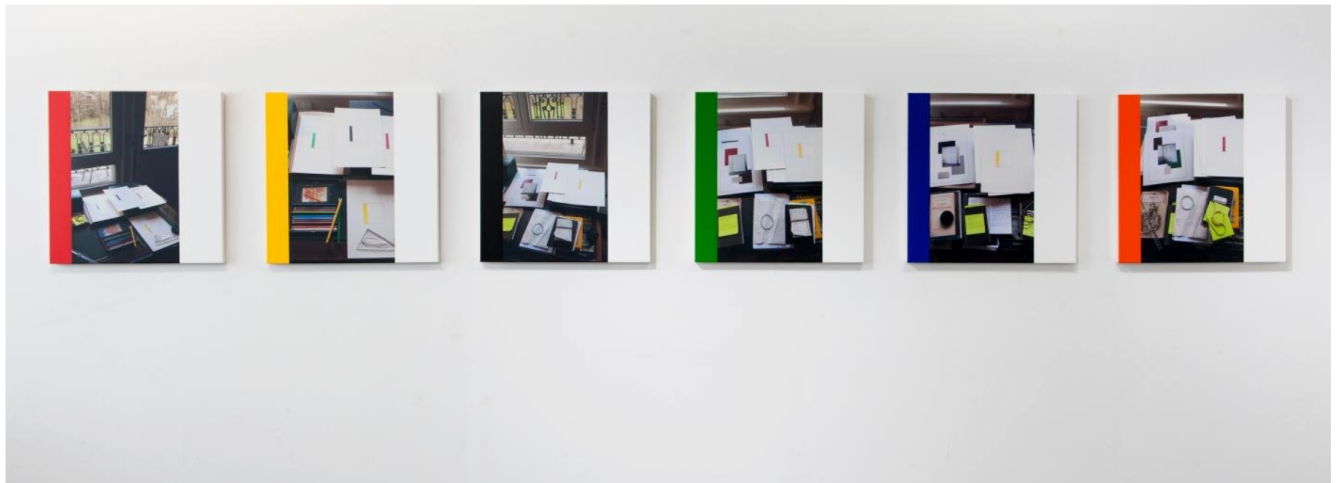


Ian Wallace bridges the distant past and the present in *Home and Away*, at West Vancouver Art Museum

In an intimate and unprecedented exhibition, the celebrated artist shows his earliest work for the first time

BY JANET SMITH



Ian Wallace, *Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa*, Baden-Baden, 2014, Photolaminate and acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

West Vancouver Museum presents **Home and Away: Ian Wallace** to May 4

IAN WALLACE CAN remember the summer day in 1957 clearly—grabbing his watercolours to hike far up the mountain above the family house at Palmerston and 24th in West Vancouver, taking shelter from the sun to paint the view from a rocky outlook.

The celebrated artist was just 14 years old, and the work, called *Eagle Bluff*, is part of a new exhibit installed not too far from where he grew up. Called *Home and Away*, at the West Vancouver Art Museum, the show gives an unprecedented look into his earliest years.

“As you can see, the point of view is from the shade—those are the blue marks in the front versus that hot rock—and I was just kind of sweating away, painting,” he recalls, looking at the now framed, 67-year-old watercolour. “It is one of my favourites. And so it’s a really pleasant experience to be showing it. I’ve never hung it before, I just kind of look at it in my portfolio.”

The first room features watercolours, sketches, and photos from Wallace's teen years with new photographs taken from the same West Van vantage points. The second space presents 2014 works from Wallace's famous "Hotel Series". While staying at the Brenners Park-Hotel and Spa, he photographed the table by his room's window, carefully laid out with artist supplies and rough sketches for artworks, as well as paperbacks, notebooks, and other objects. Each photograph bears a thick, Mondrian-like strip of painted primary colour on one side and a strip of white on the other. Carrying on Wallace's career-long interest in the intersection of painting and photography, the works were installed at the Staatliche Kunsthalle the same year.

Wallace says *Home and Away* is unlike any exhibition he's ever staged in a career that has taken him across North America and Europe.

Putting the show together with museum curator Hilary Letwin, he realized a deeper level of dialogue between the different bodies of work.

"If you look at those early works, I'm looking into the distance—I'm focused on things that are far away," he says, gesturing toward a view of English Bay and downtown Vancouver across the water, painted from his bedroom window when he was 16. "When I'm away, with the 'Hotel Series', everything is really close. The hotel room is like a studio, and it's looking very closely at books and papers and drawings and photographs. I see them as a kind of an intellectual landscape that's a reflection of my thinking."



Ian Wallace, *John Lawson Pier*, 1959, watercolour on paper, 30 x 45 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

It's true: the early works look outward, speaking of a yearning and hunger for what lies ahead. He would eventually head over to that city he painted with his watercolours, by bus, to take night classes at the old Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr University). Eventually, he would move to the city in 1962, going on to renown as one of the giants of the Vancouver photo-conceptualism movement. He would study and then lecture at UBC. His students would include Christos Dikeakos, Jeff Wall, and Rodney Graham—the last two of whom played with him in the influential first-wave art-punk band U-J3RK5. (“I was the ‘hippie professor’,” he says with a laugh.)

The early paintings here, as well as a panoramic shot from his childhood home's front deck, also show the resourcefulness and work ethic of a young Wallace. His neighbourhood of West Van was not the upscale enclave it is today; Wallace remembers painting portraits of his friends to sell to their parents (and also to “be able to date girls”, he adds with a laugh) as well as juggling a paper route, washing cars, and working as a “buggy boy” at the Dominion grocery store.

"I was totally in the bushes, hiking around, and there was a beautiful ravine at the 25th Street creek, and I was always climbing up and down the Hollyburn trails."

“I was just a survivor,” he shrugs. “Our family had almost no money. My mother worked. Everything that I had, any money I had, I earned myself.”

What Home and Away also underscores is just how many major Canadian artists West Vancouver has produced. Wallace himself was hugely inspired by late artist Gordon Smith, first seeing his work in the window of the New Design Gallery on Marine Drive, and he remembers Modernist icon B.C. Binning coming in to speak to his class at Inglewood Middle School.

But there was clearly also something about West Van's setting and nature that inspired his inner artist, after he moved to the Coast at 10 from the B.C. Interior. Wallace's house predated the Upper Levels highway that would later go in above it. “So I was totally in the bushes, hiking around, and there was a beautiful ravine at the 25th Street creek,” he says, “and I was always climbing up and down the Hollyburn trails.” He'd head down the mountain, too, to the water's edge, as evidenced by the exhibit's somehow wistful 1959 landscape *John Lawson Pier*.

It was as he was leaving his school in the Interior that an art teacher, who recognized his talent, gave him a set of oil paints as a going-away present.

“That was my first kind of official acknowledgement. Those things are important for kids,” he says. “That's why I'm with the Gordon Smith Foundation [board] that supports the Artists for Kids program. So I really think it's very, very important to encourage kids to explore their talents, whatever it might be—be it art or music. Sensitive encouragement: for kids, that has to be done.”



Ian Wallace, *Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa, Baden-Baden I*, 2014, photo laminate and acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

PLACE HAS ALWAYS been important to Wallace's work. In the hotel series here, you can see him building a "home", or at least a studio, away from home, as a travelling, internationally in-demand artist.

Look closely and you'll see deeply into Wallace's process, his sketches (sometimes even on hotel-notepad paper), his lined-up pencil crayons, his interest in philosophy and poetry (mostly French), and especially his interest in art history.

Does he really work at a table with objects placed with the precision of a still life? "Yes," he laughs. "I'm a Virgo."

He traces the painted monochromatic strips on his works back to his early interest in abstract modernism in the 1960s. As for the photographs, the items depicted include such ephemera as an old library ticket from the Bibliothèque Forney in Paris, Post-It notes, and rubber bands—which brings us to his interest in collage and its history.

"The radical technical development of Cubism came out of the idea that you can actually take things from everyday life: take a piece of newspaper and paste it on your drawing," he reflects, "and that will become part of the drawing so you have the beginning of the collage technique."

As a longtime professor of art history at UBC (his master's thesis was on Piet Mondrian), Wallace's references to art's past are vast. The references, then, are not surprisingly multilayered in the "Hotel Series". Boiling it all down, though, the artist simply describes these works as "putting together monochrome painting and photography into one".

There's something poignant about seeing these more "worldly" pieces, synthesizing the life's reading, travels, and contemplation of a man in his eighth decade juxtaposed with the more naive (but still promising) works of him as a teenager. Adding to that is the fact that those works are not in a fancy white-cube gallery in Berlin or Baden-Baden, but instead in a museum that sits in a former residence that Wallace once biked by on his paper route. He's come home again, and in this tautly curated exhibit, brought a lot of what he's absorbed while "away" back with him. 📍



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