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WILLIAM WEGMAN: DRESSED AND UNDRESSED

BY PAC PROBIC

It's amazing what happens when you dress up a dog. Put a blonde wig on a Weimaraner. Give it a top hat, dress it in elegant furs or a Hawaiian shirt, step back for a moment, and take a look. You won't end up with anything quite as good as a photograph by William Wegman, who is a master of printing and composition, but inevitably your gag, at least in purpose, will approximate his art. That's what's so compelling about Wegman, who has gotten as close as anyone to finding ingenuity in a commonplace joke. His photographs are full of visual tricks, verbal puns, and references to art history, but they never present an irresolvable riddle. It's the utter transparency of his art that defines his intelligence.

It is easy to be complicated. Simplicity, directness, clarity of purpose—these are the rare qualities in an artist, and Wegman has them in deep measure. *Dressed and Undressed*, his recent exhibition at Sperone Westwater, proves this point. The show of large-format (twenty by twenty-four inch) Polaroid pictures, taken between 1979 and 2007, is abundant in the cleverness of its humble means. There is a picture of a Weimaraner wearing a quizzical expression and a sock on its snout; it is titled *Proboscidea* (1993) after the taxonomic order that elephants (and all their extinct relatives) are classified under. Another picture, *Bus Stop* (1990), has a grey dog in a perfectly matching grey coat. Here is a weary commuter grown tired of waiting. Few of the photographs are especially elaborate because Wegman does not need much to get his point across.

Wegman's dogs play many roles, but they always wear a look of slight confusion, as if they aren't quite sure how they got involved in this charade. The artist often speaks of them as his collaborators: "My dogs are working dogs and working dogs need to work and

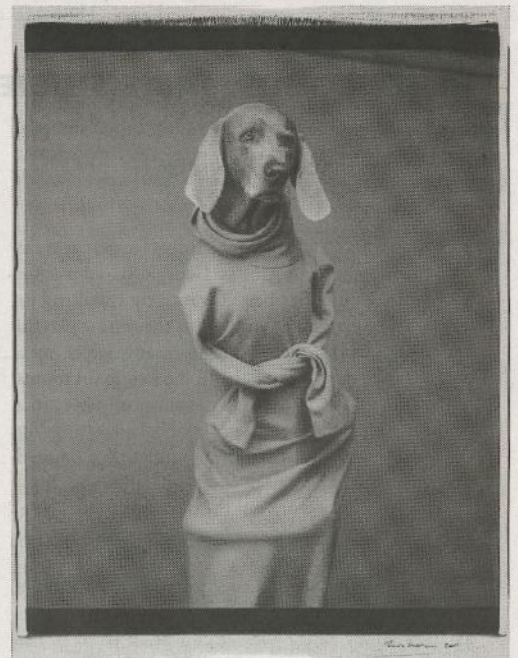
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feel part of your life." But part of the conceit of his work is that the Weimaraners don't know why they're wearing shoes or socks. They are always in on the game, always happy to please—in *Twisted Hope* (2001), a Weimaraner wears a chic turtle-neck dress and the aloof look of a self-aware model—nevertheless, there is a real detachment between us and them, which is the gap from which Wegman's great humor springs.

Sperone Westwater is relatively modest. It offers only a small selection of the hundreds of Polaroids Wegman took between 1979 and 2007, when the company stopped producing large-format film (a new book from Thames & Hudson, titled *William Wegman: Being Human*, affords a larger view, with more than 300 pictures). But the exhibition traces an important turning point in Wegman's career. When he began taking these pictures, it was after a year-long break from working with his first dog, Man Ray. That year Man Ray "would come into my studio and slump down and realize I was just making drawings or little paintings or taking photographs not of him, and I'll never forget the deep sighs he had like, 'Oh god, another day of not doing anything, with me just being a dog, sleeping here at his feet.'"

It's a sweet story, made sweeter by how busy all the dogs are in *Dressed and Undressed*. Nowadays, they're always in the middle of some strange scenario, like the poor sap *Daisy Nut Cake* (1994) covered in fruit and flowers like a Giuseppe Arcimboldo painting. But backstories are just the sugar on top of Wegman's work, which requires no preparation. How rare that elusive quality in contemporary art: pure lucidity.

PAC PROBIC is the Exhibitions editor at *The Art Newspaper*.



William Wegman, *Twisted Hope*, 2001. Color Polaroid. 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater.