William Wegman: The game of discovery

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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 the case. 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.

What are you currently working on? I’ve been making a lot of postcards and I work with them. I can make one postcard appear to be in the same pictorial space as another. I extend the edges or make it appear in your eye, you can see that the card is there but not quite. I can make another card appears to be in the same space. That’s important to me is that the card gets transformed and 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.