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Miller, Michael H. “‘The Dog Really Confused Things’: Another Side of William Wegman.”  
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# ARTNEWS



William Wegman, *Inside Outside*, 2012. COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER

William Wegman bought his first dog in California after responding to an ad in a Long Beach, California newspaper that said, “Weimaraners \$35.” He called the new pet Man Ray. Wegman had trained as a painter, but as a graduate student at the University of Illinois Champagne-Urbana in the mid-1960s, he abandoned the medium, he says, due to the popular notion at the time that painting was dead. He turned his attention to photography and video, and the dog kept wandering into his shots.

“He’d get in the way, but he looked really amazing,” Wegman told me recently. “So I found some things for him to do.” Most of his work didn’t feature Man Ray, but the dog quickly became a kind of signature. “Maybe one in ten videos or one in twenty had a dog, and the rest had other stuff. But certainly people didn’t say, Oh, you know the guy who does the videos with the chair? No, I was the guy who does the videos with the dog.”

A different view of Wegman’s career is on display through this weekend at two galleries in New York—Sperone Westwater, exhibiting the artist’s so-called postcard paintings, and Magenta Plains, which has a

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selection of his drawings, mostly from the 1970s. Wegman picked painting up again in the mid-'80s, after 20 years of avoiding the form. He got back into it by painting a telephone pole near a barn in Maine, where he has a house, but he made the work on the back of a canvas. "I didn't want anyone to know," he said. "I wasn't going to communicate to anyone that I was painting. I was going to do it in private. But that didn't last long."

The paintings at Sperone Westwater all have postcards as their focal point. The cards, which include scenes that Wegman paints around or extends, were sent by friends over the years, and their variability causes the artist to shift styles from canvas to canvas. A postcard of an Edvard Munch painting that depicts a man on a rocky beach turns into a gloomy portrait of artistic suffering, with Wegman placing the man forlornly at a desk inside a beachfront house. A John Travolta lookalike standing outdoors in a flashy leisure suit becomes a jumping off point for geometrical abstraction. Wegman told me that a critic once said of him, in a not entirely friendly way, that his paintings looked like he "put art history in a blender," an idea he's decided to run with in a more literal way here. He openly admitted to me that his technical skills as a painter are limited. "I'm not that good, really, it's just the card makes it look like I'm really good. That's a trick in itself—setting the table to make the card do the work."

During our interview, Wegman walked with me to Magenta Plains, which is around the corner from Sperone Westwater. He lives in Manhattan, but he keeps a house in Maine, and he looked vaguely prepared to disappear into the wilderness at any moment. He had a sturdy mountain bike with him, which might have helped in this endeavor. On Delancey Street, we passed a man walking a Weimaraner, and Wegman stopped to admire it silently. Man Ray is long gone, but he now lives with two different Weimaraners. "As far as the breed standard, the two that I have now are probably most likely to win Westminster—not that I show them," Wegman told me, like a proud parent.

Magenta Plains is run by the artist David Deutsch, an old friend of Wegman's. They met in the '70s, when they were both living in Los Angeles. Wegman described Deutsch a "my fishing buddy in L.A." In the show, there's an old photo of the two of them, seated at a table in 1972, each with shoulder-length hair. Wegman has scribbled words all over it, mostly the names of various plays, ranging from *Macbeth* to *Evita*.

L.A. is where Wegman came into his own as an artist, honing his conceptual chops with friends like John Baldessari. There's an oddly personal feeling to the show at Magenta Plains, like that of an artist going through an old box of works he'd forgotten about in the basement. Like the postcard paintings, his drawings demonstrate a surprising range. A simple ink drawing of a man standing over a stove, flames rising out of the top of his head and the caption BURNING WITH DESIRE FOR HOME COOKING recalls the sarcastic spirit of Raymond Pettibon. Other drawings are minimalist exercises in geometry. Some look like *New Yorker* cartoons. There are several hints at the era of self-love in which they were made. A sloppy doodle of a man looking out from behind a curtain has the caption OFTEN WHAT LURKS BEHIND THE CURTAIN IS OUR OWN GLOOMY SELF SO CHEER UP.

I had earlier asked Wegman if he was intentionally trying to distance himself from the videos and photographs for which he's best known—if he thought the dogs were maybe overshadowing him.

"It's really important when you're a young artist to find yourself and you do that more by saying what you won't do than saying what you will do," he told me. "So you find your way, and that's what I did. Somehow, the dog kind of really confused things. He came along, and I was that. And I never thought I'd become that, but I guess I did. So I had that thing going, whatever it was. It almost had a life of its own."