

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Photography*

**"It's the magic technique that opens things up, like painting in the fifteenth century. I'm very happy with it."** Jeff Wall, 1990

Jeff Wall is discussing his own art practice which references the world of mass communication - advertising, TV and cinema - through the creation of large, back-lit photographs, presented as 'billboards'.

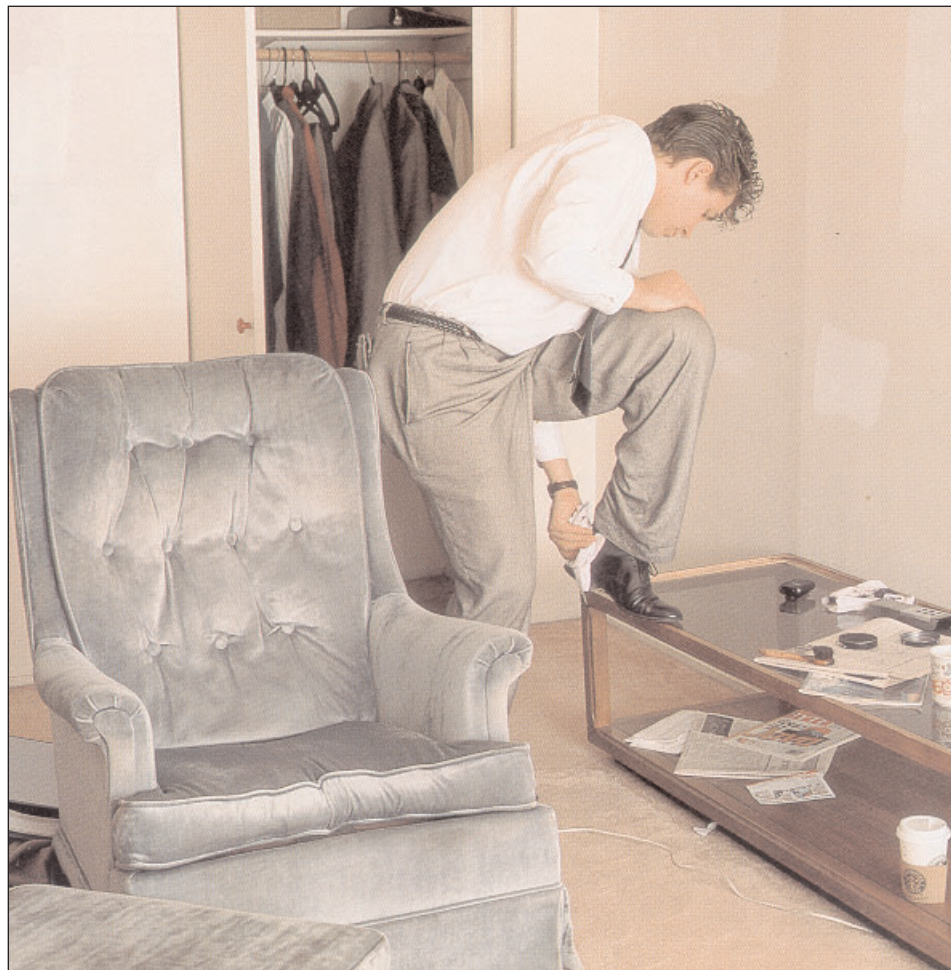
## **Art of Advertisement**

These objects are very commonplace in cities throughout the world. The artist, however, does not create his photographs to be advertisements but is consciously making art works. He constructs a narrative by carefully devising and composing a scene which is then photographed.

For Wall the association with advertising is only partial. He believes that the viewer, subliminally at least, has a suspicion that advertising images are far from truthful.

## **Observer of everyday life**

Educated in Canada and England, the artist is a keen observer of everyday life and contemporary culture. Influences from both these areas inform his art works and contribute to the meaning that the viewer brings to the work. Nothing is left to chance. The smallest details, which he calls 'micro gestures', are of paramount importance. Wall works like a film maker, dramatist and storyteller, training his cast to make the gestures he needs to tell the story.



Jeff Wall, *Polishing (detail)*, 1998, cybchrome transparency, Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia. Acquired with assistance from the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation Fund, 1999.

## **A sense of familiarity**

Wall's work is ironic and critical. Much of the appeal for the viewer is in the recognisable elements and the sense of familiarity with the sources of his images.

The viewer is encouraged to contribute to the understanding of the work by bringing their own personal experience and knowledge to the scene before them. This lack of finite explanation inevitably leads to speculation about the meaning of the work and creates the uncertainty and tension which is integral to Wall's work.

## **The narrative tradition of the Old Masters**

Jeff Wall trained as an art historian and is greatly influenced by the dramatic, painted scenes typified by the work of artists such as Rubens, Titian and Velasquez. A more contemporary parallel may be found in late nineteenth century Australian narrative painting.

There is a strong similarity, for instance, between Frederick McCubbin's *Down on His Luck* (1889) (on display in the *Centenary Galleries*) and Jeff Wall's *Polishing* (1998). In each, the viewer is intrigued and drawn to the works by their size and naturalism. Both works depict young, disenfranchised males posed in their respective, contemporary settings. Each presents to the viewer issues which are pertinent at both the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

## **Photography**

Photography was invented early in the nineteenth century. The possibilities it brought to the recording and documenting of major events, personalities and scenes had a marked effect on society and the presentation of history.

The mechanical nature of photography initially distinguished it from traditional fine arts, such as painting and sculpture. Photography was, in fact, initially used by artists as a way of making quick, preliminary studies of a subject. This tradition has remained, expanding to encompass the documentation of temporary art works such as performances and installations.

Photography began to claim the status of art with the work of such luminaries as August Sander, Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Diane Arbus and others.

**Art changes the way we see the world**

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Jeff Wall*

## What effect does the glowing quality of this work have?

The artist was inspired by back-lit advertisements with their sometimes double meaning inferences. Critics note that the luminescence of the work mimics that of an oil painting. Others have suggested that the hidden light source lends a religious quality to the work. What do you think?

## Is this a suitable subject for an art work?

Photography is a medium which has the capacity to capture and reproduce reality. The artist uses photography to create a fictional world made real by virtue of the details he introduces. Are the common place elements such as newspapers, magazines and the dirty cup appropriate for inclusion in an art work?

## Polishing

Note the title of this work. Do you think this a portrait of a man or a shot of an interior featuring an everyday activity? The man's face is averted from the viewer. How does this affect your understanding of the work? Can you identify with him?

## Is this real?

Elaborately constructed sets create fiction through the imagination and vision of the artist, Jeff Wall. The bright, flat light evenly washing over the scene emphasises the theatrical quality of the interior. Nothing is left to chance. Even the marks on the wall have been carefully planned.

## Domestic ephemera

The artist portrays the interior as a fragment of a greater scene. Does the clutter on the coffee table give the viewer any indication of the world outside the room? Items such as the take-away coffee container hint at the presence of an 'outside' existing beyond the art work. The footstool in the foreground is dissected by the picture plane and, conceptually, ends beyond the edge of the work.



Jeff Wall, *Polishing*, 1998, cybachrome transparency

## What will the subject do next?

Wall invites the viewer to become involved in the narrative, encouraging us to speculate on what the man will do next. Is he getting ready to go out, or has he just come in?

## The Subject's Identity

'He's just a really lower class guy, someone who really has almost nothing, someone trying to get a toehold somewhere, in something. He is out everyday, either in sales or at the bottom end of any bureaucracy'.

Jeff Wall to Gary Dufour Deputy Director, Art Gallery of Western Australia 29 April, 1999

## Pieces of the puzzle

The objects left lying around the room give clues with which the viewer can piece together a story about the man.

Why is the man polishing his shoe? Do the clothes he is wearing, combined with files on the floor, tell you something about the man's work or his world?

