

## GAGOSIAN

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**Garry Winogrand and Jeff Wall: Photography in Two Phases**  
*Ravishing shows, at the Brooklyn Museum and the Gagosian Gallery, contrast a master of spontaneous street photography with one of plotted theatricality.*

Peter Schjeldahl



*Garry Winogrand's "Untitled (New York)," from 1952-58, captures a little lurch in time, like the favored offbeat in jazz. Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona / © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco*

Garry Winogrand once defined a photograph as “what something looks like to a camera.” Keep that in mind when viewing “Garry Winogrand: Color,” a fiercely pleasurable show, at the Brooklyn Museum, consisting mainly of hundreds of digitally projected Kodachrome slides, most from the nineteen-sixties. Winogrand, the all-time champion of street photography, died in 1984, at the age of fifty-six. He is most famous for his hyperkinetic shots of unaware—or wary too late—pedestrians, taken with high-speed black-and-white film. The relatively long exposures required by color film steered him to subjects more static: people seated rather than walking, or at a beach instead of on the street. Winogrand sometimes carried two cameras, often with a 28-mm. wide-angle lens: one loaded with black-and-white film and the other with color. But, in every case, the camera appears to have had a will of its own.

In film footage of him at work, a Leica repeatedly jumps, hungrily, to his eye and, a split second later, darts away, sated—going about its business while Winogrand chats with an interviewer. His part in the action looks like the gesture of a man brushing off a fly. (If a subject noticed what had happened and seemed startled, Winogrand would smile disarmingly, nod, and even pause to talk.) The shots taken may never have been seen by anyone, including the shooter. Winogrand left behind several thousand unproofed (not printed to contact sheets) and undeveloped rolls of film. Indulging his cameras drove him, as the toil of reaping their harvests did not. One of his wives (there were three) said that living with him was “like being married to a lens.” But what a lens!



*“Untitled (Coney Island),” by Garry Winogrand, from 1952-58. Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona / © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco*

Winogrand was photography’s climactic, even terminal, modernist, forcing to an extreme the medium’s forte: the description of visual reality. You don’t get elegant compositions from him. (Painters can supply those.) You see the comprehensive capture of scenes on the wing. If the camera tilts, it’s not for arty effect but to squeeze in the relevant details of, say, a group of women bustling forward between a beggar in a wheelchair and a small group of people standing or sitting at a curb—three rhythms in flashing counterpoint. It’s not a Cartier-Bresson-style “decisive moment” but perhaps an instant just after or just before such a moment, with a little lurch in time, like the favored offbeat in jazz. Each person can seem observed in some unconscious dance or solipsistic performance.

In his color work, he sometimes accepted ambient blurs of motion to emphasize, and estrange, the stillness of a certain subject amid a street’s commotion. Shopwindows served him, as seen in an image of mannequins in bridal gowns seeming to behold two nondescript men in black coats and hats obliviously trudging by. Meaning hangs fire, insistent but elusive. This is terrifically exciting—and humbling. It tells me that, as much as I relish city life, I miss perceiving all but a fraction of what goes on around me. Seeing was its own reward, for Winogrand. The photographer Stephen Shore has remarked that Winogrand didn’t need to develop his pictures to know how they’d look any more than Beethoven needed to hear how his music sounded.



*“Untitled,” by Garry Winogrand, from 1955-58. Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona / © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco*

Winogrand was a son of working-class Hungarian and Polish immigrants in the Bronx. After high school, he served in the Air Force and then studied painting, followed by photography, at City College, Columbia, and the New School. He subsisted as a photojournalist until around 1960, when he began to identify himself as an independent artist—a peer of such brilliant contemporaries as Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander. Like them, he was hailed, and collected, by John Szarkowski, the magisterial curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. Formerly a poor relation of painting and sculpture, photography was gaining prestige as a pursuit central to modern sense and sensibility—all the more as important painters, starting with Andy Warhol and continuing with the likes of Gerhard Richter and Vija Celmins, capitulated to it by adopting photographs as their subject matter.

Winogrand’s work fell out of fashion in the seventies, partly owing to an emerging cohort of young artists who were skeptical of photography’s claim to veracity and partly for social and political reasons. A charge that he invaded people’s privacy seems quaint today, when no one can boast immunity to surveillance, but, in 1975, he made big trouble for himself with “Women Are Beautiful,” a book of sneaked shots of women on streets, in parks or restaurants, and at parties or political demonstrations. The project’s temerity outraged feminists and, to some extent, embarrassed almost everybody. Winogrand was denounced as predatory. It seems fairer to say that he was worshipful. But chivalrous ardor no longer cut ice as an alibi for presumption. The pictures, which are, indeed, beautiful, may be the last major artistic stand of the complacent male gaze.



*“Untitled (Cape Cod),” by Garry Winogrand, from 1966. Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona / © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco*

The Brooklyn Museum show is flawed in a number of ways. First is the fact that Winogrand didn't take digital images, though he surely would have embraced the technology. He took color slides. In one room, a carousel projector circulates some of his slides, to authentic, relatively homely effect. Sixteen sequences of big digitized images projected onto the walls of a long room, by contrast, are only too gorgeous, in the medium's smoothly flattening way. (We have become inured to the weirdness of digital picturing, which makes everything seem formed of a single miracle plastic.) The show ends with a selection from the museum's holdings of black-and-white prints, which, as you emerge from what amounts to a chromatic car wash, look glum. The projections also go by at clips—eight seconds apiece for horizontal pictures and thirteen seconds for interspersed verticals—that pander to present-day attention deficits. Winogrand worked fast, but to absorb the results takes time, first to register the subjects and then to have the form and the drama, the intelligence and the beauty, of the vision sink in.

Finally, the onslaught of images of the U.S.A. in the sixties—those cars, those clothes, that hair—generates a misleadingly rah-rah glamour. (By the way, I lived in New York back then, and I recall it as a lot drabber and rougher—while fabulous, of course—than it appears in this show.) In truth, Winogrand was pessimistic about the nation. “Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty,” he wrote in an application for a Guggenheim grant. Subtract nostalgia from your response to the color work and consider how forced and tawdry are the seeming high spirits and the strenuous styles—hysterias of a prosperous era rushing toward smash. Winogrand's full complexity as an artist, not even to think of the immensity of his unseen work, remains ungraspable.





*"Hillside, Sicily, November 2007," by Jeff Wall, from 2007. © Jeff Wall / Courtesy Gagosian*

Jeff Wall, whose show at the Gagosian Gallery is his first there after decades with the Marian Goodman Gallery, is one of the artists who came along in the seventies to torpedo the authority of direct photographers such as Winogrand. Wall was born and lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, which incubated a virtual school of technically ingenious, politically minded photographic and video artists, most notably Stan Douglas. Wall won fame for staged and manipulated color pictures, blown up and mounted on glowing light boxes. They worked by offsetting visual splendor with the thematic chill of, for example, Native Americans encamped beside a freeway bridge, or a white man on a street making a racist gesture to an Asian, or a panorama of actors posing as hideously wounded soldiers, or a steeply angled view of a suburban neighborhood where an eviction is in progress, or, less dire, the meticulous enactment of a famous Hokusai print of people by a pond in a high wind, which sends papers flying from the grasp of one character—a work whose staginess seems not its method but its very point. Each Wall picture is a one-off, secreting heady references and implications. You never know what to expect of him. He doubles down on surprise in this show, with eight very large works and one of modest size. All dispense with light boxes, a device that he has ceased to use in recent years.



*"Daybreak (on an Olive Farm/Negev Desert/Israel)," by Jeff Wall, from 2011. © Jeff Wall / Courtesy Gagosian*

Two works are black-and-white straight photographs, one of a brush-covered hillside in Sicily and the other of a bodybuilder hoisting weights in a squalid gym. Simple? Not really. Writing in the show's catalogue, the critic and curator Russell Ferguson adduces Mediterranean history in Italian literature for the former and Plato's cave for the latter. More readily ponderable is a lovely shot, made in Israel, of Bedouin olive pickers asleep under blankets on rugged ground at dawn, with the long, low expanse of a prison in the background. (But note that you wouldn't know what the subject is if you weren't told.) Two diptychs evoke bourgeois *tristesse*. One shows a couple sitting together at one end of a living room and apart at the other; the work is made uncanny by Wall's casting of the pairs with different people who look very much the same. The second presents a young naked man on a floor and a young naked woman on a bed, both apparently fathoms deep in depression. A triptych tells riddling tales of masters and servants, with the same two actors playing all the roles, in two sumptuous gardens at an Italian villa. On a street in Los Angeles, a man with a tattoo in Hebrew appears perplexed by a little girl contentedly curled up on the sidewalk. In addition, there's an awkwardly odd Arcadian scene of painted figures around a photographed young man. (Your move on that one.)



*"Summer Afternoons,"* by Jeff Wall, from 2013. © Jeff Wall / Courtesy Gagolian

"The camera lies." That was a watchword in the late seventies and early eighties among artists and promoters of the Pictures Generation, of which Wall was a kindred spirit. The game was to expose and/or to exploit photography's deceitfulness, with implicit criticism of a culture industry bent on deluding the masses. Like other of those artists, Wall has gradually edged away from politics, toward aesthetic allure and more rarefied literary content. In retrospect, it's ever clearer that the critical furor of the era was less revolutionary in artistic terms than it had seemed, though telling socially. Winogrand was as fully and dramatically cognizant of photography's artificiality as, say, Cindy Sherman, but he assumed a right to be judged strictly on the quality of his work. What happened in the culture was a loss of licensed innocence, or, if you prefer, of impunity. ♦