

WILLIAM WEGMAN

BEING HUMAN

ARTWORK LABELS

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William Wegman: Being Human

Many great artists have a muse. Sometimes this muse is a silent partner, the object of an artist's obsessive gaze. At other times the relationship is a deeply collaborative act. The history of photography has its own celebrated cases: Jacques-Henri Lartigue and Renée Perle, for example, or Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. For William Wegman, whose muses have been all these things and more, inspiration arrived almost half a century ago, when a Weimaraner who had joined the family showed both aptitude and passion for performing before the camera. In honour of one of Wegman's most admired modern artists, he was named Man Ray, the first in a line of highly spirited performers.

William Wegman is a renowned and versatile American artist who resists an easy classification as he moves adroitly between painting, drawing, photography, film, video, books and performances. Although his famed Weimaraners are not featured in all these media, they reside at the core of his art. In the late 1970s Wegman found, in the large-format Polaroid print, his ideal means of expression – the perfect print size, exquisite colour and an 'instantaneity' which allowed for spontaneity and beneficial 'accidents'. When his Polaroid chapter finally came to an end, the artist shifted to working digitally, rediscovering in this new medium what was essential to him about the Polaroid process: the print size, expressive colour and the studio set-ups.

Wegman's world may revolve around his dogs, but his choice of sets, costumes and props betray a fascination with art history – Cubism, colour field painting, Abstract Expressionism, Constructivism, Conceptualism and the like. The diverse fields of photography also intrigue the artist, and we find in his work landscapes, nudes, portraits, reportage and fashion.

And yet, is it all really about dogs? *Being Human* suggests otherwise: these performers are us and we are them: housewife, astronaut, lawyer, priest, farm worker, even a dog walker! Some pose proudly and with confidence, others express doubts or vulnerabilities. It's all about being human.

WILLIAM A. EWING, EXHIBITION CURATOR

People like us / People we like

I didn't always dress up the dogs. My first dog Man Ray was spared anthropomorphic adornment. That was left for Fay Ray. Fay and I came to a mutual realisation that she had a desire to be observed. Anyway, I found myself looking at her for long periods of time. Then one day, after some looking, I made her tall. Before long I was blurring the pedestal with fabric and creating the illusion of the anthropomorphic vertical. With the birth of Fay's puppies, my cast of characters grew. Fay's puppies – Chundo, Battina and Crooky – grew up watching their famous mother, and when it came their turn they were not taken by surprise. They knew what to do.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Casual

2002

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

The Weimaraners in this exhibition wear wigs, jumpers, jackets, pants and even jewellery to make them look like people with jobs, individual style and personalities. It looks like the dogs are playing dress-ups! When you play dress-ups do you feel like you have transformed into a different person? In these photographs the Weimaraners stare blankly and appear normal, as if they are not wearing clothes at all.

Switch it up! What type of dog would you dress up as?

William Wegman

American 1943–

George

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Whisper

1998

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Estella

2005

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Ionian

2005

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

What to do

1995

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Acetylene

1993

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Ecclesiastical

2000

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Usher

2002

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Farm boy

1996

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Dog walker

1990

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Night man

2002

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Hallucinations

In 1997 Polaroid developed a new black-and-white film. This new film looked like old film to me and it suggested a particular time in the history of photography when tricks such as double exposures were received as baffling mysteries.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Armored

2005

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Jellyfish

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

Behind a glowing raincoat, this Weimaraner sits very still waiting for its photograph to be taken. This photograph is called *Jellyfish*, because the raincoat does look a bit like a glowing – or bioluminescent – jellyfish. Did you know that jellyfish have been around for millions of years and even existed before the dinosaurs? Also, jellyfish digest their food very quickly, so they don't get weighed down by a big lunch.

What do you know about jellyfish?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Eyes

2005

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Perhaps religious

2004

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Early dog

2004

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Psychology today

2000

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

From the spirit world

2006

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Masquerade

No other breed that I am aware of is as conducive to the illusion of transformation as Weimaraners. Weimaraners are called 'grey ghosts'. Their fur gives off an almost iridescent glow. They inhabit their forms in a strange way, never appearing to solidify into themselves as, say, a lab, a collie or a bulldog does. When you photograph a collie, you get a collie.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Wolf

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Animalque

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Eyewear

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Newsworthy

2004

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Moose on the wall

1992

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

For this photograph, William is playing with a type of art made by the Abstract Expressionists called colour field painting. These artists used bold colours and big shapes in their paintings to show how they feel. Instead of painting pictures of people, animals or objects, they painted emotions! Did you know colours make us feel different ways?

Look closely at the soft blue and the bright yellow in this photograph. How do the colours make you feel?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Giraffelant

1987

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Camo

1990

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Floor piece

1990

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Dolor Oratus Vox Dicam

1992

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Elephant ghost

2007

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Early

1991

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Chow

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Colour fields

I began by ignoring colour, using the colour Polaroid film as though it were black and white. I distrusted colour. Sensuous, romantic, elusive colour. Colour was ... well ... colourful. In fact, the first few days with the Polaroid camera I made only black-on-black pictures. Man Ray under a black cloth against a black background. Polaroid film is very beautiful within a limited range. Man Ray was too dark for this film but Fay was perfect. With Fay I began to explore colour and light.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Cut to reveal

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Rustic placement

2007

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Red wine

1998

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Blue Monday Wednesday Friday

2008

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Ocean view

1993

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Cursive display

2013

pigment print

Collection of the artist

For kids

For this photograph, William is playing with a type of art made by the Abstract Expressionists called colour field painting. These artists used bold colours and big shapes in their paintings to show how they feel. Instead of painting pictures of people, animals or objects, they painted emotions! Did you know colours make us feel different ways?

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Tales

One day my assistant Andrea stood behind Fay to adjust her dress and she gestured out to me with her hand. Her long human arm appeared as Fay's. The illusion startled me. A miracle. Kind of creepy. Fay was part human. I thought of cartoons and mythology, superheroes and Egyptian gods. Next thing you know, Batty's son Chip was playing the flute.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Madam Butterfly

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

One lump

1999

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Kidnapper

1993

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Kind of bird

1993

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Tamino with magic flute

1996

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

The Magic Flute is an opera by Mozart about a prince called Tamino, who uses a magical flute to help him find his way through a dark and dangerous forest. In this photograph, the Weimaraners are dressed up as characters from *The Magic Flute* and Prince Tamino holds the flute with a pair of human hands.

Which fairytale would you choose if you were taking a photograph like this?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Curtain call

1995

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Lighting director

2002

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Eustace Tilley

1999

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Sit!/Stay!

The dogs have an obvious pride in what they do. They can sense the feeling in the room when they are working. If it's a great picture or a difficult picture, they can feel what happens because everyone stops and goes 'Wow!' Fay was particularly agile and for her I concocted a series of anatomically challenging poses. I came to understand her balance and points of physical tension. Fay liked the challenge of a difficult pose. I think she liked to impress me.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Uphill

1990

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Shrimpy

1991

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Yoga

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Very tired

1989

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

When a puppy is young, its owner usually trains it to 'sit' and to 'stay'. William is playing with these popular dog commands in this series called *Sit Stay*. Here, the Weimaraner lies sleeping in a big comfy armchair and doesn't look like it wants to move! The armchair and Weimaraner are similar shades of brown so they blend into each other.

Look at the texture of the velvet armchair. Do you think the dog and the chair would feel similar to touch?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Cantilever

2015

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Eames low

2015

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

The line about

2004

black-and-white Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Paw place

1992

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Upside downward

2006

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Leg ladder

2004

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Left right black white

2015

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Airborne

2010

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Vogue/Style

I have a very awkward relationship with fashion. I'm a little bit timid about it. This isn't the attitude of the typical fashion photographer. Fortunately, my Weimaraners are the perfect fashion models. Their slinky elegant forms are covered in grey, and grey, as everyone knows, goes with anything.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Courrèges

1998

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Dressed to boots

1996

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

YSL

2017

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Seated figure

1996

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Horizontal lines

1996

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Vertical lines

1998

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

V

2017

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Qey

2017

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Feathered footwear

1999

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Head wear, neck wear

2000

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

For kids

Vogue is a fashion magazine which often has photographs of famous models dressed in the latest styles on its covers. In this photograph, William has balanced fancy handbags on the heads of his Weimaraners – they look like hats! The dogs look silly as they stare seriously at the camera like fashion models posing for the cover of a magazine.

Look around the room. What other types of fashion accessories can you see the Weimaraners modelling?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Migratory

1999

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Nudes/Physique

Up close, unadorned, standing, sitting or lying before the eye of the big camera, the dogs become landscapes, a forest of trees, a topography of hills and valleys, earth and boulders, in a shoreline of endless interconnectivity.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

For kids

Many of the photographs in this exhibition look like old paintings you can find in the NGV Collection. Artists practise their drawing and painting skills in 'life drawing' classes, where they learn how to draw the human body. Some photographers also work with light and shadow when they are taking photographs of the body.

Here we see some Weimaraners all arranged as if they are nude, which is funny because we know that animals don't wear clothes!

William Wegman

American 1943–

Slide

1998

black-and-white Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Wall

1997

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Mountainous

1998

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Façade

2000

black-and-white Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Slow guitar

1987

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Working I

1992

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Working II

1992

black-and-white Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

On base

2007

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Tumble down

2004

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

White²

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

Cubists

Since 1972 I have had a habit of keeping a white box in the studio. If I can't think of anything to do, the box is a good place to start. The original work I made with this box alluded to Sol LeWitt's minimal sculptures of the 1960s, but this is now a fading memory. I use a box the way a philosopher uses a chair, as a physical object representing hypothetical questions: 'How many ways can a dog fit on a box?', 'How many dogs can fit in a box?', 'Around a box?' And on and on. On these square wheels, round questions keep rolling.

WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman

American 1943–

Yellow peril

1992

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

In hiding

1989

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

3 on 3

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Split level

2010

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Constructivism

2014

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

White out

2014

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

The letter

1993

pigment print

Collection of the artist

For kids

In the studio, William uses different props for his photographs. One of his favourites is the cube, perhaps because they are useful as a seat or a pedestal. William calls this section of the exhibition 'Cubism' after an art movement created by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. He is thinking about the history of art and making jokes by using actual cubes.

In this photograph, the Weimaraner is resting on a cube that looks like a letter. Have you ever received something in the post?

William Wegman

American 1943–

Contact

2014

pigment print

Collection of the artist

William Wegman

American 1943–

Red triangle

1994

colour Polaroid photograph

Collection of the artist