



Jeff Wall's Vancouver and Documentary Landscapes

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Cover:

Clipped Branches, East Cordova St.,

Vancouver, 1999

transparency in lightbox

72 x 89 cm

Right:

Coastal Motifs, 1989

transparency in lightbox

119 x 147 cm



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From the very beginning, the solo exhibition *Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver* at Canton-sardine has been about reconnecting to a new generation of audiences in Wall's hometown of Vancouver. Many Generation-Z artists and art enthusiasts here have probably never encountered Wall's works in a physical exhibition space, especially his older transparency in lightbox artworks. Wall has not made any of these in many years and, despite having several foreign exhibitions, the artist's last local solo exhibition was 14 years ago at the Vancouver Art Gallery (*Jeff Wall – Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, 2008-2009*). Presenting these early lightboxes from about 30 years ago, to give a fresh perspective of Vancouver and to make a connection to this place and the people here, feels 'right', and also 'good'.

The four pictures in this exhibition: *The Old Prison* (1987), *Coastal Motifs* (1989), *Park Drive* (1994), and *Clipped Branches, East Cordova St., Vancouver* (1999), have been in Wall's storage for several years. Liberating them again has given them life and fresh air. It is a process of rejuvenation. There is a sense of freedom. This metaphor is especially resonating given that one of the works is titled *The Old Prison* (1987).

Wall creates images from the two main branches of his photographic methodology—cinematographic and documentary. Many of his subjects come from his acute observation of the human condition in urban settings. Often, he takes an earlier personal experience from memory and re-shapes it freely to construct a new image. He refers to these works as 'cinematographic', since they are done in collaboration with performers or models in prepared, rehearsed situations.⁽¹⁾ The 'cinematographic' mode ranges from simple reconstructions of everyday events, a mode he calls 'near documentary', to elaborate artificial constructions involving a combination of techniques. Wall's attention to detail is striking. A recent example of the 'near documentary' is *Trap set* (2021), in which



Trap set, 2021
inkjet print
166 x 180 cm

an animal trap was placed in an environment where it may well have functioned to ensnare a mink or other small creature.

Views In And Out Of Vancouver includes only documentary pictures—three 'cityscapes' and an image of an urban detail. The images are nearly void of human presence; therefore, the viewers' presence creates an interesting scenario. The gallery is activated almost as a theatre and the viewers become protagonists, playing the roles of local residents looking 'outward' from the centre of the city, from houses or apartments in glass towers. In this sense Wall's pictures act as windows to the past, and possibly the future, of the city.

Cityscapes and street scenes are part of our everyday existence in this city. Architects and developers emphasize and give importance to such views. The city's urban plan and its guiding principle—Vancouverism—provides the ground for maximizing the viewing periphery of the city from different angles.⁽²⁾ Wall's pictures function as the windows to the outside world from the basement gallery of Canton-sardine, allowing viewers to contemplate vistas of the city from 30 years ago. The thinking process of the artist from that time resurfaces again to form an affinity with the viewers' present state of mind. This forms an intimate relationship and connection both with the city and with the artist. An exhibition room without any figurative works creates a rare stage for these theatrical moments to occur, although the dramas that are enacted are often quiet and contemplative.

'I make landscapes, or cityscapes as the case may be, to study the process of settlement as well as to work out for myself what kind of picture (or photograph) we call a "landscape" is. This permits me also to recognize the other kinds of picture with which it has necessary connections, to the other genres that a landscape might conceal within itself.'

– Jeff Wall, *About Making Landscape*, 1995



Clipped Branches, East Cordova St., Vancouver, 1999

transparency in lightbox

72 x 89 cm

During the 1980s, many Vancouver-based photo-conceptualists took interest in documenting events and transformations in and around the city. Notably, lens-based artists such as Ian Wallace, Christos Dikeakos, Roy Arden, Marian Penner Bancroft, Iain Baxter, and Henri Robideau, captured Vancouver in narratives that are grounded in the history and development of this West Coast city. Wall added new and further dimensions, interested as he was (and remains) in how the genre of landscape came to be, what makes a compelling landscape picture, and what other new ideas and image possibilities may come from the genre.

For many audiences, Wall's photographs are a mystery. The artist never likes to explain the meaning of the content in his work. An open-ended interpretation is preferred, with the understanding that ambiguity is a necessary ingredient for discovery and imagination. His pictures promise to offer nuanced layers and deeper meanings and award viewers if they spend the time to investigate the pictorial composition and try to understand the artist's thinking process. Often, this is influenced by literature, cinema, painting, and art history, as well as being informed by his own experience and living environment. The city of Vancouver is where Wall was born and raised, where he works, and where he has lived most of his life. It is the background of a significant portion of his artistic output. His connection to this city and its people is permeated in the artist's graduated evolution of picture making.

The artist's thoughts and process are inseparable from the influence of their surroundings and their life experiences. The 'without' experience and 'within' experience are one and the same, mediated and connected by memory. Over several decades, Wall has paid attention to the marginalized; people living on the edge of post-modern society. These are voiceless, broken, and often racially profiled people. They are glued to the ground and struggle to stand up on their own. Some are damned. With a lack of support and means, they are floundering to survive. Wall's works about the city often evoke a strong emphasis on empathy. His concern for the damaged extends to other life forms, often focusing his attention on trees, especially broken ones. Upon viewing one of the works in the exhibit, *Clipped Branches, East Cordova St., Vancouver* (1999), I cannot help but ask - Did the abruptly cropped branches on the tree outside his Cordova Street studio asked to be clipped voluntarily? The 'broken', regardless, is a form of resilience. Deep inside, the tree's life force is still pulsating; its roots digging deep, taking hold underneath the mercilessly oppressive concrete sidewalk.

The other works from the exhibition are 'cityscapes', that is, classic documentary photographs. Early clues of Wall's initial interest in making such pictures can be seen in his early photo-text experimental booklet, *Landscape Manual* from 1969.

After 'Landscape Manual', 1969/2003

silver gelatin print

40.6 x 50.8 cm

Landscape Manual, 1969

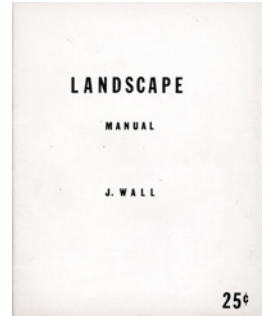
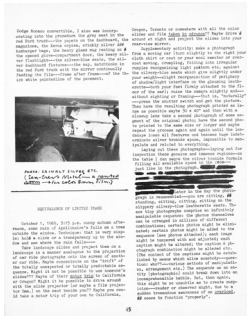
book, self-published by the artist

front cover and inside pages

Steves Farm, Steveston, 1980

transparency in lightbox

57 x 229 cm



In it, he combined dozens of straight photographs, mostly made from a moving automobile, with a free-form text ranging from immediate descriptions of the taking of the photographs to passages of fantasy and philosophical musings. Artist Ian Wallace recalls: "Early in 1970 we were in an exhibition together, at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, in which Jeff showed his *Landscape Manual*, which was photographed in the late fall of 1969. *Landscape Manual* was also included in *Information*, the groundbreaking conceptual art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in the summer of 1970."⁽³⁾ *Landscape Manual* was the only tangible product of Wall's engagement with conceptual art, which occupied him during the second half of the 1960s. The problems he encountered in the relation of photography to conceptualism led him to his recovery of the idea of pictorial art in the 1970s.

In contrast to his subjective, dramatic cinematographic pictures, which are often fuelled with tension, Wall's documentary landscape images are calm, without interpersonal drama; usually without a human presence. In his work, depicting tension within a harmoniously balanced composition is a signature. As Wall himself has noted, "I like the idea that something dramatic, and even disturbing, also has its serenity." 'Landscapes' made in a city are, by definition, studies of the process of urban development or decay, studies of modernity and modernization in a capitalist context. *Steves Farm, Steveston* (1980) is the earliest of these pictures and resembles classical Italian or English pictures that usually contain country roads, farm fields, and farm animals. *Steves Farm, Steveston* (1980) and *The Old Prison* (1987) are expansive wide format compositions that feature a low horizon line. Wall seems to have experimented with this type of wide-screen image early on and moved away from it, toward more square formats, as in *Coastal Motifs* (1989) or *Park Drive* (1994).

The pictures in the current exhibition include concrete roads, some construction or industrial implication, and trees; trees from different depth of fields and perspectives. Although the artificial concrete structure may give a sense of tension within the natural setting, the overall pictorial space is harmoniously composed to show the interconnecting beauty of land, earth, sky, water, either in river or sea forms, and trees. They could be a result of Wall's desire to document the change of this place and to understand the developmental process of settlers' influence on a native land in post-modern time; his examination of the effects of modernist development and colonialism.

The Old Prison (1987) is a panoramic view of the Fraser River taken from New Westminster. A seemingly commonplace edge-of-the-city photo, actually holds a richness of content and offers much space for contemplation. The decommissioned prison structures, the surrounding land development, and



Paul Cézanne
Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1904-1906
oil on canvas
Musée d'Orsay

the river with its log booms, feels static. However, when viewers spend time to investigate the image in detail, one eventually discovers a tiny lone person wearing a red shirt standing beside the prison buildings to the right. The figure is small, with his back facing from the viewers, but his presence can not be ignored, as this man is the only human presence. I asked the artist if the red shirt man was placed there by him, or whether he just happened to be standing there. Wall replied: "No comment". The picture again conceals at least part of the artist's thought process and intention. It adds a layer of mystery and leaves the artwork confronting the viewer; openly without ending, just like his dramatic photographs.

Another lightbox, his majestic *Coastal Motifs* (1989) looks from Burnaby Heights over the North Shore Mountains and the industrial areas running along the Old Dollarton Road in the ancestral territory of the Tsleil-Waututh people. Its palette of green and blue-grey hues, and the overall composition remind me of Paul Cézanne's painting *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904-1906). Cézanne frequented Mont Sainte-Victoire and made several paintings using the mountain as his main subject. Here, the centuries old stone bridge and agricultural fields from France are again replaced by North Vancouver's Second Narrows Bridge and heavy industry districts through Wall's post-modern lens. Through this process of reconstructing landscape pictures and contemplation on the genre, Wall is in constant conversation with the classical master painters.

Besides the wide-angled panoramic pictures like *The Old Prison* and *Coastal Motifs*, we are also confronted with *Clipped Branches, E. Cordova St., Vancouver* (1999), a close-up of a tree standing outside Wall's studio. By placing wide-angle and close-up pictures together in the same exhibiting space, the macro versus micro relationship of the works becomes obvious. It reminds us of a montage in a film, where we move from a distant to a closeup view. Wall's four large lightboxes in a small gallery space function like four separate windows for viewers to experience the different realities and views of the region.

Trees permeate all four pictures, especially dominating in *Park Drive* (1994), photographed in Vancouver's world-famous Stanley Park. The native trees of the Pacific Northwest Coast fill up most of the pictorial space in the almost square image, with Park Drive itself cutting through the picture diagonally until reaching the vanishing point. Trees, logs, or broken branches are reoccurring themes in Wall's picture-making. We find them in works such as *Shapes on a Tree* (1998), *Clipped Branches, East Cordova St., Vancouver* (1999), *A Sapling Held by a Post* (2000), *Cuttings* (2001), and *Logs* (2002). The closeup picture of *Clipped Branches* is an indication that Wall is not just concerned with the progress of a mass real estate settlers' development or land survey, a pictorial landscape



Cuttings, 2001
transparency in lightbox
130.5 x 158 cm

Logs, 2002
silver gelatin print
180.02 x 221.3 cm

A Sapling Held by a Post, 2000
chromogenic print
40.6 x 33 cm

Shapes on a Tree, 1998
silver gelatin print
24.3 x 19.5 cm

or cityscape composition, but also, he has a very personal connection to the small things in his surroundings. Things often stirred up with certain unknown emotions, perhaps empathy or curiosity, but ultimately unknown to the viewer.

Wall's images are the result of his intellectual contemplation concerning the evolution of human existence and the melee of conditions we find ourselves in the post-modern web of life. His interest and acute observation on these traps of the human condition may be motivated by sympathy, or a yearning to find freedom using art as medium. Freedom to create and compose interesting, artistic, or aesthetic pictures is fundamental. Wall is a highly literate and intelligent artist. What sets him apart from other photographers is his way of thinking—that he does not think, work, or make pictures like conventional photographers. He thinks like a writer or philosopher; he works like a film director; and he composes his photographs like a painter.

Reconstructing images through the lens into the darker societal landscape in urban or suburban life, this Jeff Wall world is created, with his own uniquely precise picture making methodology, a rare intellectual contemplation, an intense observation of the dark psyche of modern life, his interest in art history and classical picture-making genres, and his innovative experimentation with the medium of photography.

Jeff Wall once said that there are two types of photographers – one works like a hunter and other like a farmer. ⁽⁴⁾ A hunter uses cameras like weapons and waits for the perfect moment, or prey, in order to capture a picture, whereas a farmer spends long seasons to conjure up an idea, research a subject, undergo a rigorous production process, and build everything from ground up to create a perfect picture. Wall is the latter. The city of Vancouver and its surroundings is the land where Wall cultivates his art.

Notes

1. Theodora Vischer, *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonne, 1978-2004* (Steidl, 2008), p. 29.
2. "Vancouverism" (*Wikipedia*, 2023), para. 1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vancouverism>. Vancouverism is described as: "an urban planning and architectural phenomenon in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. It is characterized by a large residential population living in the city centre with mixed-use developments, typically with a medium-height, commercial base and narrow, high-rise residential towers, significant reliance on mass public transit, creation and maintenance of green park spaces, and preserving view corridors."
3. Ian Wallace, "Some Correspondences in Retrospect", in *Jeff Wall: Vancouver Art Gallery Collection* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008), p. 31.
4. R. Horne, Holly Andres, "Farmer of Photographs" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2012), para. 2.

Park Drive, 1994
transparency in lightbox
119 x 135 cm





The Old Prison, 1987
transparency in lightbox
70 x 229 cm













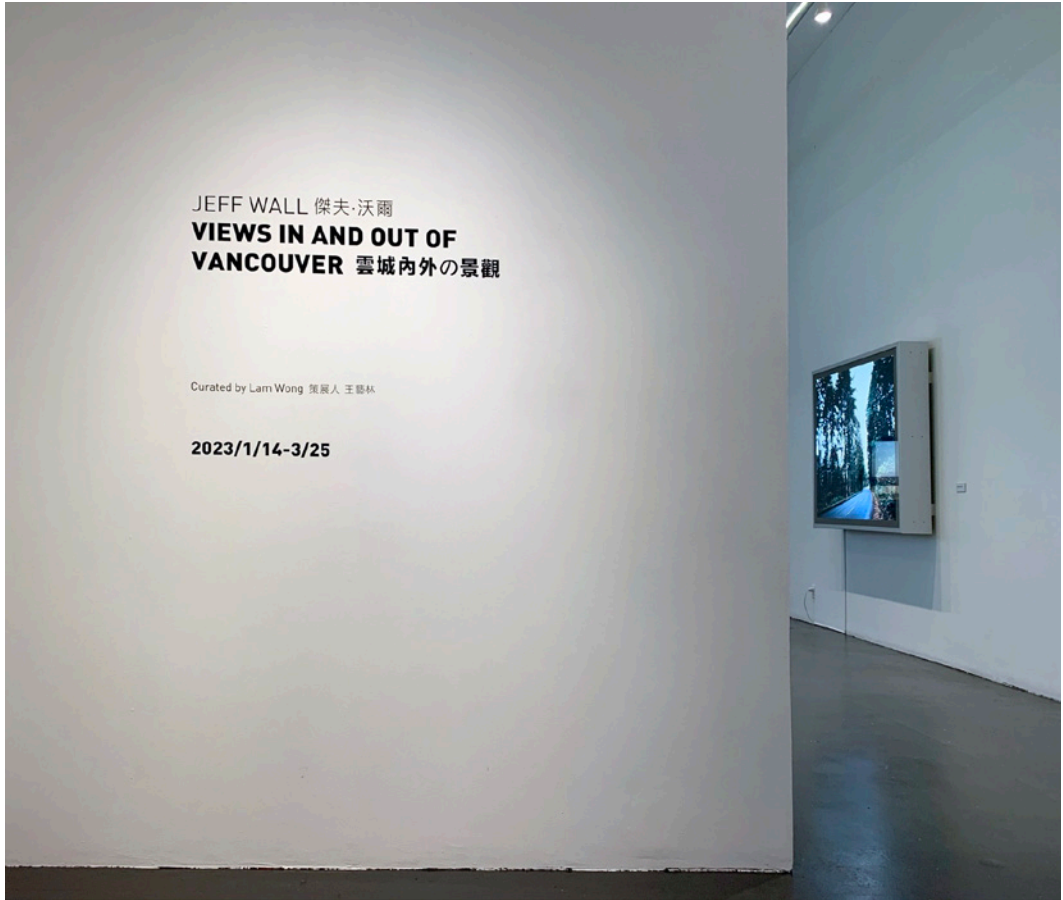
Exhibition view
Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver
Canton-sardine, 2023





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Exhibition view

Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver

Canton-sardine, 2023

Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver

Curated by Lam Wong

January 14 to March 25, 2023

Canton-sardine

Vancouver, BC, Canada

Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver presents three vintage cityscapes—his classic transparencies in lightboxes—created between 1987 and 1999, a time that now seems almost like another era. The title, 'Views In And Out Of Vancouver', points to the fact that two of the three pictures depict other municipalities—North Vancouver, New Westminster, and Surrey. These landmark early documentary pictures are part of an ongoing thread in Wall's overall practice. He described this direction at the time: 'I make landscapes, or cityscapes... to study the process of settlement as well as to recognize the other genres that a landscape might conceal within itself.' Wall's now five-decade long involvement with image-making has ranged across many subjects and approaches, but he has been insistent in his pursuit of real-time observation of the spaces and behaviours of contemporary life in all its often troubling, often exhilarating, complexity and his pictures have become known worldwide for their highly specific and often critical images of Vancouver. Yet most of them have remained out of sight in the city itself for many years. We hope this small selection will begin to reintroduce them to new generations of viewers.

Curated by Lam Wong for Canton-sardine in Vancouver's Chinatown, *Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver* marks the first local solo exhibition by the artist since 2009.

Jeff Wall was born in 1946 in Vancouver, where he lives and works. His photographs have been exhibited worldwide over the past forty years. His pictures often depict events the artist has witnessed and reconstructed in a process he calls 'cinematography'.

His subject matter ranges from everyday occurrences photographed in real places to imaginary situations constructed in a studio. He is considered to be one of the artists who since the 1970s has led the way in emphasizing the affinities between photography, painting, and cinema. He taught art in universities in Canada for twenty-five years, and his critical writing has been collected and published in several languages. His work has been the subject of numerous retrospective exhibitions, most recently at the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, Maryland in 2021.

Jeff Wall's Vancouver and Documentary Landscapes is published in conjunction with *Jeff Wall: Views In And Out Of Vancouver*, an exhibition organized by Lam Wong and presented at Canton-sardine from January 14 to March 25, 2023.

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