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William Wegman

The game of discovery

*interview by **Leda Cempellin****

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South Dakota State University.

What are you currently working on? I've been making a lot of work with dogs on furniture. Recently I did a project with vintage Nakashima furniture and also with furniture loaned to me from Herman Miller, which included Eames chairs. Rather than the usual props that I find in dumpsters or at the yard sales, this is classier stuff.

Your subject matter has gained widespread popularity and appeal beyond the art world. I wonder if your work has also been seen as sentimentally charged or borderline kitsch... Hopefully not! [*Laughs*]. Weimaraners are spooky in a way, they are not so cute. I think that the fact that they are grey and neutral allows me to write lots of different stories with them.

I understand your dogs' need of human companionship and of getting your attention, but I wonder how did you learn to train them so naturally to perform the tasks you wanted them to? I have had ten dogs over the years. Man Ray was my first dog in the 70s and my dog Fay had puppies and they had puppies and I have enjoyed working with them all. Now I have two dogs, Flo and Topper. All my dogs have been Weimaraners, which is a working breed: they like to be around people and they also like jobs. The dogs see me struggling, working, and concentrating when we are in the studio. They are working dogs and they see me as a working person taking things seriously and so that's something they grow to do. I usually don't use treats because I don't like the dogs to be drooling or looking so eager; I want them to just have their own presence.

Do the dogs at some point proactively determine the course of an idea that you initially had in mind? We are very quick to take a new direction, if for some reason the dogs do not like being around a certain prop, or if something seems to annoy or distract them, for instance metal or noisy things. Certainly it's how they act and how they look that informs my work.

An example? Well, my second dog Fay didn't like posing next to other dogs, she would always leans away. Her son and daughter on the other hand were always very close, both in life and in pictures, and always seemed to be resting on each other; very sleepy-eyed and dreamy. This makes for different sorts of moods, different pictures. I always pay close attention to that.

When you have a photograph, what is the quality you are looking for? Well, I like to find something that I never saw before. What's really interesting for me is when I take a picture and the dogs become a picture. It makes me see them better and even love them more, I actually fall in love with my dogs the more I photograph them, because when you flatten out the surface like that into a picture plane, it makes you see it in a new way. If you think of a map of the State of Massachusetts when you are driving there, then you are thinking from the map point of view. A photograph is like a flat map of a three-dimensional object, which is maybe the dog; certain angles are presented in the pictures and I see them in the living dog, and it makes me even more attached to them.

What is the biggest misunderstanding about your work that you had to face throughout your career, and how do you respond to that? A misunderstanding about my work is that I am abusing my dogs. This is just wrong. So many people watch me work and they always see that the dogs are happily working. I found that to ignore dogs, to tie them up in the backyard or not let them see or be with people or other dogs, that is a problem. I feel like these images of dogs have a sort of mythical quality to them. Since Prehistory art has produced creatures of the imagination mixing human and animal qualities. When I was making these hybrid creatures standing tall on pedestals, I was thinking a little bit about Egyptian gods [like Horus]. I was thinking more of a kind of mythology rather than humor with the dogs.

What do you want the dog disguised as a human to transmit in the contemporary era? I'm not really sure. When I made my version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, I was interested in animal transformation, that's inherent in that story, where the wolf pretends to be the grandmother, and so forth. For the book *Cinderella* I was thinking about the idea of adoption: if you adopt a dog, you can be either the good mother or the evil stepmother. **I would like to touch a little bit on the other work. I noticed that you attach postcards to panel and you expand on them by continuing the visual narrative beyond their boundaries with the overall result becoming a mixed-media painting and collage. How did this work originate?** My background is in painting, and that's what I studied in art school. I never studied photography, so I feel more natural as a painter, rather than as a photographer. A long time ago I was altering my own photographs, where I would take a picture and paint into it or around it. I think with the postcard paintings it is similar to that. I extend the edges or make one postcard appear to be in the same pictorial space as another one. I have found a lot of different ways to work with these cards, depending upon the design of the card and the image. One thing that's important to me is that the card gets transformed and now suddenly it's been pushed into a whole other space. But the original postcard is still there, completely visible yet also almost invisible so that's the game, I suppose.

What ties all your work together? My wish to transform and evolve and play. I don't try to make a specific statement, I just try to invent and to explore.