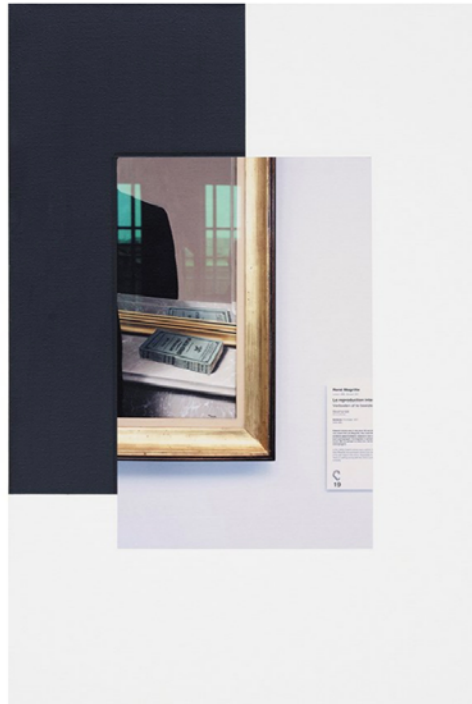


# Ian Wallace

A meditation on the museum wall.

by Yani Kong

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Ian Wallace, "Abstract Composition (with Magritte)," 2011, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography; courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

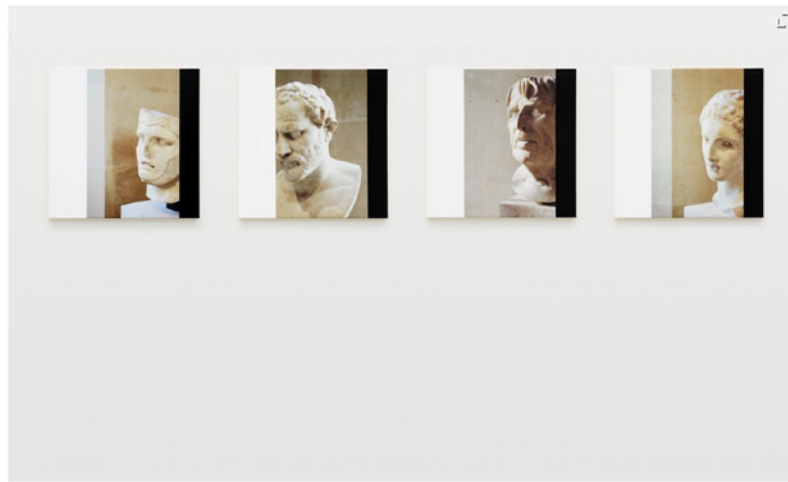
*In the Museum*, an exhibition by Ian Wallace on view at the Catriona Jeffries gallery until May 22, casts its singular focus on the museum. This show is not performing institutional critique. Nor is it an intervention into the operative mechanisms of the gallery. Instead, it offers something more akin to an institutional meditation.

This series, photolaminate images of canonical art set on canvas and offset by sharp geometric painted blocks in grey, green, blue and black, was made from 1990 to 2015.

Wallace's subject is the white wall set between the art and its text label, both of which appear cropped in frame. The sliver of wall stands at the centre of the image. The works bear a degree of almost ridiculously clever self-referentiality. Ruminating on the wall as a support structure, these are photographs of a wall in a gallery, set in a painting, hanging on a wall in a gallery.

We see the flank of a Piet Mondrian, the shoulder of a Barnett Newman, the left toe of a René Magritte, the obscured face-to-face view of a series of Roman heads set in sculpture. Great works, famous men. Why? It's possible it doesn't matter, or it's possible the perceived greatness of these iconic pieces points to the heft the wall is really bearing.

It's not new thinking in art history or curatorial studies to develop a critique of the white cube. The whiteness of the wall imbues the viewer with an objective focus and gives the artwork a tidy purpose. It's also a form of display that remains unchanged after centuries and can burden the work with the ideological weight of the entire museum.



Ian Wallace, "Roman Heads I-IV," 1990/2015, photolaminate with acrylic on canvas, each 24" x 24" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography; courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

For Newman, Mondrian, Pollock and their peers, whose works came inside Wallace's pictures, the museum wall offered something sacred as host to the encounter with the singular work of art. But in these encounters, the wall is meant to melt away. Here, it loudly proclaims its presence.

At first, I felt resistant. What was I meant to encounter? As an appropriation series, it is not exactly art in and of itself, nor is it art about art. Then, I took several large steps backwards into the centre of the room.



Ian Wallace, "Abstract Painting (Blue on White)," 2011, photolaminate and acrylic on canvas, 80" x 60" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography; courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)



I stood at a distance to regard the wall that holds *Abstract Painting (MOMA NYC II)* and *Abstract Painting (Blue on White)*, from 2009 and 2011, respectively. Each has a peeking edge of the free-form geometry of Kazimir Malevich's 1918 painting, *White on White*. Malevich, through his tonal square, expressed a utopian dream of surpassing even the vaulted limits of the sky. If the wall is a medium in Wallace's work, then the wall of the gallery joins with the white square to sensitively raise it a little higher. It is a beautiful doubling.

I discovered each work in this show benefited from this perspectival shift, which grants enough distance to include the wall itself. It's an exercise that allows viewers to meditate on the wall's quiet structure and its potential as material itself. ■