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ARTSY



Portrait of William Wegman in his New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Dressed in wigs and elaborate costumes, or absurdly anthropomorphized with human hands and feet, William Wegman's Weimaraners—some 30 in all across several generations—have been fascinating, delighting, and perplexing us for more than four decades.

The popularity of Wegman's prodigious canine-related oeuvre reaches far beyond art galleries and museums, and includes videos for both *Saturday Night Live* and *Sesame Street*, calendars, toys, kitchen magnets, and books, including the best-selling *Puppies* and a new collection of never-before-seen 20x24 Polaroid portraits, *Being Human*. His dogs have graced the covers of *The New Yorker* and *Wallpaper*, and made numerous appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show*.

Dogs have brought fortune and fame to Wegman, now 73. And, indeed, his two current Weimaraner collaborators, Flo and Topper, are ever-present grey shadows following him wherever he walks through the warren of studios, offices, and domestic spaces that constitute the 5,300-square-foot converted nursery school where he lives in New York's Chelsea district. "We did a shoot for French *Vogue* last weekend," he tells me, pointing to a wall of large photographs of Flo and Topper decked out in an array of clothing styles. "They brought the latest fashions from Paris, and the dogs modeled them."

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Portrait of William Wegman in his New York home and studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Most everyone recognizes Wegman's dog portraits (even if they might not always know the name of the man who made them). But fewer remember that he was a pioneering conceptual artist in the 1960s and '70s, part of a movement founded on the belief that the idea behind a work of art is more important than its execution. Yet Wegman's "conceptual mindset" has been center stage throughout all aspects of his practice, comments his dealer, Angela Westwater of Sperone Westwater. "Everyone loves the dogs. But the sensibility, the droll, not-quite-serious whimsy that made the dogs so popular, that was already there in those quirky but extremely inventive photographs and videos he was making."

In recent years, Wegman has also been focused on painting. With Flo and Topper at his heels, he leads the way into a large, brightly lit studio, past a work table overflowing with hundreds of postcards. Several of his large "Postcard Paintings," in various stages of completion, are propped against walls amid tubes of paint and brushes. Each begins with a single postcard, usually placed in the center. Wegman then works outward, using the found composition as a prompt to create vast



Detail of William Wegman's New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

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surreal landscapes or acutely angled modernistic interiors. “They’re easy to start,” he says, “but almost impossible to finish.”



Detail of William Wegman's New York home and studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.



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So how did he get here, to the kind of success most artists only dream of, spending most of his summers up in Maine, and the rest of the time in this charming and sprawling urban complex—a place big enough to fit an MG sports car in the living room? (The automobile belongs to his son, Atlas, a tech whiz and aspiring designer, who lives here with Wegman and his wife, the book publisher Christine Burgin. Their daughter, Lola, is away at college.)

Born in 1943, Wegman grew up in the town of East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where he spent his boyhood trekking through the woods in back of his family's house. Wegman's precocious draftsmanship talent was evident at an early age; a self-portrait done when he was nine years old romantically depicts him holding an axe, walking with his dog through a snowy forest.

The artist was a teenager in 1950s America, and that cultural moment continues to permeate his work: Radio comedy shows, advertisements, and Hopalong Cassidy serials at the local Congregational Church (which doubled as the town's cinema) all stewed into what the critic Joan Simon has described as the “purity and perfect strangeness” of Wegman's art.

He majored in painting at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, but temporarily abandoned conventional mediums in the late 1960s while working on his MFA at the University of Illinois in Urbana,

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where the composer John Cage and the dancer Merce Cunningham were then in residence. “Astronauts were about to land on the moon,” Wegman reflects, explaining his change of heart. “I thought you shouldn’t be painting pictures, or even just splashing paint on a canvas.”



Detail of William Wegman’s New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Instead, for his thesis project, he constructed a 20-foot-long bubble structure he dubbed *BODOH*. It was located in the lobby of the Arts Building, where visitors were assaulted by deafening machine noises, bright swirling lights, and absurdist gadgetry, such as a soda machine that only dispensed empty cups. “My Uncle Everett worked for Westinghouse, and invented the mechanism for Coke machines, where the cup drops down and ice and soda go into it,” Wegman says. “Mine did the same, but without the ice and soda.”

The *BODOH* installation was only up for half a day before the fire department condemned it, he tells me. “Rightfully so. It was a fire hazard, really badly wired and made of very flammable polyethylene.”

Although his work at the time might have had a lot in common with ’60s Happenings and psychedelic light shows, Wegman says he never experimented with psychedelic drugs—at least not intentionally. “The only time I did LSD,” he says, “was in the late ’60s, when I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin. One of my students laced my Coke with acid. He thought he was doing me a favor, to enlighten me or something.”

In 1968, with the Vietnam War raging, Wegman was drafted, but he was rejected at the induction center. “I channeled Borges and the Bible into my personality,” he tells me with a sly smile. “I kept fiddling obsessively with a hole in my sweater, and I kept wandering into the wrong line no matter how many times they told me where to go. I had a pretty good crazy thing going, and they didn’t take me.”



Detail of William Wegman's New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.



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The University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was teaching in 1969, was a hotbed of the anti-war movement. Wegman remembers tear-gas wafting through a classroom where he was trying to teach conceptual art to sculpture students. But for whatever reason, the artist has always steered clear of politics in his own art. “I don’t like hot subjects, like war, or sex, or politics,” he says. “I thought that was cheating. I wanted something droll and clean and clear.”

That aesthetic was evident in his 1970 photograph *Cotto*, a turning point for Wegman, and perhaps an insightful peek into how his brain works. “I was talking on the phone and making doodles on my hand,” he says. “I had a ring with a ruby and two diamonds, and I drew those shapes on my fingers. Later that night, I went to a party, and picked up a piece of cotto salami at the snack table. I saw that the little peppercorns in it looked just like the doodles I’d made on my hand. I raced home and took a picture of my hand next to some slices of cotto salami, developed it—and eureka!”

Wegman realized that the power and allure of photographs, for him, resided in their ease of distribution. “My idea was that a photograph should be a size that could be easily reproduced in magazines or books,” he says, “so that thousands of people could see it.”

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He still regards *Cotto* as his best photograph in certain ways. “The work I did after that was less photographically appealing but more powerful conceptually. After that, it was not about how it looked, but what I was saying.”



Portrait of William Wegman in his New York home and studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

From Wisconsin, Wegman moved to California, settling in San Pedro, near Los Angeles, in 1971, where he joined a coterie of influential conceptual artists, including Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, and Bruce Nauman. The beach was a block away and the light was beautiful, but Wegman struggled to make ends meet. “I couldn’t get a teaching job,” he says. “I had a painting degree but I wasn’t painting. I was doing photos but I had no training in photography. Ed Ruscha bought 50 of my photographs for \$4,500 and I lived on that for a year. I was getting food stamps. So, I could squeak by. My expenses were low. A roll of film cost 90 cents. A bottle of beer now and then. That was it.”

In contrast to the large, bold, brightly colored images and text employed by Baldessari and Ruscha, Wegman’s videos and photos were understated, black and white, and often relied on subtle visual puns and for their impact. One of his personal favorites, a self-portrait called *Madam I’m Adam* (1970), mirrors the palindrome in its title with a pair of seemingly identical images, which he made by flipping the negative in the darkroom. “It’s like those Spot the Differences games that you see in magazines. The only clue that they’re different is my watch,” he says. “If you look closely, the numbers are backwards.”

It was while he was living in San Pedro that Wegman bought his first Weimaraner, a puppy he named after the Dada artist Man Ray. The animal would change his life forever. When he was taking pictures or experimenting with his camera, Wegman recalls, Man Ray would act very interested in what was happening. So, “very cautiously,” the artist began incorporating the dog into his work.



Portrait of William Wegman with dogs Flo and Topper in his New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

In one of the first resulting videos, *Milk/Floor* (1970–71), we see Wegman crawling on all fours away from the camera, dribbling milk in a straight white line on the floor. Man Ray then enters and laps up the milk. In the *Spelling Lesson* (1973–74), Man Ray sits looking quizzical, while Wegman, deadpan, reviews the results of the dog's spelling test. The result of these unique man-and-dog collaborations, in the words of *Guardian* critic Jason Farago, were “artworks in which the rigors of conceptualism got wrecked on the shoals of canine indifference.”

Wegman's reputation as a quirky conceptualist was growing in California, but his career didn't take off until 1972, when he moved to New York and was quickly picked up by the prestigious Sonnabend Gallery. Yet, despite his newfound art world success, he admits that he wasn't happy, and often thought about returning to Los Angeles. “I didn't love New York when I came here,” he told me. “The scene nearly did me in. I was hanging out at Max's Kansas City, there was a lot of alcohol and coke. L.A. was healthier for me. It took me a long time to tolerate New York.”

By the end of the 1970s, Wegman had stopped making photographs and videos, frustrated and dissatisfied with the results when he tried to transition from black and white to color. But his next step became clear in 1979, when he traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to try out a large-format Polaroid camera. “The company had only made five of the cameras. They were designed to take actual size, 24-inch by 20-inch portraits, instantly, the same way small Polaroid cameras did. They kept asking me to come and try it. I finally did, and I fell in love with it.”

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Many of Wegman's most memorable pictures of Man Ray and his successors were taken with the large-format Polaroid, including Wegman's favorite, *Dusted* (1988), showing Man Ray in a shower of flour that envelops him like a white spotlight.



Detail of William Wegman's New York studio by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

All along, Wegman had also been a fervent maker of cartoon-style drawings, loaded with puns and wordplay. In a classic 1984 drawing that is still sadly topical, a few small figures on a boat wave and yell hello to the Statue of Liberty. "NO ANSWER," the caption reads. Another, from 1976, makes a strange prophecy: "Some day you will be able to drive by telephone."

Then, Wegman's interest in painting was rekindled in the 1980s by a series of recurrent dreams in which he was wielding a brush again. The inspiration carried over into his waking life. "I started drawing on walls, painting on stairs, painting on anything but canvas," he remembers.

With Neo-Expressionists like Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, and David Salle spearheading a painting revival, Wegman at first hesitated to begin painting himself. "Painting had suddenly become a big thing in New York, and he didn't want to appear just to be jumping aboard the bus," says artist and dealer David Deutsch, now one of the directors of Magenta Plains, a downtown New York gallery that has shown and supported Wegman's earlier work.

Encouraged by Deutsch, Wegman finally took the plunge. "I just said, 'I'm middle-aged, I'm famous enough, just do it.' But it was harder than I thought it would be," he recalls. "I hadn't painted in years. I had to relearn how to do it." Self-conscious, he made his first awkward painting on the back of a stretcher, so that he could quickly hide it if anyone came into the room.

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The experience was humbling but liberating, he says. Paintings like *Hope* and *Museum of Beer*, both from 1985, echoed childhood memories: images of old cars, roadside attractions, magazine advertising, and American Indians. “I thought they were amazing, but not everyone agreed,” he laughs. “One critic said it looked like I’d put art history in a blender.”



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Wegman began making his “Postcard Paintings” in 1996. The style has dominated his work to the present day, and has been the subject of several shows at Sperone Westwater. (The gallery’s current show of his work is up through October 28th.) Throughout, of course, he’s kept photographing his dogs, a commercially successful parallel practice that, by the mid-1990s, had some people referring to him as Wegman Inc.

Now, fully settled into his reputation, the artist is relaxed. He divides his time between making new work and some wholly unrelated passions—fly-fishing, as well as ice hockey, a sport he’s played since he was a teenager, and which he still indulges in four times a week at nearby Chelsea Piers. Wegman wears his good fortune with an easygoing lack of pretension, and still sometimes seems surprised by his phenomenal, unconventional success.

“When I was first starting, it was a surprise if someone that I didn’t know—or who wasn’t my girlfriend—liked what I was doing,” he reflects, scratching Flo behind her ears. “Just to have an audience is so amazing.”

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Portrait of one of William Wegman's Weimaraners by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.