time as we usually experience it, giving viewers the tools to pay attention. Ultimately, this is what his photographs share with works by the artists he admires – they are works of art that tell the viewer about the provisionality of appearance and about existence in the contemporary world, works that speak about themselves and how they were made, all the while destabilising the habits and conventions of recognition to repay attention with refreshed perceptions of the so often invisible made visible.

Gary Dufour

More precisely, in Wall’s own words:

I had no real subject in mind when I started to work. I was simply interested in a problem I had noticed in my interior shots: they often felt really closed in. So I decided to find an interior with an exterior. First I had to find a place to shoot, so I went searching for a place with a view, and found an apartment with a lovely vista of Vancouver harbour … I asked the person on the left, a woman I knew, to behave as if it were her own apartment. I gave her a budget to furnish it and left her to live in it. This took quite a while, since each person’s interior is such a collage of accidents, plans, things you’ve collected. I didn’t want to design it in any way … I had done a lot of improvisation in advance, watching them do the sort of things such women might actually do. I had the one on the left video herself when I wasn’t around, so I wouldn’t miss moments that might turn out to be beautiful: walking past the window, having a cigarette, that sort of thing. I was just waiting for something to strike me.11

Jeff Wall


Throughout his career he has made colour prints as well as transparencies. However, since ‘Spring Snow’, large-scale colour photographs have become a more common format. The new colour works embrace both straight and ‘near documentary’ photography, full-scale cinematic productions and digital montage. In other words, Wall affirms the many genres, styles and techniques of photography as options and decisions available to an artist.

This has led to a staggering array of new works: transparencies and prints of varying dimensions. There are photographs such as Hotels, Carrall St., Vancouver, 2005, a street scene one night and photographed the next morning, more orchestrated events such as Knife throw, 2008, and Boy falls from tree, 2010, and ‘near documentary’ pictures including Dressing poultry and Ivan Sayers, costume historian, lectures at the University Women’s Club, Vancouver, 7 Dec. 2009. Virginia Newton-Moss wears a British ensemble c.1910; from Sayers’ collection, 2009. Each allows Wall to lift the photographic bar, so to speak. All of his preparations – whether a device designed and built, or a structure built to control the lighting – fade away, leaving unified photographic moments: simple, arresting stories told with imagination.

Wall’s photographs reveal a considered, decisive response to the immediacy of everyday experiences. They underscore his readiness to admire artists as mentors, and his willingness to mentor others.12 There is also a subtlety in his pictorial vocabulary that encourages viewers to look and look again for more.

Most importantly, Wall’s images stay with you and shape your experience of the world. His photographs have a unique perspective: they are executed with exacting precision and, once encountered, become touchstones as the viewer navigates their own path through the daily parade of events in any city, anywhere. His work keeps you looking, enriching the enjoyment and visual pleasure to be found everywhere every day, if one pays attention. And that is in his work slow time as we usually experience it, giving the tools to pay attention. Ultimately, this is what his photographs share with works by the artists he admires – they are works of art that tell the viewer about the provisionality of appearance and about existence in the contemporary world, works that speak about themselves and how they were made, all the while destabilising the habits and conventions of recognition to repay attention with refreshed perceptions of the so often invisible made visible.

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Polishing 1998
Dressing poultry 2007