

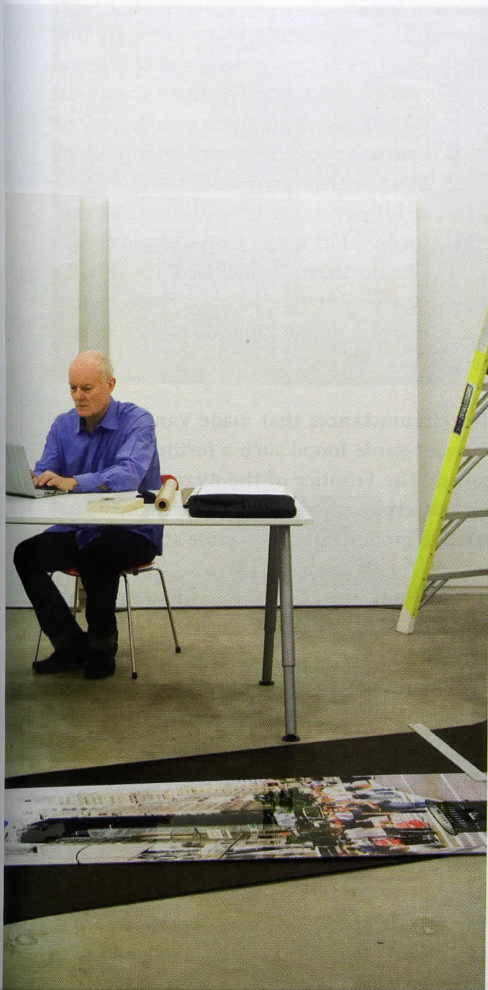
Lasting Pictures

Ian Wallace and the Making of Photography's Future Past

An Interview by Robert Enright

Ian Wallace, *At Work 2008*, 2008, diptych, photolaminate on canvas, 203 x 305 centimetres. Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery. All images courtesy the artist.





Ian Wallace is an indispensable figure in the history of artmaking on the West Coast. It is impossible to think of photo-conceptualism without the shaping role he has played as an artist, teacher, curator and critic. He continues to occupy that overlapping set of roles today. As he explains, he didn't invent the term *photoconceptualism*, but he did apply it to the work that was being done in the early '80s by himself and a younger group of artists—including Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Roy Arden, Stan Douglas and Ken Lum—who dramatically expanded the scale, content and ambition of the art of contemporary photography in Vancouver.

It is important to understand that there was never anything in Wallace's approach to artmaking that was narrow or provincial. From the beginning his looking and attention were global. For Wallace, artmaking and the history of art are in a dynamic relationship, and his understanding of the links between the already made and the being made has been especially generative. That dynamic quality is inescapably transformative and has led him to investigate the places where photography and painting are in conversation. The title of his major retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2012, "Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography," used those two forms as a frame within which his art could be contextualized.

The use of the word *intersection* in the title was also a way of focusing on one of his most productive locations, the street. Wallace has worked in two kinds of places: the public and the private. For him, the public sites are urban intersections and art galleries; the private settings are the studio and the hotel. Each of those locations provided a subtle and inexhaustible range of subjects, objects and activities. He has consistently approached that content through the intersecting registers of the photographed and the painted. His art has dealt directly with political issues, beginning with the “Poverty” series in the early ’80s and continuing more than a decade later with his “Clayoquot Protest” series, but even those bodies of work situate the taken-ness of photography and the made-ness of painting inside the same frame. He describes what he has been doing since 1980: “combining photographs with abstract painting on a canvas ground.” That process—what he calls his main *modus operandi*—incorporates a tidy economy.

Wallace’s work hints at quietude, but that suggestion is something of a decoy. What actually interests him is drama. This emerges from a variety of sources, including the puzzle of relationships, the play of form and colour, and the weighted read of the photographic and painted components of any composition. Nothing is predictable; the size of painted areas is never consistent and, as a result, it insists we look for difference. His hotel compositions are especially intriguing because they seem to imply meaning beyond what we see; a glance out a window is always a look at where we’re not and where we may long to be.

Abstract compositions are his most personal works. They are the fragments of living he gathers around him—deliberately interrupted collaborations with the work of other artists, architectural details, tabletop profusions—and represent a kind of object autobiography, a way of recording and ascribing significance to aspects of a life lived. Wallace doesn’t distinguish between art and life because anything from life can be made artful—a book, a stack of art magazines, pieces of paper, a set of coloured pastels, a snapshot, the light from an open window. The “Abstract Compositions” are elegantly hermetic; they have about them an unmistakable meta-quality. As art, they are about what artmaking is. Wallace says that his challenge “is to constantly explore new compositional languages and let them speak their content.” The bodies of work that have the most potential to speak their content are the various series called “Abstract Composition.” They are certain and provisional at the same time.

Ian Wallace says the central issue of his art has been “how to create a meaningful and lasting picture of the world.” For almost 60 years he has been involved in an understated passion for making lasting pictures. His engagement is a temporal weave. “I like to bring the best of the past into the composition of the future” is how he describes his ambition in creating authentic works of art. In the present, Ian Wallace is using the intersections between photography and painting to make an ongoing and resonant future past.

The following interview is comprised of his considered and generous written responses to a number of questions that were sent to him in July of 2025.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I want to come head-on at the legend of Vancouver photoconceptualism. Were you the person who came up with the term?

IAN WALLACE: In 1985 I curated an exhibition at the 49th Parallel Gallery in New York City that included myself, Jeff Wall, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham and featured work that combined photography and aspects of conceptual art practice at the time. This was likely the beginning of what later came to be described as the “Vancouver School.” Subsequently, I wrote an essay titled “Photoconceptualism in Vancouver” that was published in the catalogue titled *Thirteen Essays on Canadian Photography* edited by Martha Langford, and from that I became identified with the term. In this essay I emphasized that the idea and the practices of “photoconceptualism” were global. I think I first noticed the term in an essay by the British artist Victor Burgin, so I never claimed to have invented it. However, it was a useful term to describe the experimental link of photography and conceptual art. And in Vancouver from the late 1960s on there was a great deal of experimenting with photographic practices in the context of conceptual art, as there was elsewhere as well. In this regard, Iain Baxter and N.E. Thing Co. had a tremendous influence in the Vancouver scene, and elsewhere. In 1969 Christos Dikeakos curated an important exhibition at the University of British Columbia called “The Photo Show.” It included not only the Vancouver artists but also several of the most important American artists who were instrumental in initiating what I later termed “photoconceptualism.”

So what were the circumstances that made Vancouver the place where the avant-garde found such a fertile reception? In your essay called “The Frontier of the Avant-Garde” for the exhibition in Antwerp, you wrote that the city should not have been expected to produce an avant-garde at all. So what happened?

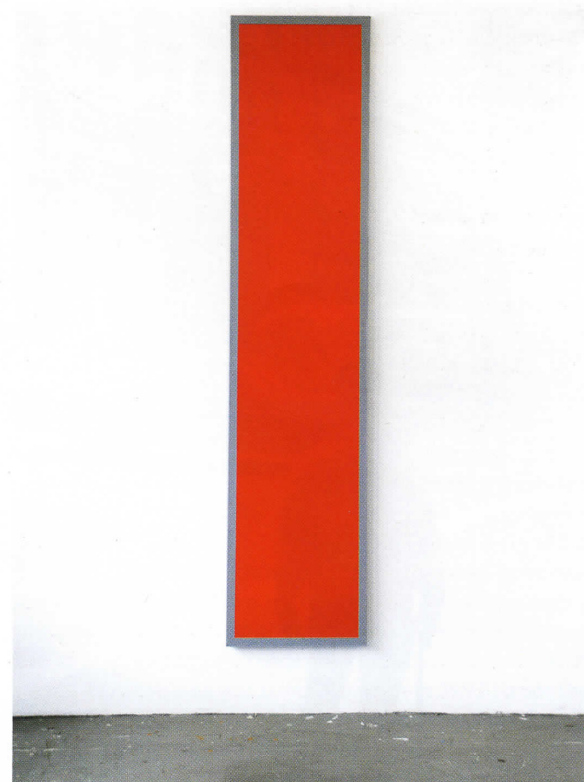
I credit Iain Baxter with introducing and encouraging a Vancouver avant-garde in the 1960s. But avant-garde attitudes were in the air everywhere and Vancouver organizations such as the Western Front and Intermedia were very influential in creating the opportunities and the audience for experimental art. But this was and remains a global phenomenon.

Has your view of how art developed in Vancouver changed over the years? What I’m asking is, has time shifted your own understanding of the history of what happened?

I have always been interested in the history of art, and this history is the dynamic outcome of specific artistic practices. Contemporary art is always in transformation, and I am always trying to comprehend new developments.

I’m interested in small moments in an artist’s life that end up being epiphanic, to use a Joycean term. When you were a student at Inglewood Middle School, your class attended a presentation by BC Binning. Do you remember that as an inspiring encounter?

Yes. BC Binning was a mature artist who took modern art seriously. That meant that as an aspiring youngster, I could also take modern art seriously.





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1. *Clayoquot Protest I*, 1993–95, photolaminate, ink monograph and acrylic on canvas, 178 × 300 centimetres. Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery.

2. *Untitled (Black Monochrome with Grey)*, 1967–2007, acrylic on canvas, 228 × 50 centimetres.

3. *Untitled (Red monochrome with grey)*, 1967–2009, acrylic on canvas, 228 × 50 centimetres.

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1. *The Calling*, 1977, black and white photograph, 113 × 145 centimetres. Collection of National Gallery of Canada.

2. *Intersection 1970, 1970/1991*, silver gelatin print, 16 × 24 centimetres.

I'm struck by how the story bridges a gap between old-school West Coast artmaking and the generation that followed, in which you played a central and galvanizing part.

In my understanding of West Coast art, I have always had tremendous respect for the generations of local artists, mostly modernist abstract painters, who came before me. After I got my degree as an art historian, BC Binning gave me my first serious job teaching art history at University of British Columbia. Gordon Smith became a close friend and was very supportive despite our artistic differences and Tak Tanabe remains a prolific and inspiring artist.

Vancouver was isolated geographically—the ocean on one side and the mountains on the other—but it always seemed to generate an admirable degree of internal energy. You mentioned Iain and Ingrid Baxter's N.E. Thing Co., which began in 1966, and Intermedia started by Jack Shadbolt and Glenn Lewis a year later. These were artist-run collectives that broke free of conventional notions of what art could be and how it could be made. Did collectives like this contribute to a climate of innovation in the city in advance of what became the Vancouver School?

Yes, very much so, and these specific personalities were an important influence on what became possible. It was about the ambitions and the talents of many different people. It is often noted that the geographical separation of Vancouver made it a unique scene, but Vancouver is a typical urban centre connected to the rest of the world. In fact, its distance from other centres even led Vancouver artists to travel widely and make global connections. That was my experience anyways.

I know that the "Vancouver School" is a contested name and has been much argued about. Did a thing called the Vancouver School ever exist?

I have never used the term "Vancouver School." Of course, there are some distinctive characteristics shared by artists who worked closely together, and they can seem to constitute a homogenous "group" or "school" and this is true to a certain extent for the Vancouver scene, especially in the link between photography and conceptual art. But as always, each artist has their own independent identity that resists being labelled. No Vancouver artist identifies specifically with being part of a "Vancouver School." However, some tendencies in common inevitably lead to being labelled as a "school" by those from other territories.

You say in your essay for Antwerp that "each generation seeks a position that is unoccupied

by the previous generation." What position did your generation understand to be unoccupied territory and how, and with what, did you enter it?

Speaking for myself, the "unoccupied territory" was an intellectual one. As an artist who was also an educated art historian, I inevitably made artistic decisions informed by my intellectual understanding of what was the necessary art to create in this "late modernist" historical period, thus I was open to the photographic and media image-making that characterizes our epoch.

When did you realize that what you called "the radical banality of everyday life" could be both material for making art and a way of getting away from art that had already been made?

That comment was an ironic reference to the quotidian or the everyday. But, yes, the subject of "everyday reality" that on its surface seems unimportant or "banal" implicitly can also contain the essence of a deeper social or political significance that inspires new work.

Was there an inherent politics in this focus on the quotidian and the local? I'm thinking of a project like Roy Arden's "Rupture and Abjection" in 1985 where he appropriated documentary photography as a way of drawing attention to a suppressed history about race and class.

Yes. To create an image of the quotidian or everyday reality is also to engage with the politics of it. Roy Arden's work was influential in my thinking of this issue regarding the way that photography could carry a political effect in its mirroring of everyday reality.

Does this engagement between the global and the regional set up a conflicting geography of aesthetics?

The ability of the photographic image to register specific information in the context of an aesthetic composition inevitably opens up divergent responses and readings that propel unique political interpretations of reality.

Where do your own "Poverty" images fit into the politics of the local?

I started the "Poverty" series in the early 1980s when the British Columbia government was closing down the mental hospitals and releasing patients into the street. The "Poverty" series was a specific attempt to create a body of work that could be read politically. Later in 1993 I made the "Clayoquot Protest" series that was even more specifically political in content.

Was there ever a collision of aesthetic ideologies between politics and art for you? I ask this because of the observation that “contradiction in suspension” has been fundamental to your work. I suppose the dominant political outlook in my work could be termed “dialectical.” That is, life and reality and art are full of contradictions, and the attempt to convincingly reflect the truth of this in a unified work of art requires that the artist be capable of having these contradictions exposed while they also communicate meaningfully.

Why did you stop painting in 1969? I sense this is a simple question with a not-so-simple answer. I had been exhibiting abstract paintings through the 1960s, culminating with a large solo show of monochrome paintings in 1968. In addition to the fact that painting was in a crisis everywhere at that time, I felt those monochromes marked a finality in that direction of my work. The intense discussions about political and social content in the late 1960s led me to engage with a more representational and performative imagery that could be best expressed in the techniques of photography and video. To this end I was quite influenced by the photographic works of Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham. This was also the time when Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Christos Dikeakos were starting to pay attention to media and photography. Performance art was also strong in Vancouver, especially with the Western Front program. So throughout the 1970s I made a number of large-scale narrative photographic works. However, I returned to painting in 1980 with the “Poverty” series, when I combined photographs with abstract painting on a canvas ground and that has been my main modus operandi ever since.

It is interesting that when you decide, quite consciously, to make a work that is more concerned with world politics, you find the term for it in painting. It will be “a contemporary version of a history painting.” Painting seems always to be just under the surface of your consciousness.

Painting is a very versatile medium. It has also been the ground or support for pictorial art for centuries. And the most ambitious art of the past has been “history painting,” that is, large-scale painting that presents an image of social reality, what today we generally consider a “political” view of the world and the values projected in the imagery. For me the central issue of my art is how to create a meaningful and lasting picture of the world. My 1993 series of nine large photographic canvases titled “Clayoquot Protest” showing the ecological protest at Clayoquot Sound still stands

as my most ambitious attempt to create a contemporary “history painting.”

I’m assuming that in making a work that monumentalized an event of historical importance, you had to move to scale.

Yes, history paintings have usually been large in scale since they were meant for the spectacle of public viewing in the salons and the museum. Cinematic spectacle has come to dominate this pictorial function since the beginning of the 20th century.

You realized that monochromatic painting had been emptied out of content, so you moved away from it and towards photography where you could find the pictorial truth that painting had relinquished. In doing that, did you have any doubts about what photography could do?

Photography has the ability to reflect the world as a direct concrete image. Beyond that, the challenge for me is to have the photographic image function as an aesthetic statement as well as information.

I am intrigued by this notion of “the evacuation of the image” because it recognizes a process of emptying out. Was your engagement one of unmaking painting as much as it was about making images?

I used that term to describe the historical shift from representational imagery in painting to monochromatic abstraction through the first half of the 20th century. While I experimented with “pure” monochrome painting in the late 1960s, I reintroduced representational imagery into my painting when it became technically possible, by the late 1970s, to laminate photographs onto canvas. This technical innovation made painting relevant again for my practice.

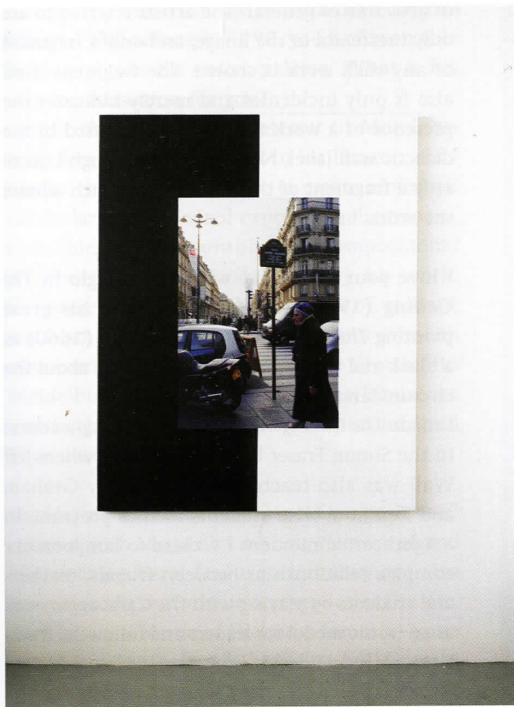
There was a time when you were producing collages in the manner of Schwitters and Hausmann—one addressed the formal, and the other, the political. Did those interests cover two critical aspects of your sensibility?

Collage was an essential technique in the earliest experiments in the cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque that led to the subsequent development of abstract painting. Collage as a technique thus became identified with avant-garde pictorial art. In our attempt to identify with an avant-garde history of art influenced by this earlier collage technique, the use of cut-up fragments of published media was common in many works by myself, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Christos Dikeakos in the later 1960s through the 1970s and up to the present. We were all certainly influenced by the collage works of

1. *Intersection (Place Sartre-Beauvoir, Paris)*, 2006, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 152 × 122 centimetres. Private collection.

2. *Winter Light (Paris)*, 2006, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 152 × 122 centimetres. Private collection.

3. *Constellations (with stains) I & II*, 2012, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 183 × 152 centimetres.



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Schwitters and Hausmann. Collage allowed for the introduction of subject matter into the pictorial frame while still respecting the material support of painting on canvas. This combination of a referential photographic image integrated with the material support of the painted canvas has been the basis of my art since the early 1980s.

You were a teacher as well as an artist and that doubling seems to have made you generously disposed towards appreciating myriad ways of making art. It leads me to ask how quotation functions in your practice. Is it a distraction or an affirmation; is it homage or irony?

Quotation allows for a myriad of references and interpretations in a pictorial image. It enriches the reading of a pictorial statement to go beyond the purely optical impression of its aesthetic structure to include symbolic relationships within and without the pictorial frame.

How do the “Abstract Compositions” from 2011–12 figure into the frame of quotation? They are named after a cornucopia of artists including Agnes Martin, Franz Kline, Malevich, Picasso, Kiefer and Warhol. These seem tributary. The “Abstract Compositions” that you refer to are part of a continuing series, my “Museum Series” in which I photograph the space between a canvas and its didactic label on the museum wall. The central space of the image is the wall of the museum, which is, in effect, the support for the presentation

of artworks in general. The artists referred to are only incidental to the image, and only a fragment of any such work is shown. The fragment itself also is only incidental and merely indicates the presence of a work that is also identified in the didactic wall label. Nevertheless, although I quote only a fragment of the work, I very much admire the artists I refer to.

I love your early play with Caravaggio in *The Calling* (1977) where you restage his great painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1660) as a black and white photograph. Tell me about the circumstances of its making.

I made *The Calling* when I was teaching a course in the Simon Fraser University studios where Jeff Wall was also teaching. Both Rodney Graham and Ken Lum were students in that program. In a lighthearted moment I decided to lampoon our complex relationships between friends, teachers and students by playing with the Caravaggio work as an ironic model for leaders and followers. It was a fun piece and deeply ironic.

When I look at the “Fontana” series it occurs to me that their subject—the detritus of the studio—could justify naming them the “Arman” series, or the “Almost-Schwitters” series.

Again, I enjoy playing with the ironic relationship between art historical models and the actual production of studio work. I had the luck to be able to visit the basement cleanup room in the former studio of Lucio Fontana in Milan, Italy. For the occasion of an exhibition of my work (with Rodney Graham and Robert Kleyn) in the Sergio Casoli Gallery upstairs, I photographed the remains of Lucio Fontana’s painting materials, and laminated the photographs onto canvases that comprised the show. This led on to my subsequent “messes in the studio” series that played with a similar ironic relation between accidental effects in the production of artwork and the final aesthetic decision to accept arbitrary marks and textures as “painterly” material for a finished work.

The artist with whom you have had a long-standing relationship is Mondrian. You wrote your MA thesis on “The Evolution of Neo-Plasticism” in his work from 1910–20; there is a set of “Abstract Compositions” with the parenthetical attachment “with Mondrian”; the sequence of pictures in “At Work” (2008) deflect form through objects, so you include white canvases, a black floor runner, a red chair, a yellow ladder and a blue book on the floor. Colour plays persistently throughout this work. By the time you had completed the 19 images

comprising the “Homage to Mondrian” at the Vleeshal Middelburg in 1990, you had been able to incorporate his entire palette. What is his ongoing attraction for you?

I think that my primary interest in Mondrian is his focus on composition in his images, and I admire the way he was able to create a modern vocabulary for a focused expression of compositional pictorial relationships. My compositional sensibility is much influenced by his work. He worked with a very basic range of colours, but I can say that my sense of colour is much more varied. The exhibition at the Vleeshal in Middelburg directly referenced the landscape motifs that Mondrian painted when he lived there during WWI.

The Hayward Gallery’s “Abstract Compositions” connect with Mondrian in their yellow, red and blue architectural features, but they are also anomalous in that you underemphasize the site. The Hayward is one of the most famous—some would say “notorious”—brutalist buildings in the art world. It’s as if your citing is a decoy or a displacement of some kind.

The Hayward Gallery works were a spontaneous response to my excitement at the works that I had just seen, and I was riffing on the primary colours in the stairwells and used them in a few works. It was just playing with the specificity of the site, and of course with the primary colours of Mondrian’s work.

What was the point in your art practice when you realized you could conveniently divide it into the studio, the museum and the street?

These were “locations” that allowed me to create a series of works that introduced documentary photographic imagery that could explore critical relationships with a variety of social subjects: the production of artworks in the studio; the public display of artworks in the museum; and the monumental public space of the urban environment. Although I have created works with other themes, these “locations” gave focus to my subject matter.

Two of these are controlled environments but the street isn’t. Is that unpredictability one of the major appeals it had as a place to make art? The urban environment—and this is the environment that I spend a great deal of time in—is one that is the most invested in social subjects that are open to a critical political perspective and a discussion of the ideological superstructures of modern life.



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In an urban context, the “intersection” is one way that you compose. It is a beginning point that provides a structure of meaning. Can you talk about the intersection as both a location and an idea for artmaking?

My first work using this theme of the street intersection was a small photograph titled *Intersection 1970* that I exhibited in that year. I related the painted rectangle of the urban intersection crosswalk to the painted rectangular frame of my earlier monochrome paintings and thus initiated a “dialectical” relationship between a thematic image conveyed by photography and the pictorial conventions of painting. Of course, I was also interested in reflecting on the presence of people who are negotiating traffic and signals within the structure of the intersection crosswalk. Since then, this metaphorical and even “existential” theme has been the subject of many subsequent works.

Does the relationship between abstraction and composition—and the link between the real and the constructed—change when you bring reality, literally, into the picture? In *Jazz Street II* there is the painted vertical stripe down the left-hand side and then there is the yellow and blue horizontal marquee that juts prominently into the lower right-hand side of the picture that is part of the street scene. What does its presence reinforce—the reality of the street or the integrity of the composition?

1. *Construction Site LA IV*, 2003, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 183 × 183 centimetres. Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery.

2. *Hotel Metropole, Brussels*, 2009, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61 centimetres. Private collection.



1. *Abstract Composition*
(Hayward Gallery, London) VII–IX, 2011, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, each 122 × 122 centimetres.

2. Installation view, "A Literature of Images," 2008, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.

Jazz Street II, which I photographed in downtown New York, was a reference to the abstract painting by Piet Mondrian titled *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. Therefore, I was particularly interested in the colours and compositions in the architecture as well as the individuals in the street. It was an homage to Mondrian, who was responsive to urbanity as well as abstraction.

In The Museum (Guggenheim) from 1990 does something similar to *Jazz Street II*, where the architectural features of the museum (its walls, floors and famous balconies) serve as structural devices that are a complement to the grey and white segments that divide the composition.

In this series of museum works I was reflecting on the formal structures of the architecture.

Your city architectural photographs make the viewer aware of structure and form. They are themselves construction sites, not just in naming but in seeing and making. Were you looking for that doubling?

Yes, I was looking at the physical formal structure of urban architecture as a parallel to the formal rectangular structure of pictorial framing.

In *Pan Am Scan* you seem to be creating a structural narrative. Is a visual story a fallback position?

Pan Am Scan was shot in London in 1970. I had been photographing reflections in store windows as a mirroring of the activity of the street. In this work I took a series of shots panning from the reflections in the windows of the Pan American ticket office on Piccadilly Road in London to the pedestrians on the sidewalk. Jeff Wall was with me at the time, and I think I did it for his amusement. It became a key work that I have exhibited many times.

You have had and continue to have a close relationship to Jeff Wall. What stages did it go through and in what ways has that relationship been important to you?

I first met Jeff Wall when I was teaching a contemporary art history class at the University of British Columbia in 1967. Jeff was never technically a student of mine, but he audited my lectures and was very attentive to the information about contemporary art that I presented. We subsequently became friends and shared a common interest in recent developments in contemporary art. In 1970 we both found ourselves in London and we shared a flat in Hampstead with our families. Later, when we both moved back to Vancouver, we worked on a proposed film project with Rodney Graham. Jeff wrote about my work and I wrote about his work, so we were both well informed and influenced in subtle ways by each other's intellectual interests and our art practices.

How much does design play into the work? I look at the *Constellations (with stains) I & II* (2012) and they're so damn elegant that even including stains in the composition does nothing to undermine that elegance.

Elegant or not I am always inspired by the endless ways that design and composition can make an interesting and appealing image. The challenge is to constantly explore new compositional languages and let them speak their content.

I see something of the same quality—although here it is delivered tonally—in the delicate presence of the 2009 image of the *Hotel Metropole, Brussels*. The painted lavender edge is exquisite.

The painted monochrome portions of the canvas are as important as the photographic image. The colours are carefully chosen but often seem arbitrary. The white spaces are primarily an acknowledgement of the ground colour of



the canvas support and, while they are equally important, in any “reading” of the picture the photographic image inevitably dominates.

Did you stay in hotels to make work, or did staying in hotels make you realize they could be locations where work could be made?

In my many travels over the past few decades, I have spent a lot of time alone in hotels. It seemed a perfect place to contemplate and thus to prepare new works, so the hotel rooms became a form of surrogate studio for making studies of potential works that I would later complete in my Vancouver studio. I usually travel with a small carry-on bag with a minimal amount of materials and a portfolio. I would take photographs on my travels (for instance, the museum subjects as well as the streets) and have them printed as snapshots that I would mount onto small sheets of drawing paper. These then provide the studies for the composition of the larger finished work on canvas. These studies are treasured and preserved in my inventory.

I’m looking at a pair of Paris images, *Winter Light (Paris)* and *Intersection (Place Sartre-Beauvoir, Paris)*. In the former the perfect centrality of the streetlamp reinforces the black and white division of the composition. Something similar happens in *Intersection*, except that the image is complicated by two things: the name of that specific place and the fact that the pedestrian in the picture looks like Sartre. What do those readings do to alter the geometry of the image?

In my photography I encourage a play between a formal composition and the arbitrary appearances of things in motion. The spontaneous taking of the street photograph also puts things in motion. The complexity of everyday reality additionally introduces an interesting complication of interpretations that

keeps things in motion. And especially anonymous people in the street are mobile individuals who also add the indefinably “Sartrean” existential geometry to the image.

Construction Site LA IV (2003) looks more like a collage than a photograph of a cityscape. Do you intend it to confound photography’s claim on truth?

Photography only reproduces what can be recorded via the lens, thus only what can be “seen.” It does not have any claim to “truth” in the abstract philosophical sense. And every image of a cityscape is going to be a “collage” of varying perspectives and signages. Therefore, photography is the perfect medium for recording the dynamics of the urban environment as a collage of arbitrary encounters and movements.

Is colour a way of mediating the surplus of content that is contained in every photograph?

I consistently use colour photography because as a technical medium it shows things as they are, but colour as an end in itself in the photograph is not a central concern for me.

John Baldessari used forms of colour in his work as well. What do you think of what he did?

I always liked his work, especially its playfulness.

“The Table (Displacement Series)” from 2011 is a set of pictures composed of identifiable objects placed in relationship to one another on a table. My inclination is to read them through the lens of modernist collage. Although his were abstract, I see Motherwell’s collages in the blue, red and the black colours in yours (maybe touches of Jessica Stockholder as well). What does my historical and abstract musing do to your conception of the “Table” series? Does my association displace or cancel your intention and achievement?



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1. *The Table (Coup de Dés and Canvas) I*, 2019, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 centimetres. Private collection.

2. *The Table (Coup de Dés and Canvas) II*, 2019, 61 x 61 centimetres. Private collection.

The random compositions of the “Displacement” series was a way of reflecting on collage composition whereby an apparently random group of objects or images forms a new and unexpected set of relationships. These works were diptychs, whereby the images in one canvas would also appear in its companion canvas, so that the viewer has to compare the arrangements in each to see how they have changed.

You have said that you “can’t avoid a self-conscious self-critique.” Does that mean that your subjectivity is under constant scrutiny?

Yes, I think of self-conscious self-critique as a form of modernist pathology. In the making of a work and even discussing it afterwards, there is a lot of self-reflection and self-critique. I think this has always been a part of my world view.

You have also said that the mystery of contemporary art continues to “offer a refuge for the roving spirit of alienated subjectivities.” Are you placing yourself inside that refuge? Definitely. That is where I feel comfortable and can give my best.

You told curator Manuel Cirauqui in 2010 that your work is not as radical as you would have liked it to be. Was that because of a lack of will or means?

I can only create work that accurately reflects my world view. I have to be true to myself to make art that is convincing. I cannot convincingly make radical avant-garde art if I am trying to create a false impression of “radicality.” In essence I consider myself to be fairly conservative, even in my ambition to create authentic works of art. I like to bring the best of the past into the composition of the future. For some audiences this falls short of what they expect from contemporary art.

I want to know more about what you call “a literature of images,” the title of your exhibition at the Witte de With in 2008, and how the combination of photography and writing, which are its component parts, became a critical part of your art practice. (I should say that the museum was renamed the Kunstinstituut Melly in 2021 after a piece by a Vancouver artist and former student Ken Lum.)

“A Literature of Images” is the title of a short essay that I first published in 1969. My concept was that photographs were visual statements that could be composed in a structure that would be like a form of visual writing by virtue of their referential symbolism and thus could be considered as a “literature of images.” I exhibited a number of photographic works in a linear format like that of a visual sentence. One of the earliest was *The Summer Script* of 1974, which is in the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

How much is your literature of images fed by a literature of literature? You have used Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1897 poem “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” (“A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance”) on more than one occasion as an inspirational text. (You’ve been labelled a “repeat hommageur” because of your three

iterations.) What is it about that poem that you found so generative?

I have always considered Stéphane Mallarmé to be one of the original modernists in the visual arts as well as in literature. In his last published poem, “Un coup de dés,” he originated the displacement of his written text in relation to the physical space of the page, just as I compose my photographic images in relation to the physical space of the canvas support and its rectangular frame. In my view of the modernist enterprise—and this is key to an understanding of my work—the image of phenomena, photographic, literary or otherwise, must be seen in relationship to the material support of the medium that expresses it, whether it be words on paper or photographs on canvas.

In the opening section of the poem called “A Toast,” Mallarmé has the beautiful line “the white anxiety of our sail.” Its beauty is suggestive because it represents both the canvas sail and the journey itself; it is both noun and verb, material and event. That rich ambiguity must have been especially compelling.

Yes, that was a beautiful line, and it was in a toast given to a gathering of poets. Mallarmé in his later years was an avid sailor. But in this poem, the “sail,” as I interpret it, was an invocation of the beauty of the sail full of the wind that propels the craft, but it was also a sly symbolic reference to the looping curve of the white page of the manuscript on which the poet impresses poetic script. The destiny and beauty and authenticity of this inscription induce the anxiety for the poet about the future of writing and poetic vision.

You’ve been considering this question of representation and how it is realized in painting and photography for almost 60 years. It appears to have remained a generative vexation. Is that what has kept you at it?

The challenge of making a serious and lasting and meaningful work of art is a lifelong pleasure.

Is a complete understanding of this question a Sisyphean quest: you almost get the stone of meaning to the top of one side of the valley and then it rolls back down again?

The closer one gets to a full understanding of what is to be done, the more one realizes that there is still more of the mystery to be discovered.

Let me ask the question another way and through a different lens. Do you think, to alter Mallarmé and change the object of his attention, that all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a photograph or a painting?

From my point of view, that is far too ambitious a proposal. ■