

William Wegman Being Human

08 September 2019 – 06 January 2020
Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano
LAC venue

Curated by William A. Ewing

Under the patronage of



Press conference: Friday 06 September 2019, 11 a.m.
Opening: Saturday 07 September, 6 p.m.

Press Release

Lugano, Friday 06 September 2019

From 8 September 2019 until 6 January 2020, Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana presents the exhibition *William Wegman. Being Human: a selection of 100 works by the famous American photographer William Wegman featuring Weimaraner dogs.*

William Wegman, an eclectic master of contemporary American art is a renowned, versatile artist who resists an easy classification, as he moves adroitly between painting, drawing, photography, film, video, books and performances. He rose to prominence on the international art scene for his series of images featuring his dogs. Ever since he met his first Weimaraner - whom he named Man Ray - in the seventies, the photographer has made dogs of this breed the main focus of his photographs, using this rather unusual muse to portray characters, comment on fashion trends and address movements in art history with great perspicacity and irony.

His Weimaraners Man Ray, Fay Ray, Penny, Bobbin, Chip, Chundo, and Crooky, and several generations of their pups, are the focus of his big Polaroids: unique and unretouched photographic prints, underlining the photographer's skill and his subjects' spontaneity and demonstrating the artist's exceptional harmony with his dogs. Every shot may be viewed as the result of a partnership, rather than the creation of a single craftsman.

Being Human looks back over the evolution of this unusual artistic partnership that has lasted thirty years, serving as a kind of mirror of human nature. "Is it really about dogs?" asks exhibition curator William A. Ewing. "Being Human suggests that it is not: the subject is us, and we are them: the housewife, the astronaut, the lawyer, the priest, the farmer, and even... the dog-sitter! Some of them pose with pride and confidence, while others express uncertainty or vulnerability: they are human beings."

The exhibition includes a selection of about 90 Polaroids along with a dozen pigment prints selected by exhibition curator William A. Ewing in close collaboration with the artist and divided into chapters, each of which brings together works which address a specific theme, or which are connected by similar visual allusions. The *People like us* section presents portraits of human types played by dogs:

the dandy, the priest, the astronaut, the lady with the permanent wave. The personalities are so well-defined we seem to be able to imagine the past and the psychology of every one of them. *Tales* (or 'tails') includes historic portraits, set in elaborate scenes against painted backgrounds, and contemporary portraits incorporating references to literature and film. From the metamorphosis of dog to man, Wegman goes on to the paradoxical and grotesque dress-up scenes of *Zoo* and *Masquerades*: the Weimaraners, wearing masks or stage costumes, take the shape of other races of animals, whether they be chow-chows, cats or wolves.

The *Nudes* section includes photographs in which the dogs' agile, athletic bodies provide the material structure for abstract compositions, while in *Hallucinations* the body and its form dissolve completely, and the photographer transforms his subjects into ghostly presences.

The photos in the *Vogue* series cover decades in the history of fashion, from casual to haute couture, interpreted with canine elegance and aplomb.

Wegman touches upon artistic citations in the section entitled *Cubists*, immortalising his Weimaraners balancing on cubes and parallelepipeds. In one of the works in this series, a dog rests its front feet on a big black cube balanced on the corner of a smaller white cube: a Malevic with an intruder. In *Color fields*, the four-legged intruders break up the chromatic order while separating different fields of colour. Lastly, the artist picks up on this play of balance and geometry again in the final section, *Sit/Stay*, in which we see dogs, lying down or standing up, balancing a great variety of objects: the tension between the subject's immobility and the elaborate compositions resting on the model's face or back bring to mind the rules of proportion so beloved of art historians.

The exhibition is completed with a selection of films made by Wegman since the seventies. The films also feature Weimaraners, making use of the dogs' deadpan comic talent to ironically imitate performances filmed by conceptual artists or represent clichés about art and artists.

Being Human is a project originated by the Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, Minneapolis/ New York/ Paris/ Lausanne in partnership with Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, curated by William A. Ewing, an independent curator and former director of the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. The exhibition in Lugano is the first on a tour of European museums promoted by the Foundation.

Biographical notes

William Wegman was born in 1943 in Holyoke, Massachusetts. He studied painting and began a career as a conceptual artist in the seventies, participating in some of the most significant exhibitions of the time, such as *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) and *Documenta V* (1972).

When he moved to California in 1971, he got a Weimaraner dog who he named Man Ray. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration. The dog became a central figure in Wegman's photographs and videotapes. When Man Ray died, Fay Ray took over, followed by her descendants. Wegman's relationship with this cast of characters grew to a series of children's books (*Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *ABC*, *Mother Goose*, *Farm Days*, *My Town*, *Surprise Party* and *Chip Wants a Dog*) and, above all, photographic images that dialogue with art history and have been featured in a large number of exhibitions and documented in numerous catalogues.

Monographic exhibitions of Wegman's work include *Wegman's World*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1981; *William Wegman: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs, Videotapes*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1990 and then Centre Pompidou, Paris and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Funney/Strange*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2006 and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, 2007; *Hello Nature*, Bowdoin Museum of Art, 2012 and then Artipelag, Stockholm.

In 2017 Thames & Hudson published *Being Human*, by William A. Ewing, which includes 300 works, representing 40 years of Wegman's work. The volume is also available in French (Textuel) and German (Schirmel).

Over the years, Wegman has created film and video works for Saturday Night Live and Nickelodeon, and his video segments for Sesame Street have appeared regularly since 1989. In 1995 the film *The Hardly Boys* was screened at the Sundance Film Festival. He has been commissioned to create



images for a wide range of projects including a fashion campaign for Acne, a banner for the Metropolitan Opera and covers for numerous magazines, including The New Yorker and, more recently, Wallpaper. He has appeared on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and with Jay Leno, on the David Letterman Show and on the Colbert Report.

William Wegman lives in New York and in Maine, and continues to paint, draw, make videos and photograph his dogs, Flo and Topper.



MASI Lugano

Founded in 2015, after just a few years the Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana (MASI Lugano) has become one of the most visited art museums in Switzerland. It forms a cultural bridge between the north and south of the Alps, between Latin and Germanic Europe. Through its two locations – the LAC cultural centre and the historic Palazzo Reali – it offers a rich programme with temporary exhibitions and changing collection presentations as well as a comprehensive, multilingual educational programme for visitors of all ages. The offer is complemented by the close collaborations with the Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, which is part of the MASI network, entirely dedicated to contemporary art. MASI is one of the Swiss museums to be directly supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and is also one of the “Art Museums of Switzerland”, the group of museums selected by Switzerland Tourism to promote the country’s cultural image worldwide.

Current exhibitions

Sublime. Light and landscape around Giovanni Segantini

LAC, 25.08.2019 through 10.11.2019

Upcoming exhibitions

Marisa Merz

Geometrie sconnesse palpiti geometrici

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, 22.09.2019 through 12.01.2020

La collezione

Palazzo Reali, 13.12.2019 through 14.02.2021

Julian Charrière

Towards No Earthly Pole

LAC, 27.10.2019 through 15.03.2020



Information

Venue

LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura
Piazza Bernardino Luini 6
CH- 6901 Lugano

Opening hours

Tuesday - Sunday: 10:00 - 18:00
Open until 20:00 Thursdays
Monday closed

Admission

Admission fees and a complete list of discounts and special conditions available on the museum's web site.

Online ticket sales

www.masilugano.ch
www.luganolac.ch

Contact information

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Guided tours and creative workshops

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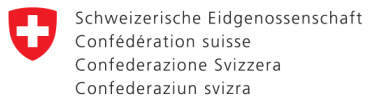
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