Polaroids and 20 smaller color photographs, make up the show "Outdoor Photographs," at the Neuberger. Mr. Wegman's new images, shown for the first time, are at once irresistible and decidedly uneven: sometimes art and sometimes usually amusing snapshots of extremely cute dogs. They often indicate that at least where Mr. Wegman and dogs are concerned, more is sometimes less.

But the pleasures of this lighthearted exhibition are many. It has Americana jokes and art jokes and titles that rebound, as when four dogs crouch in a series of old theater seats for "Scary Movie," sit Rushmore-like on a huge boulder for "Presidents' Dogs" or line up chest-deep in water for "Lakers." For "Bacon" (the artist, not the saturated fat), three dogs loll on their backs, legs up and tangled, on a modern orange velvet couch in front of a deep red curtain. The ensemble captures the palette, the figural contortions and in the couches' three cushions even the triptych format for which Francis Bacon is widely known.

In and around the camp's main house, the dogs double as stuffed hunting trophies or pose in ways that mimic rustic furniture. With their lean long-legged physiques, they effectively imitate statues or form canine decorative friezes on generous window sills. Their velvety gray-brown coats always seem just right for the buildings' wood interiors and exteriors.

Mr. Wegman has never let his love of animals interfere with an astute formal sense, as attested by the carefully matched shades of dog, dirt and tree bark of "Birch" and the weathered shingles-with-Weimaraner monochrome of "Jam." One of the best, this image shows a dog seated in profile in a window and functioning as a diagonal jam to hold it open while also keeping one steady eye on the camera.

As the reader may have guessed by now, the more one looks at, thinks about and generally savors these images, the better they become. In the best of them, the artist uses the dogs to convert the vacation snapshot or postcard -- a not insignificant part of American visual culture -- into something stranger. The image of four somber Weimaraners in

orange life preservers adrift in a canoe in the middle of a huge lake is funny because theirs is a swimming, retrieving breed, but funnier (and sadder) still for conjuring generations of snapshots of not-so-happy campers.

But too rarely is the one-on-one Man Ray-Wegman chemistry in evidence or the balance of humanness and doggedness in the animals brought powerfully to the fore. In "Side Entrance" and "Shut-Ins," Mr. Wegman dresses two of Fay's daughters, Battina and Crookie, in old-fashioned smocks. They stiffly peer out of a door or window like a pair of ill-at-ease spinsters out of Grant Wood, yet with a combination of curiosity and anxiety that is pure canine. On vacation or not, it's clearly a job to capture the dogs in the subtle state of being something else while also being completely themselves.

"Outdoor Photographs" remains at the Neuberger Museum at the State University College at Purchase through June 30.

Photo: A detail from William Wegman's Polaroid work "Side Entrance." (Neuberger Museum)