



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Smithsonian American Art Museum Celebrates Opening with William Wegman Retrospective

The first retrospective of William Wegman's work in more than 15 years will be on view July 1 through Sept. 24 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum as part of the grand opening that follows a six-year renovation. The Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., organized "William Wegman: Funney/Strange," a comprehensive traveling exhibition of the artist's work. Guest curated by Trevor Fairbrother, the exhibition explores 40 years of Wegman's work in all media.

"William Wegman is an American original in every sense. His pioneering video work, photographic innovations and tongue-in-cheek portraits are thought-provoking and engaging," said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The exhibition features more than 200 works, including Wegman's signature 20 x 24 Polaroids, as well as early black-and-white and altered photographs, paintings, drawings, collages, videos and film. Throughout his career, Wegman has moved seamlessly among various media, from conceptual works to commissioned magazine shots, from video work to television segments made for "Sesame Street" and "Saturday Night Live," from artist's books to children's books and from photographic "landscapes" employing his dogs to his most recent tour de force cycle of paintings, which incorporate scenic postcards with drawing, collage and paint.

Beneath the surface of William Wegman's work the light humor of "funny" is always mediating the darker human comedy of "strange." The exhibition title comes from the artist's 1982 drawing of the same name.

"The drawing shows two pairs of more or less parallel diagonal lines, each descending into its own hole," said catalog author Joan Simon. "The word 'funney' hovers above and between the images; the word 'strange' below the image. One soon senses something 'funny' about the word 'funney,' finding it, in fact, somewhat strange. Whatever it is, it is something requiring scrutiny, engagement and

attention.”

His career, as the exhibition and the catalogue attest, has never been static or predictable, yet it is woven of enduring threads of interests and explorations that engaged him at the beginning and compel him still. Coming of age in the 1960s, Wegman was an early exponent of conceptual art and a pioneering videographer. In addition he is an adventurous painter, prolific writer and masterful photographer who is able to navigate between art that amuses and surprises and art that challenges and transforms.

“Beloved by the general public and held in critical esteem within the international art world, Wegman fascinates both for much the same reasons: his smart, gently subversive humor that destabilizes the familiar to reveal life’s essential oddity,” said Fairbrother. “This exhibition will bring together classic Wegman images with rarely exhibited material and surprising new work to reveal the full range and savvy voice of this remarkable artist’s production.”

Born in Holyoke, Mass. in 1943, Wegman received a bachelor’s degree from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and a master’s degree from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In Illinois and later in Wisconsin, he began to experiment with a wide range of media—film, kinetic sculpture, installation and performance. While teaching at California State College in Long Beach in the 1970s, Wegman developed what was to be his mature artistic voice expressed in his signature media of photography, video and text. It was in California that he acquired his canine muse Man Ray—the first of his iconic weimaraners—and began to include the dog in both photographs and video. By the fall of 1972 he moved to New York where he has remained ever since, applying his unpredictable imagination and expansive artistic appetite to a career that has been far-ranging, all-embracing and provocative.

About the Curator

Trevor Fairbrother is an independent scholar who has worked on a wide range of topics, from Andy Warhol to John Singer Sargent. He has served as a curator of American painting and of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and as deputy director for art at the Seattle Art Museum.

Tour

Following the presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the exhibition will travel to the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla. (Nov. 4 – Jan. 28, 2007) and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass. (April 7 through July 31, 2007).

Publication

The accompanying catalog, “William Wegman: Funney/Strange,” is published by Yale University

Press in association with the Addison Gallery. Joan Simon, curator-at-large at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, is the author. The book is illustrated with 250 images and includes an exclusive DVD with highlights of Wegman's video work. It is the first retrospective volume to consider the artist's entire career from the 1960s to the present.

Credit

"William Wegman: Funney/Strange," was organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass. Generous support for this exhibition and publication was provided by The Henry Luce Foundation. The Lunder Foundation supports the presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum collection began with gifts of art donated to the federal government in 1829 and has evolved into one of the world's most important American art holdings, with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. The museum's National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district, above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station (Red, Yellow and Green lines). When the building opens July 1, it will be a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture that celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Web sites: www.americanart.si.edu or www.reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to Editors: The spelling of "Funney" is correct. Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 275-1594 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition will be available from the museum's online press room.