

Press Release

Jeff Wall receives the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography, 2002

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation has selected Canadian photographer Jeff Wall as the winner of the 2002 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography. The prize, consisting of SEK 500,000 and a gold medal, will be awarded at a ceremony held in Göteborg, Sweden on November 9, 2002. A new exhibition of Jeff Wall's work, curated and organized by the Hasselblad Center, will be opened in conjunction with the ceremony.

The Foundation's decision to award the 2002 prize to Jeff Wall was motivated with the following statement:

For over 20 years, Jeff Wall has developed an outstanding body of work, using photography in a very innovative way which has helped establish for the medium a major place in contemporary art. With his carefully staged and composed images, sometimes digitally altered, placed in back-lit boxes borrowed from advertising, he has explored a wide range of social and political themes, such as urban violence, racism, poverty, gender and class conflicts, history, memory, representation, and many others. His photographs, in colour or in black and white, maintain a constant dialogue with great genre painting of the 19th century, and truly make of him, in the words of Charles Baudelaire, "a painter of modern life".

The Jury for the 2002 Award, which submitted the proposal to the Board of Directors of the Foundation, consisted of: Mr. Régis Durand (chairman) curator, Paris, France, Ms. Kate Bush, senior programmer, London, Great Britain, Mr. Sune Nordgren, director, Gateshead, Great Britain, Mr. Urs Stahel, curator, Winterthur, Switzerland and Ms. Tove Thage, curator, Hillerød, Denmark.

Jeff Wall was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1946. He began making art in the late sixties, before interrupting this activity to study art history, and resume it in the mid-seventies on a different basis. By then, he had realized that photography was an open medium, which enabled him to satisfy apparently contradictory aspirations: on one hand, an interest for a "neorealist", documentary type of representation; on the other, a reference to aspects of painting. The model for this was cinema, or what he called "cinematography", of which he began using some of the techniques and procedures.

His pictures are carefully staged, with actors and props, and are large colour images on transparent film, presented in back-lit aluminum boxes of the kind mostly used in advertisements. This was a new visual object (since then widely imitated), which had the appeal and radiance of the filmic image, the scale and poise of traditional painting, and the density and the sheer realism of the street photograph. The street image had become "monumentalized", not only in scale but also in complexity.

Among the more frequent themes to be encountered in the early works are scenes of urban life (*Milk*, 1984, *Diatribes*, 1985, *The Storyteller*, 1986), of racial tension (*Mimic*, 1982), of poverty (*Bad Goods*, 1984, *Eviction Struggle*, 1988), which carry a strong political undertone. But there are also urban landscapes, such as *The Old Prison*, 1987, *Coastal Motifs*, 1989, *The Crooked Path*, 1991, with no apparent drama or narrative.

Jeff Wall's works often have something enigmatic about them- an invitation to interpret, but also to allow our imagination to range freely. The imaginary component of his works has been emphasized by the use of digital technology in some of the more recent works, such as *Dead Troops Talk*, 1991-92, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993, or *The Flooded Grave*, 1998 – 2000. Because of the complex montages and layering allowed by the technology, the fantastic becomes an important element of the works. Yet, the ambiguity inherent in many of them is not just a factor of the technique used. In the large black and white prints which Jeff Wall has been making in recent years, something seems to have come to a standstill, the drama, the more theatrical aspects seem to have receded, but a

mystery remains, a delusive quietness of simple appearances (*Cyclist*, 1996, *Passerby*, 1996). His interiors, in particular, have a haunted quality, as in *Housekeeping*, 1996.

What is so exciting about him, is that his photographs, apart from being visually splendid, are always charged with meanings. Sometimes those meanings come across clearly and quickly. More often, they are felt to be diffusely there, requiring from us an act of closer attention and perhaps an act of imagination as well. The elaborate preparation and production, then, appear to be the condition for giving form to those several layers of meaning, without becoming didactic, and always allowing the viewer a space for freedom of interpretation and private associations.

When he refers to himself as a “painter of modern life”, quoting Baudelaire’s phrase, he expresses this connection with the great moment in the 19th century when genres were collapsing and new subject matters were coming to the fore, and his desire to recover something of the energies at work at that point. But he also more literally describes his actual subjects, and in particular the manner in which individual situations appear to be the product of social conditions. Photography allows him to fuse his interest in the complex images created by the best of 19th century painting, and the realistic fluidity of mechanical image. And it is through their fusion that he powerfully conveys the conflicting impulses, which characterize life today, the constant changes it undergoes, the rapid shifts of moods and conditions. He sets in front of our eyes a new and beautiful visual object, which can also be read as a splendid, fragmented “anthropology of contemporary life”.

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation was instituted by a bequest from Erna and Victor Hasselblad. The purpose of the Foundation is to promote scientific education and research in the natural sciences and photography. A number of projects are granted funds annually, amounting to approximately SEK 16 million. One of the awards, the annual international award for outstanding achievement in photography, being given this year to Jeff Wall, has come to attract a great deal of media attention.

In 1989 the Foundation opened the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Photographic Center (the Hasselblad Center) in Göteborg, Sweden. The Center maintains an ongoing exhibition and lecture program. In January 1996 the new exhibition hall housed within the Göteborg Museum of Art was inaugurated. A photographic research and reference library, open to researchers and students, is in the process of being established, as is a collection of photographs including photos by all the Hasselblad Award winners and others. The exhibit of Jeff Wall's work to be opened on the occasion of the award ceremony on November 9, 2002 will be organized by the Hasselblad Center.

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