



## A summer to remember

Jeff Wall's depictions of everyday events have remained at the forefront of contemporary art for almost four decades, writes **Gary Dufour**.



**Jeff Wall** *Summer afternoons* 2013, printed 2014. Diptych: 2 type C photographs face mounted with Diasec, left: 183 x 212.4 cm, right: 200 x 251.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation Purchase 2014. © Jeff Wall.

Jeff Wall refers to his pictures as near-documentary. Most commentators consistently invoke terms like staged or meticulously reconstructed in their desire to emphasize planning over intuition and the accidental. When talking about how his photographs come about, Wall mentions that he always begins by not photographing. This is an affinity his photographs share with novels and cinema, genres similarly based on keen observation, memory and freedom. Each is developed in an often very hands-on, hand-made way aware of just how important craft skills are to success.

Jeff Wall's photographs are emphatically pictorial. His depictions of the everyday world remain at the forefront of contemporary art where they have been for almost four decades.

Always innovative, each pushes the boundaries of what photography might do. Every picture is produced with the consummate skill of someone who understands the mastery required to create a unique photograph, one that can capture our imagination in a single still photograph, particularly now, when a seemingly limitless number of images, swirl around electronically every day. Wall's large-scale colour images connect two elements – photographic verisimilitude, which records each new situation, with the greatest of fidelity, all the while simultaneously transforming them into a picture, something with its own reality, something that sets in motion narrative trajectories, stories enriched by what viewers bring to a picture – memories, conjectures and imagination.

"I refer to my work as cinematography" »

because I've always admired the way a film project can begin from any starting point – a witnessed event, a daydream, a fairy tale, a literary adaptation, or a fragment of overheard conversation – anything – and sometimes from more than one of those things at the same time”.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning Wall felt that fine art photography, which by the 1960s was largely a genre of small black and white prints, could be reinvigorated with colour and scale. Simultaneously the milieu of conceptual and performance art was redefining photography as a trace of an action conceived to be documented. These ideas galvanized Wall to create what was then a new medium – a colour transparency in a light box. It was coupled with a simple but ultimately revelatory proposition that contemporary life in the city he has lived in for his whole life, Vancouver, could be a site for depictions of urban modernity inspired by the scenes, moments, faces and gestures of daily life.

Since Wall starts by not photographing,

any image, incident or memory that interests him needs to stick around in his mind's eye over time. This leads to thoughts about how best to capture a feeling, an emotion, a look, a memory, a perception or a relationship in a photograph. What follows are a series of artistic and practical choices – site, setting, people – and most importantly honing the clarity of what interested him in the first place. All of this is essential for him to create a picture of a unique temporal moment, an evidentiary record of an event remembered and “there are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened ... but as I recall them, so they take place.”<sup>2</sup>

*Summer afternoons* 2013, currently on display on lower level 2, is just one of these moments, something he remembered from decades earlier, something Wall felt offered up new photographic territory to be explored. The format, a diptych, two images slightly different in size, is unique in Wall's oeuvre. The alignment

of the tops of the doorframes and the strong directional light on the right hand side in both images seems to lend a perspective that may lead you to think that this pair forms a panorama. But no, each is a scene in the same yellow room, one apartment, bathed in daylight observed at two moments. Are these moments, temporally contiguous, separated by a minute or a month? In one the daybed is empty, pillows arranged differently and in the other the bathroom door is ajar. These adjacent scenes and figures are physically separate. But do they reveal a moment before or after something more intimate? Both figures seem to be lost in thought, self-absorbed, oblivious as we confront them at what are intensely private moments. Can we assume they are a couple, why? And what can be read into the poses; the woman reminiscent of Goya's *La Maja Desnuda*, except her gaze does not address the viewer. The man could be a reverse angle of Lucian Freud's *Naked man with rat*, in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western

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Jeff Wall at his *Tableaux Pictures Photographs 1996–2013* exhibition preview at Kunsthaus on October 16, 2014 in Bregenz, Austria. Photo: Johannes Simon/Getty Images.



Australia, a work familiar to Wall from his visit to Perth. Both paintings were ground breaking celebrations of the human body and personal freedom, themes that equally fueled a rebellious joy in the 1970s.

Like several of Wall's pictures *Summer afternoons* is steeped in autobiography, something remembered. The scene draws on his London apartment in the early 1970s, when Wall was a student at the Courtauld. It is a small space with practical furnishings, decorated with paintings by Wall himself and that of a friend, Duane Lunden. So *Summer afternoons* begins from a personal memory recalled, but like most of Wall's near documentaries there were challenges to overcome and collaborations to make as an idea for a picture became a situation to photograph. Access to the London apartment for reconnaissance and simple things like measurements after an absence of 40 years proved impossible. Wall as is usually the case was undeterred. He had conceived to shoot

this interior picture in daylight, something he accomplished in Vancouver by rebuilding the interior of the apartment from memory and placing it on the roof of his studio. But no matter how elaborate these preparations may sound in the end they fade away, leaving a unified photographic moment of immense intensity – a complex arresting story free again for reimagining youth, beauty and desire.

On numerous occasions Wall has mentioned his admiration for cinematographers, particularly their dogged determination to see ideas through, and the tenacity with which they make what is often invisible, visible. *Summer afternoons* is just such a triumph that speaks of the provisionality of appearances, memory and existence all the while openly acknowledging how it was made and offering a glimpse into another reality.

This is Jeff Wall's gift, and why his art transcends time and captivates many. At its core is his attentiveness to the everyday world in an

effort to create an art that increases in rewards the closer you look. Everything you need is in the picture and every picture is unique. Slow down, connect the details, construct a space in your mind, just what do and don't the figures in *Summer afternoons* share – recollections, daydreams, memories, aspirations. For me, Jeff Wall's pictures have changed how I see the world, allowing me to find unimaginable aesthetic beauty in the un-swept corners of reality, incidents remembered, and those chance encounters each of us have every day.

Gary Dufour is adjunct associate professor at the University of Western Australia and curated *Jeff Wall Photographs*, which toured Perth, Melbourne and Sydney in 2012-2013, as well as *Jeff Wall 1990* at the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario, he is currently researching the *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné: 2005 – 2016*.

1. Jeff Wall, quoted in Zoe Ferguson, 'Wall-to-Wall Photography', *Reportage/online* (Sydney) 6 May 2013.
2. Harold Pinter, *Old Times*, Grove Press, New York, 1971, p.39.