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Reviews/Art; William Wegman's Versatile Humor Survives Man Ray

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For people who believe art and humor are strange bedfellows, a visit to the 20-year retrospective of William Wegman at the Whitney Museum of American Art may make them think again.

Mr. Wegman, a Conceptual artist turned painter, is the art world's most amusing heavyweight lightweight -- and its premier dog photographer. He is perhaps best known for turning a cooperative Weimaraner named Man Ray into a virtual art icon, something on the order of a canine Andy Warhol.

Mixing high art with popular culture, Mr. Wegman works in drawing, video and photography as well as painting. He routinely alternates between an endearing childlike naivete and an unerring sense of language and style -- often within the same work. At times, his art can seem so versatile as to be almost schizophrenic.

Moving from his do-it-yourself videotapes of the early 1970's to the frothy paintings that have been his specialty since the mid-1980's, for example, is like going from Ernie Kovacs to Raoul Dufy. On one hand, there is the dopey video sequence of the artist spraying an entire can of deodorant into his armpit, as if trapped in a television commercial gone berserk; on the other, there are paintings like "Revolutionary Skating," among whose decorous clouds of abstract color the viewer can pick out a boisterous group of ice-skating stick figures observed by a ghostly row of infantrymen. They may be toy soldiers or a real palace guard looking for a peasant riot to overrun.

This exhibition was originally organized nearly two years ago by the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, Switzerland, and has been updated with recent works for its final stop here, which has been overseen by Richard Armstrong, a curator at the Whitney. To its organizers' credit, the installation evenhandedly integrates Mr. Wegman's popular dog images with his other efforts, conveying a sense of wholeness that his work has never quite had. In the process, the show reveals an achievement that helped set the stage for the art of the 1980's -- especially in its emphasis on narrative -- and yet that has come fully into its own only in the past few years.

Man Ray, one of Mr. Wegman's most effective artistic weapons, came by pure chance. The dog nosed his way into Mr. Wegman's work in 1970, mainly because he was lonely and wanted attention, first appearing in black-and-white photographs and short videotapes. Starting in the late 70's, the artist immortalized his dog, who died in 1982, in a series of rich-hued Polaroids that are often as witty as they are moving.

As the Polaroids at the Whitney remind us, Man Ray submitted to green flippers and other ridiculous costumes, dustings of flour and smears of paint without ever surrendering his almost human sense of dignity. These portraits, which combined irony and sincerity in equal parts, attracted legions of fans, many of whom know little of Mr. Wegman's other tactics.

In addition to several Man Ray portraits, the show begins with a gallery of Weimaraner images that are being shown for the first time. These feature Man Ray's successors -- a female Weimaraner named Fay Ray and her offspring -- and indicate that the artist retains his infallible touch with canines.

Mr. Wegman endows his dogs, which are sometimes in costume and sometimes simply arranged on different pieces of furniture, with the pinched face of a 19th-century spinster ("Colonial Maiden"), the smoldering resentment of a travel-weary child ("Long Drive") or the drowsy slouch of a starlet ("Lolita"). In "Dog Walker," in which one Weimaraner is about to take another one for a walk, the artist coaxes contrasting facial expressions from the hounds that differentiate between dog-as-master and dog-as-dog.

Mr. Wegman, who was born in 1943 in Holyoke, Mass., belongs to an artistic generation that emerged in the late 1960's and early 70's. These artists, among them John Baldessari, Vito Acconci and Joseph Kosuth, were convinced that art could be made out of absolutely anything -- any event, material or idea -- as long as the activity didn't produce a traditional painting or sculpture. While other Conceptual artists, as they were soon known, delved into art as language, philosophy or performance, Mr. Wegman focused on the joke: marshaling visual and verbal puns, non sequiturs, black humor and stand-up comedy into his drawings, photographs and videotapes.

At times his early efforts are little more than obscure in-jokes that parody the very trend he was a part of. Things are livelier the closer he gets to different forms of popular culture, especially entertainment, and, interestingly enough, the influences seem to have been reciprocal.

Mr. Wegman's video shorts of the 1970's, for example, were inspired by the home-made used-car commercials he encountered on late-night television while living in southern California. But these clumsy little vignettes also presaged the kind of videotapes featured on television's "Saturday Night Live." And Mr. Wegman's amateurish captioned drawings, which once resembled rejected New Yorker cartoons, now read as harbingers of the loopy didactic style favored by the magazine's younger cartoonists, like Roz Chast. In one 1970 work, a number of casually drawn figures rest their heads and arms on tables shaped like kidneys, triangles and the letter E. The caption reads, "Shape of desk doesn't matter: kids still get bored."

In the mid-80's, Mr. Wegman returned, like the prodigal son, to painting, successfully giving his cartoonish renderings the force of epic. Both big and intimate, these works interweave crowds of little images -- many of them copied from charts and illustrations in encyclopedias -- and diaphanous layers of stained color that recall Color Field painting, the dominant abstract painting style of the artist's youth. But looking through these layers of color also creates the sensation of peering back through layers of time and culture, an experience not without its dark side.

In "Major Mining," clouds of red paint suggest pollution, while the images drifting through them alternate the similar shapes of baseball stadiums and strip mines, as if equating two very different forms of human activity and suggesting, among other things, that baseball could be bad for the environment.

In "House and Village," Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, an angular masterpiece of modern architecture, overlooks small-town America, a neatly ordered grid of white houses and steepled churches. Between them is a yellow steam shovel that may represent the villagers' anger at the lofty individuality of Wright's creation. Or perhaps the machine is the harbinger of Fallingwater: The Subdivision, row upon row of identical, radical houses.

Either way, the painting offers a witty, subtly sinister metaphor for the rugged terrain that lies between high art and real life: a place that has been Mr. Wegman's artistic territory for the last 20 years.

As usual, Mr. Wegman leaves us smiling. But the growing power of his recent canvases also makes us admire his painterly skills and contemplate the deepening meanings of his art.

"William Wegman: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs, Videotapes" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through April 19.

Photo: "Dog Walker" (1990), from the retrospective of William Wegman's work at the Whitney Museum. (Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery)