

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Jeff Wall Takes Photography Into a Painterly Realm

The conceptual photographer's transfixing show at Gagosian includes confounding diptychs and a cinematic triptych.

Karen Rosenberg



“Pair of interiors” (2018) shows a man and a woman having a communications breakdown. Jeff Wall photographed two different couples who resemble each other to imply continuity between the two images. © Jeff Wall, via Gagosian

Rumination and risk-taking, in equal measure, mark Jeff Wall’s spellbinding new exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea.

Since the 1970s, the restless “conceptual photographer” has made single, large-scale prints using elaborate processes and layered references from other mediums like painting, film and theater. The final image was always recognizably a photograph, even if it seemed to hold the documentary tradition at arm’s length. That’s not always true in his latest works, which slip the bounds of the single frame and, sometimes, even the photograph’s illusionistic space.

In its mood, however, this show, Mr. Wall’s first at the gallery since ending a 25-year run with the rival dealer Marian Goodman, feels decidedly introspective. Figures alone in contemplative trances, or alienated from their partners in scenes of evident tension, define most of the works. The encyclopedic visual literacy that has long characterized Mr. Wall’s pictures (with their compositional echoes of old master paintings) has been pared back, allowing more psychological complexity to emerge.

Just as new is an emphasis on narrative and sequence, as opposed to the single incident (or, more accurately, the staged illusion of the kind of incident a lucky street photographer might capture). Among the works are two diptychs and an enveloping, cinematic triptych.



“I giardini/The Gardens” (2017) exemplifies Mr. Wall’s later-career emphasis on narrative and sequence. © Jeff Wall, via Gagosian

Mr. Wall also delivers moments of uninhibited sentimentality, beauty and transcendence, albeit in unexpected settings like a CrossFit gym. In his previous works, these encounters have usually been laced with social critique (as in his images of homeless people and day laborers) and/or leavened with physical comedy (a spurt of milk, a wind-tossed sheaf of papers).

The sweeping triptych “I giardini/The Gardens” (2017), which takes up an entire wall of the capacious single-room installation, exemplifies all of these shifts. Set in the lush gardens of the Villa Silvio Pellico near Turin, Italy, it’s a kind of three-act play on the theme of expulsion from paradise in which a man and woman in late middle age inhabit multiple roles (or just multiply themselves, in a confounding doppelgänger effect that owes something to digital editing). In the final image they stand knee-deep in a neatly pruned hedge labyrinth, reading from a printed script or manifesto.

Another eerie doubling occurs in the diptych “Pair of interiors” (2018), which shows a man and woman having some kind of communication breakdown in a drab beige setting that might be a hotel room or a couples’ therapist’s office. This time, however, Mr. Wall uses two different couples who resemble each other just enough to imply continuity between the two images.



A young man and woman occupy separate shots of a colorful living room redolent of Edward Hopper’s interiors in “Summer Afternoons” (2013). © Jeff Wall, via Gagosian



The show's theme of self-absorption extends to works featuring children in dreamlike states, such as in "Parent child" (2018).© Jeff Wall, via Gagosian

In the similarly alone-together diptych "Summer Afternoons" (2013), a younger man and woman, naked and indolent, occupy separate shots of a colorful living room — one with raking light redolent of Edward Hopper's interiors, and yellow walls and fuchsia velvet upholstery modeled on Mr. Wall's own graduate-school housing.

Such mirrorings are not unprecedented in Mr. Wall's work; see, for example, his "Picture for Women," inspired by the network of gazes and reflections in Manet's "A Bar at the Folies Bergères." Here, however, Surrealist film is the point of departure. In the show's catalog, Russell Ferguson traces "Pair of interiors" back to Luis Buñuel's 1977 movie, "That Obscure Object of Desire," in which the director used two actresses for the same role.

The theme of self-absorption, or the failure to connect, extends to works featuring children in dreamlike states. In "Parent child," a little girl is curled up on a stretch of sidewalk, ignoring her father's pleading stare. Her little act of toddler rebellion brings a strange sense of stasis and endurance to the foreground of the picture, which in the background looks like a typical street photograph with passers-by caught in mid-stride. This photograph most closely resembles Mr. Wall's earlier pictures made in what he calls the "near-documentary" mode, inspired by scenes he may have witnessed but achieved with elaborate setups and rehearsals.



“Recovery” (2017-18) represents a departure for Mr. Wall; it is a photograph, but only a small portion of it is recognizable as such. © Jeff Wall, via Gagolian

As it happens, two other examples of Mr. Wall’s previous style (both landscapes, from 2007 and 2011), are also on view. They flank the mural-size “Recovery” (2017-18), and have clearly been folded into the show to emphasize this newer work’s startling departure. “Recovery” is a photograph, yes, but only a tiny fraction of the image is recognizable as such: the figure of a young man, seated within and merging into a flattened Fauvist landscape à la Matisse’s “Joy of Life.”

Mr. Wall has never been afraid to use digital tools or to punctuate his realism with magical and hallucinatory episodes (see the reanimated soldiers of “Dead Troops Talk,” from 1992), but this is something else: a true flight into painterly space, with an escapist bent. It’s a bold move, with an uncertain payoff; Instagrammers posing in front of street art may come to mind, along with other forms of “augmented reality” that don’t seem worthy of Mr. Wall’s subtle pictorial sensibilities.

Those put off by “Recovery” may find solace in “Weightlifter” (2015), an unexpectedly classical black-and-white image of a man straining to raise a barbell in a bare-bones gym setting. A kind of ode to the gelatin silver print — with luscious grays that differentiate the textures of cinder block, rubber, metal, plywood and sweaty skin — it has a sense of gravity befitting the title and finds Mr. Wall still quite attached to, or at least grounded by, photography.