

GAGOSIAN

BROOKLYN RAIL

Jeff Wall

David Carrier



Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978. Transparency in lightbox, 62 5/8 × 90 1/8 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy the artist and Glenstone Museum.

The birth of an artistic genre demands novel aesthetic thinking. When in the 17th century European artists created pure landscapes, images of the countryside with no significant human figures; or when the first still-life pictures were created, then theorists identified the value of these new artistic genres. And so when, thanks to novel technologies, Jeff Wall and some other artists create large photographic narrative pictures, it is also necessary to theorize their achievement. Indeed, thanks to his graduate art history studies at the Courtauld Institute, Wall himself was well prepared to participate in this discussion. And so the display of almost 30 of his photographs, many of them very large, at the utopian site of the Glenstone Museum, with its enormous high-ceilings and rural setting, provides an ideal occasion to understand his achievement.

As has often been noted, the ability to make photographs as large as easel paintings allows them to compete visually with paintings. But of course that practical consideration merely identifies the necessary condition for the success of this novel artistic genre; it doesn't tell us how to interpret these works. Here, then, the first stage in Wall's development involved what might be called the translation of older visual motifs. Thus, as commentators have explained, *The Destroyed Room* (1978) is his version of Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827). His *Picture for Women* (1979) is a translation of Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*

(1881–82). And *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai) (1993), his version of Katsushika Hokusai's *Ejiri in Suruga Province* (*Sunshū Ejiri*) (ca. 1830–32). Just as Marcel Proust can be translated into English, so these older motifs are translated by Wall into narrative photographs which preserve the original themes in a metamorphosis that has been reconstructed.



Jeff Wall, *Steves Farm, Steveston*, 1980. *Transparency in lightbox*, 22 7/8 × 90 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy the artist and Glenstone Museum.

Although all three of these motifs are very well known, some coaching may be needed to identify them. *The Death of Sardanapalus*, for example, shows Sardanapalus, a ruler who has been defeated in war, reclining on a red bed as his possessions, his splendid horses and harem women, are destroyed by his servants. *The Destroyed Room* shows a room with a red wall, a pale green bed, and the room's contents strewn about. Apart from a miniature statue of a ballerina, which is set on top of the disheveled bureau, no represented human figures are present. As Barry Schwabsky notes in the catalogue, this room is really a stage setting. Delacroix gives us a glimpse at the far top of his painting of the entry of Sardanapalus's enemies through the destroyed city walls, and we view the space beyond Wall's room at the edges of his photograph. As a poetic translation transposes the original text while preserving its essential qualities, so Wall preserves the fundamental elements of Delacroix's picture.



Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai), 1993. *Transparency in lightbox*, 90 1/8 × 148 3/8 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy the artist and Glenstone Museum.

Soon enough, however, it was clear, I think, that Wall could not be satisfied with such translations. And so, building on these successes, he created varied narratives which did not rely upon such precedents. Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (1992) is one. In this digitally processed image, a group

of Russian soldiers are sprawled across a wintery landscape. The art historian Michael Fried links this photograph to the 18th-century tableau vivants in which actors brought storytelling genre-paintings to life on the stage. I never really understood that claim until, when writing about Caravaggio's *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (ca. 1607), I was inspired by the presentation on a Neapolitan stage of that painting. Suddenly I grasped the range and subtlety of Fried's analysis. What makes Wall's photograph "not a candid shot of an actual event but rather a work of deliberate and elaborate artifice," Fried argues, is that none of his figures look out of the picture, as often happens in everyday photographs. And of course Wall's photographs are subject to elaborate digital manipulation. As in the most successful 18th-century French art, as Fried writes, we see "a closed system which in effect seals off the space or world of the painting from that of the beholder."



Jeff Wall, *Mother of pearl*, 2016. Inkjet print, 23 5/8 × 27 3/4 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy the artist and Glenstone Museum.

Fried's way of thinking also applies to the other recent photographs in this show. In *Search of premises* (2008), which I associate with the Showtime spy thriller *Homeland* (2011–20), we see three men absorbed in monitoring surveillance instruments in a barely furnished apartment. And in *Boy falls from tree* (2010), a youth who resembles one of Caravaggio's burly Neapolitan airborne putti, is seen in mid-air. So far as I know, neither of these photographs translates any obvious single source, though they both are akin to various Old-Master-painted narratives. If we accept Fried's account, as I am inclined to do, then we can begin to understand the relationship between these photographs and old master painting. Like those painters, Wall creates visually self-sufficient narrative tableaux which seem to elide the presence of the spectator. No wonder, as Fried proudly reports he was pleased to discover that Wall was a close reader of his books.

- Barry Schwabsky, "Fiction & Memory," Jeff Wall (Potomac: Glenstone, 2021), 16.
- Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 34.

- Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 64, 39.
- Julie Ramos, *Le tableau vivant ou l'image performée* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2014).