

Stephen Waddell's Depictive Art

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Stephen Waddell was born and raised in the Vancouver area. His Mother is an opera singer and music teacher and his stepfather was an animator. Waddell drew and painted as a child and his family home was a very artistic environment. In 1986, at the age of 17, he enrolled in Simon Fraser University's Fine Arts program and took courses with Jeff Wall. At that time, most art teachers would have still been spreading the avant-garde orthodoxy of a radical and irreparable rupture with tradition. As rooted in critical theory as Wall's thinking was, he also sought to challenge the myth of discontinuity with tradition that was at the heart of avant-gardist dogma.

Exposed to Wall's views, Waddell began to pay serious attention to the world around him and the problems of its depiction. Influence is a two-way street, the student chooses the teacher they wish to learn from. Waddell's development has, from the very beginning, followed a trajectory that evidences a dedicated and profound concern for the depiction of the human figure in its environment.

That in 1990 Waddell began to use the Polaroid instant picture as a sketching tool for his painting. Polaroid appealed to Waddell because its limitations can be enjoyed as a freedom from the daunting pursuit of drawing or more elaborate photographic technique. Polaroids reduce and simplify visual phenomena, effecting and illustrating the step from the perception of three-dimensional reality to two-dimensional picture. Details are usually lost, and planes simplified. Polaroids are similar to the early stages of a painting wherein the basic forms, composition, and lighting are established.

While using Polaroid to learn how to see, Waddell also began to explore what to see. His early Polaroid's are etudes of mostly urban phenomena from pedestrians to buildings, to overlooked urban texture or detail. His taste in buildings or architecture seems to favour *Art Moderne* or institutional architecture of the modernist past. In the Polaroids (and the paintings made from them), these buildings seem like remembered sightings rather than buildings seen in the present. The planar architecture of the Bear pits at the Stanley Park Zoo certainly invoke childhood memories in Vancouverites over a certain age. These fantastic forms were a well-chosen subject for someone beginning to learn to paint volumes in space.

Waddell's Polaroid camera also found the overlooked and undervalued in etudes of alleyways, trash, and neglected corners. His city is the city of the Realist poet with all of its blemishes and contradictions. Waddell began to use the Polaroid to picture people but his interest in the pedestrian emerged with the Super-8 films he began making in 1997.

Waddell's super-8 films, like the Polaroids, were also intended as studies for painting. They usually involved surreptitiously filming strangers in the street, more often than not stalking them like a private detective. Yet the only fact he was attempting to discover was the fact of their appearance. Waddell made many of these studies in film and video, and it is from them that his later, mature photographic work evolves.

There is a feeling of paranoia or alienation in the films of pedestrians that is distinctly modern and occasionally surfaces in the first of his later photo tableaux. But Waddell was no performance artist and was, as always, looking only for the motif. The films are not narrative but frustrate the expectation we have of film to tell a story. By following the subject and keeping it in the centre of the frame, the figure becomes almost a still motif, albeit a quivering one with a moving background.

Waddell knew he wanted to make depictions of modern life and was as interested in Manet as a starting point as Wall had been in his early work. However, Waddell wanted to paint his pictures and initially used photography only to learn about seeing, discover subjects, and develop motifs.

In 1997 he switched to a 35mm camera as a sketching instrument. He soon noticed that the quality of his 35mm photographs was sometimes very good and he began to make large C prints from his negatives. As his interest in making photographs developed, his painting began to take second place to his photography. By 2002 he had switched to medium format cameras and had begun to develop a serious *métier* as a photo artist.

Waddell does not wish to stage the images he would like to make and so must hunt them down. As a direct photographer, Waddell relies on luck, but it is luck he earns through dogged labour. It is clear that Waddell is interested in a variety of types of images and must stroll the city or its periphery hoping to recognize one of these ideal images when he sees it. It is exhausting and often dispiriting work, many street photographers of note produced their famous work in a short few years before quitting or switching to other projects.

There is a fundamental difference between Waddell's work and most of what has come to be called *street photography* – one that makes his job even harder. Waddell would never accept the haphazard, often surreal compositions of a photographer like Garry Winogrand. Waddell is interested in making pictures that appear deliberately composed rather than snatched on the fly.

Hunting for pictures is hard work but sometimes the payoff is gold, both figuratively and literally, as in the case of Waddell's *Lookout*, a gorgeous composition of a young woman's golden hair and a gilded iron fence illuminated by the warm rays of evening sun. Such an unbelievably serendipitous alignment of figure, ground, and light are testament to the value of hunting for pictures. While he could have staged this picture, he probably could have never imagined it.

Looking at Waddell's oeuvre, we see that almost every picture is of a person, sometimes two, or occasionally a group. But mostly we see lone figures, usually against an urban background, perhaps in Berlin, Tokyo, or Vancouver. If we try to classify the types, we find workers, vagrants, pedestrians, young women, people at leisure, artists sketching and so on. We immediately see that as much as Waddell favours certain types, when we try to classify these types our distinctions become problematic – is a female pedestrian a 'woman' or a 'pedestrian'? Is a resting worker a 'worker' or a 'person at leisure'? People defy categories, at least when it comes to depiction, yet we can never be free of the need and impulse to see in terms of categories. Waddell does pursue specific types, but even if he did not, we would read them as such.

Waddell's interest in these types comes from Baudelaire, Daumier, Manet, August Sander, Walter Benjamin, Walker Evans, - in other words the project or tradition of Realism. One of Waddell's images, *Man with Red Sash*, might just as well have been titled *Man with Crack Pipe, Vancouver, 2007*. By titling it as he does, he invokes an older idea of pictures. He is not making documentary images but genre pictures, as is driven home by another image of a vagrant entitled *Le Clochard*. Here he initiates a relationship with the now mythic modern types we see formulated in Baudelaire and Manet. He positions his art in dialogue with his Realist ancestors.

Many of Waddell's pictures depict figures seen from behind. In his film sketches, this promotes a reading of the image as voyeuristic; the subject is 'hunted'. In his photographic tableaux, the careful compositions work against such an interpretation. There is a calm that we would not associate with surreptitious intent. Instead, the facelessness of the figure is now a clue to see it as a figure, rather than a specific individual. A figure is a generalized individual; it is a person, but not any specific person. We can project ourselves into a figure, a figure represents our existential, human commonality.

Circus Field is a picture of a vacant lot in Berlin being used as a parking lot for a traveling circus's caravans. It is a charming, anachronistic subject and echoes Heinrich Zille's circus photos made around 1900. Zille was primarily an illustrator but also made photographs of everyday people and life in Berlin that are astonishingly prescient of later 20th. Century street photographers like Robert Frank. Zille focused on the overlooked aspect of the circus: not the action in

the ring, but the weeds, detritus and even the W.C. at the rear and edges of the grounds. That Waddell's picture so closely resembles a Zille provides good reason to see it as a conscious homage. While the spectacular Television tower by Alexanderplatz looms in the distance, the focus of the picture seems to be an electrical wire strung along poles and the dirt road in the foreground. The 'road' is not much more than a wide path created by the weight of vehicles. While most of the natural material has been compressed, obstinate rocks or bits of wood still poke up here and there. Like Zille, Waddell notices that most everything on earth happens on the ground. The electrical wire is held up from that ground by an arrangement of poles and cable and looks like a happy line leisurely doodled across the blue sky. While many photographs have isolated such a detail as a found 'abstraction' Waddell keeps it in context of an everyday Realism. Another picture, *Man on Bench*, draws our attention to the ground. At first glance, the subject seems to be a bearded man sitting on a wood bench before the sun-bleached grass of a neighbourhood park. If we dwell longer, we notice the pattern of wear ringing the bench, the grass that grows beneath the bench has been spared and takes on the semblance of a little island.

Pondgarden is one of five pictures in this exhibition that feature pathways, it shows a traditional park in Tokyo with mediocre modern architecture looming in the background. A gnarled pine tree is supported by an armature of wooden poles so that it might continue its grotesque development instead of falling and dying. Japanese culture has long appreciated the irregular organic form. The garden's studied asymmetries contrast with the architecture more than would a Western park. Rustic tradition alongside brash modernity is a cliché of Japan but nonetheless as real as the neat gentility of the older couple returning from shopping.

In *Shade* and *Pile*, we see manufactured detritus beginning to break down and reintegrate with the ground. In *Shade*, the lampshade's symmetrical geometry has been dented and taken on a more rustic form. The diaphanous fabric now reminds of the delicate lamellae under a mushroom's cap, or perhaps a coral or jellyfish from the sea. In *Pile*, the monstrous mass of brambles and vines become a *Triffid* and the multicoloured plastic bags and rags look like they are being consumed and regurgitated. What most would pass by as unsightly things to be abjected from their world, have been discovered by Waddell as worthy, fascinating and beautiful subjects.

While Waddell's interest in Impressionism is largely because of its modern social vision, several of Waddell's figure pictures are also linked to Impressionism by their *contre-jour* light. *Wader* depicts a fair-skinned man under the bright sun of a Vancouver summer. He stands in the almost waist high water gazing out at English Bay. His back is consequently in shadow but Waddell has kept the tonal values of his back from becoming so dark as to obscure the surface detail of his freckled skin. The wader's upper body is muscled but rounded and conveys a strong sense of solidity or volume. This volume is something Waddell often seems to search for in his figures; a sculptural presence.

In *Frankfurt Scene* or *Man with Red Sash*, Waddell has found *contre-jour* scenes that exploit the dapple effect of sunlight streaming through leaves. *Frankfurt Scene* shows a Breugelesque man holding a can of Pepsi, another man smoking, a young couple, and others seated around a tree in a city square. It is an image of a scruffy urban civility - workers at rest, perhaps on a Sunday? The light could be from a Renoir but the social milieu is German proletarian. In *Man with Red Sash*, the light is balanced enough to read his face, but his lower body retreats into shadow fortuitously backgrounding the titular red sash. It is hard to believe that such a complex and perfect image was made candidly, but that is the core difficulty of Waddell's craft and art - to find images that are as he would have created them like a painter or cinematographer. Undoubtedly, there are those who will take offence at *Man with Red Sash* for exploiting this unfortunate man as an opportunity for an aesthetic operation - as though not making the picture, or perhaps making it in 'documentary' black and white, might somehow magically reverse his fortune.

Like Jeff Wall, Waddell is a lover of painting who felt compelled to make photographs. While Wall chose to explore the potential for staged - or as he has accurately named it - "cinematographic" photography, Waddell chose to adhere to the 'hunting and gathering' model of direct photography. Yet his intention was not 'documentary' or journalistic but, like Wall's it was rooted in the tradition of high art, and Realism specifically. The Realism of Courbet and the 'Painting of Modern Life' of Manet, Degas, Caillebotte and other Impressionists is usually seen as the core of this tradition but it also

extends back through Goya to Caravaggio and forward to Walker Evans, Robert Bresson and the Dardenne Brothers. It is important that this tradition is accurately and exclusively defined - it is a complicated lineage but I think it can be understood as the end of Sacral and Aristocratic styles and rhetoric and the birth and development of a modern Bourgeois Realism. While many images made under the rubric of the documentary or journalistic could be considered Realist, It is also true that most 'documentary' or 'journalistic' images actually engage in dramatic rhetoric that owes more to Sacral and Aristocratic art - as images by photographers such as W. Eugene Smith or Sebastiao Salgado demonstrate.

Asphalt Layer (#1) pictures a city worker in Berlin. It is an image of labour, 'dirty' backbreaking work that has not yet been completely mechanized. Both Eugene Atget and the Berlin photographer Friedrich Seidenstücker made images of asphalt layers early in the 20th. Century. Atget's studies of street workers - the petites métiers, have been of special interest to Waddell who likes to show how much closer we are to the 19th. Century than we normally assume. The outstretched arms of the worker also remind us of Caillebotte's famous *The Floor Scrapers*. But the most famous image of a worker on his knees is Courbet's *Stonebreaker* and Waddell's picture shares the same Realist agenda of a sober, unsentimental depiction of labour. Waddell's *A Resting Worker* also depicts a worker in relation to the pavement - the worker has paved the ground and so takes it as his right to lie on it and recoup his energy.

Scale is important to Waddell; he sizes each print according to it's subject. A study of a small object like *Shade* is a small print and a landscape like *Circus Field* is much larger. For the most part the pictures are life-scaled rather than life-sized. That is, they replicate the experience of scale based on an ideal or approximate viewing distance - so that a six foot tall person might be printed four feet high in order to factor in the experience of the viewing distance. While such consideration of scale was de rigueur in the nineteenth century, today's artists largely handle scale arbitrarily; a century of avant-garde experimentation appears to have severed us from even the important, useful, and desirable gains of tradition.

While most of Waddell's pictures have been presented as large, mounted and framed, C prints, he has recently begun to produce archival pigment prints. These are essentially inkjet prints, but made with high-resolution printers and long-lasting pigment based inks on archival paper. Now his negatives are scanned and digital files created which are then manipulated in Photoshop. Despite being an early and accomplished Photoshop artist and technician, Waddell rarely changes his images except with respect to basic tonal and colour values and minor retouching. Yet, this digital process allows him to bring his pictures even closer to the control a painter has over their work. Indeed, Waddell's pigment prints are no longer photographs, they are instead mechanically produced pointillist paintings, - perhaps something that Seurat might have dreamed of.

In Peter Galassi's "*Before Photography*"¹ he focuses on the period before the technical invention of photography when photographic vision was discovered, developed, and explored through painting. That is, a kind of depiction, one that follows all of the optical rules built into the camera obscura, was explored in painting *before* the chemical problem of fixing an image was answered. So "photographic depiction" never needed photography to exist and in fact did flourish for many years before photography.

In light of this, it is easier to understand how Waddell could approach photography from the tradition of Realist painting rather than the tradition of art photography. It also explains why Waddell's photographs exhibit few of the hallmarks of the kind of art photography that derives its criteria from a strictly photographic tradition.

Much of Waddell's enterprise has been involved with defining his desire to make pictures with a camera, rather than being a "photographer". Now that photography is finally free of the index, free of it's status as document, it will be easier to understand artists like Waddell - who choose not to make photographs, but pictures.

Footnotes

- 1 **Peter Galassi**, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*, **Museum of Modern Art**, New York. 1981