

## Who Took the Dogs Out?: William Wegman at Sperone Westwater

Emily Watlington :: 6/14/2022

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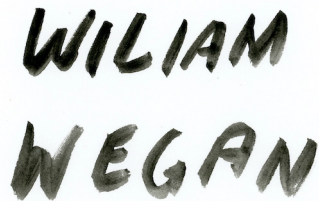


William Wegman, *OMG*, 2021, acrylic and charcoal on wood panel, 40 by 60 inches. *Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York*

At first glance, [William Wegman](#)'s survey at [Sperone Westwater](#) in New York might read as an attempt to remind viewers that, despite his reputation as reigning dog portraitist, Wegman is in fact a serious artist. The exhibition coincides with the release of *William Wegman: Writing by Artist*, published by Primary Information and edited by artist-curator [Andrew Lampert](#) (a contributor to this magazine), who also curated the show. Of the more than 70 works on view, most are black-and-white, and only a handful of videos feature his signature canines. The works look, on the surface, nothing like Wegman's iconic oversize Polaroids of Weimaraners, often shown sporting silly human outfits. The dogs—being, well, dogs—are never in on the joke. Their indifferent expressions and drooping jowls convey an endearing oblivion, undercutting the ostentatiousness of the tableaux. (The Weimaraners are immortalized in a mosaic in New York's 23rd Street subway station on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue—hands down, the best subway art in the city.)

Instead of those familiar images, the show includes many drawings on paper, as well as a couple of paintings on canvas or wood panels and vintage videos on cube monitors. These formats look more obviously white cube than do the Polaroids, or the Sesame Street segments that featured Wegman's pets, and brought him greater fame when they first aired in 1989. But this other work is just as goofy, thank goodness. The burn is just slower, mostly because, often, reading is required. One drawing, *William Wegan* (2017), shows just the artist's name styled in bold letters, written with an impassioned swiftness using ink and a brush. As in the work's title, he misspelled his own name on the page, as if caught up in the heat of the moment, or dabbling, as often he does, in some twingly persona. Any pretension affiliated with an artist's signature is wholly undermined by the missing "l" and "m." Meanwhile, a 1972 graphite doodle depicts two cartoonish men—one with a pipe, the other with a cigarette—captioned with the scribbled phrase twins with

individual tastes. Who knows whether this was intended as an artwork or just a joke he jotted down, and who cares? It's funny.



WILIAM  
WEGAN

William Wegman, *Wiliam Wegan*, 2017, ink on paper, 8 ½ by 11 inches. *Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York*

Countless jokes populate the works, but one stands out, and not just because it's repeated in two of the videos on view, once in black-and-white, and once in color. In *Peck and Chuck* (1972) and *Peck & Chuck B* (1976–77), Wegman points his camera at two different pieces of lumber and states that he wanted to find out how much wood a woodpecker could peck compared to how much wood a woodchuck could chuck. It turns out, he concludes in a monotonous voiceover and without citing any evidence—save the same two scraps of wood on screen—that a woodpecker could peck as much as a woodchuck could chuck, relative to each creature's size. Echoing the Weimaraners' deadpan expressions, Wegman's tone is serious and dry despite the absurd premise.

I confess that one other zinger got me good: *OMG* (2021), a painting of what has become an increasingly familiar scene—a suburban house that has just been ravaged by some climate catastrophe. The front wall and exterior are totally wrecked, but a few posts hold up the roof. That red roof, plus the largely intact garage off to the right and the recognizable window in the pile of rubble, are the main clues that the painting is not some chaotic abstraction. Sleek arrow buttons are painted on the left and right sides of the canvas, and when I first saw the image on Sperone Westwater's website, I clicked the right one, duped into believing it was part of some slider, then was stuck taking in the scene a little longer.



William Wegman, *Peck & Chuck B*, 1976–77, video, 27 seconds. *Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York*

Maybe it's because I'm experiencing the most intense spring fever of my life, which is, I'm sure, in some way pandemic related, but I left the gallery feeling amped by Wegman's lightheartedness, as if I'd just come from joking around with an old friend, even though I've never met the man. The show re-created those moments that make life, well, enjoyable. This felt necessary, and refreshingly humble, especially when compared to a more prevalent contemporary artistic M.O.: subjecting strangers to one's seemingly singular vision of the world and/or how it ought to be (even though it's probably ending). It certainly helps that many of the works Lampert decided to include seem unconcerned with being "art" at all. And for this irreverence, they're all the better, making the self-righteous didacticism that so easily follows the pretense of an "artistic vision" seem, by contrast, profoundly egomaniacal. Sometimes, amid an endless slew of banal catastrophes, a little humor feels like all we've got.