

GAGOSIAN

**BROOKLYN RAIL**

Jeff Wall

Graham W. Bell



*Jeff Wall, I giardini / The Gardens (left) Appunto / Complaint; (centre) Disappunto / Denial; (right) Diffilda / Expulsion order, 2017. 3 inkjet prints. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.*

Silent figures and charged landscapes abound, but true to form, this is an exhibition of singular works, not a thematic outing. Connections can be drawn, but ultimately it is each image which begs to be considered intimately. In an interview, Wall remarked, “I don’t make exhibitions as such—each picture is a singular event, I never aim to make a picture that relates to another one in any deliberate way—but sometimes affinities show up later.”<sup>1</sup>

An art historian by training, Wall’s tableaux are connected to imagery from across time from a specifically scholarly viewpoint. The photographer frequently employs visual tropes in his works that reflect his interest in historical image-making. There are noticeably no lightbox constructions (for which he became known early in his career but have been absent in the past decade), but he retains the scale and intricacy in his images that one has come to expect. A couple of outliers exist among the more familiar themes of interiors, landscapes, and street shots, among them a picture of a painting, *Recovery* (2017-18), and Wall’s first real narrative image series, *I giardini/The Gardens* (2017). These works exist as informative tangents that help to shed light on Wall’s multifaceted practice.



Jeff Wall, *Recovery*, 2017–2018. Inkjet print, 98 7/16 x 175 3/16 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

In this context, *Recovery*, as a bold focal point of the exhibition, is bizarrely tangential. In it, Wall chooses to fill the majority of the work with an image of an actual painting that resembles a stylized, Matissean version of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. What does a photograph of a painting specifically made to be photographed do with our perception of the final work? The subject is a composition that was created specifically for the picture and photographed at a 1:1 scale. For a photographer known for questioning the divide between perceived reality and pictorial construction, incorporating such a stylized medium in such a prominent manner brings about not only a conversation about the materiality of painting but also that medium's place in history after the advent of photography. In his catalog essay for the exhibition, Russell Ferguson posits, "*Recovery* refers to the history of painting, as so many of [Wall's] works do, but it also is a painting, albeit one that we see only in the form of a photograph."<sup>2</sup> By being both a painting and photograph, *Recovery* acts as Wall's material bridge between the two realms. In fact, the foregrounding of the work's painterly base acts as a key to the rest of the works in the exhibition. An obvious plant, the solitary photographed figure composited into *Recovery* acts as a connection to the rest of the show, while the painted portion acts as Wall's reaction to the "delirium of happiness and relief" surrounding the recovery of someone close after a long affliction.<sup>3</sup> The photographic figure is in limbo as his legs fade into (or out of) the painted surface. His look of reverie might be a look of realization as the world comes into focus (an upturned bike nearby makes us wonder if perhaps he has taken a tumble and the world has become painterly as a result of head trauma). But, if we think of *Recovery* as a key to Wall's practice, we realize that he has historically thrived on the push and pull between the obviously staged and the seemingly documentary. Works like *Daybreak (on an olive farm/Negev Desert/Israel)* (2011) seem to be almost journalistic while *Parent child* (2018) points toward the artist's knack for recreating slightly askew street scenes. The photographs would be easily at home nestled against a newspaper headline or a snapshot taken on a casual stroll, respectively, but in the company of works like *Recovery*, the viewer is asked to consider the meaning behind staging such seemingly trivial events and how they relate to a broader conversation on representation.



Jeff Wall, *Parent child*, 2018. Inkjet print, 86 5/8 x 108 1/4 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

Particularly notable in the exhibition are a number of diptychs and a triptych that extend Wall's practice into a specifically narrative and sequential program. In *The Gardens*, the progression of both the characters' mannerisms and actions from left to right are accompanied by the setting's metamorphosis from an unruly pastoral English garden into a highly ordered labyrinth of hedges and topiary. Evolving around the players, the environment gives way to human construction and order as a decidedly Brechtian melodrama plays out amidst the greenery. Themes of the cinematic, of imperfect doubling, and frozen but pregnant moments stop the action in nearly all of Wall's photographs in the exhibition where human figures are seen. Only in *The Gardens* does outright interaction between the characters take place (although the fact that each actor plays multiple parts muddies this); in the rest of the exhibition the figures are silent, sullen, or caught in reverie. Wall noted in an interview, "The figures appearing in my photographs are phantoms, in a way, that have emerged out of a set of circumstances that gave rise to that motif. They're hard to explain but they happen, and sometimes those figures have a kind of emblematic quality."<sup>4</sup> This predilection for disconnection and the foregrounding of his photographs' staged nature is further explored in the *Pair of interiors* (2018) where two seemingly similar tableaux are found to employ two separate pairs of actors that resemble each other. By doing so, the artist blurs the line between photographic still and a cinematic setup. Each work yearns to be set into motion, but Wall is not quick to offer up resolutions, noting, "I like to think that it's the viewer that writes the text that the artist has erased in the process of turning whatever he feels or she feels into a picture."<sup>5</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. D. Rimanelli, "Jeff Wall: *The World As It Appears*," Gagosian Quarterly, Summer 2019.

2. R. Ferguson, Jeff Wall, New York: Gagosian, 2019, 11.

3. J. Wall, Jeff Wall: The Space of Photography, video, 9:15, May 30, 2019, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2019/05/30/jeff-wall-space-photography-video-interview/>

4. D. Rimanelli, "Jeff Wall: *The World As It Appears*," Gagosian Quarterly, Summer 2019.

5. J. Wall, "Jeff Wall: The Space of Photography," video, 9:15, May 30, 2019.