

“Jeff Wall” at the George Economou Collection in Athens

BY WILLIAM KHERBEK | AUGUST 02, 2019



Jeff Wall *An Eviction*, 1988/2004 Transparency in lightbox 229 x 414 cm
(Courtesy the artist)

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The eponymously titled survey exhibition of the works of Jeff Wall at the George Economou Collection in Athens is the first solo showing of Wall’s work in Greece. The exhibition is curated by Philipp Kaiser of Marian Goodman Gallery and the Economou Collection’s director, Skarlet Smatana. The two curators have brought together works spanning more than three decades of Wall’s creative practice including a number of his lightbox transparencies as well as stellar examples of his later, essayistic photographic series. The centerpiece of the exhibition for many will likely be “An Eviction,” a tragic, cinematic work depicting a violent eviction from what appears to be a suburban street. Wall began “An Eviction” in 1988 and later reworked the image in 2004. The reconfigured eviction greets the visitor on the ground floor of the Economou’s spacious gallery.

Fitting for a retrospective exhibition, the course and creation of narrative is a significant theme in “Jeff Wall.” For example, upon arriving at the Collection’s entrance, the visitor stands in an entry way before staff come to open the door; as the lights come up in the gallery, the viewer can see Wall’s 1994 lightbox, “Park Drive” through a pane of glass in the entry door. The gentle bend of the crepuscular, tree-lined road evokes the rural uncanny of David Lynch and informs the visitor that a journey of some kind is about to commence. The ground floor exhibits several lightboxes from around the same time period: “Coastal Motifs” (1989), “The Old Prison” (1987), and “An Eviction.” Together they evoke the kind of Cascadian Noir that birthed Lynch’s own “Twin Peaks,” but Wall’s compositional sense owes as much to Brueghel as to cinema or television. In its present form, “An Eviction” is as harrowing as its original incarnation, but Wall’s manipulations of the image — adding new details and figures — caution against reductive or fixed interpretations of the work’s narrative.

The second floor of the exhibition centers on Wall’s more recent interest in fabric and costuming in images. Among the highlights is “Vancouver, 7 December 2009: Ivan Sayers, costume historian lectures at the University Women’s Club, Virginia Newton-Moss wears a British ensemble c.1910, from Sayers’ collection.” The exhaustive, highly literal title of the work belies the complex chain of art-historical references Wall has worked into his carefully-structured composition. Similarly, a four-part set of prints positions another costume historian as its protagonist. In this work the historian of the title traces the background of one of his pieces to a department store in Weimar-era Germany. The shop has a traditionally German-Jewish name, and the year of the catalogue in Wall’s image is 1932 — the year before Hitler came to power. Beware the seeking of narrative, the work seems to warn, you may well discover a story you cannot bear the weight of.

Excavation is the literal subject matter of one of the images on the third floor of the exhibition: a lightbox with another excruciatingly detailed title describing the location and protagonists of an archaeological dig in British Columbia. This next movement of the exhibition is composed entirely of lightboxes contrasting interiors and exteriors. “After ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue” is the only explicit literary reference in the exhibition but Wall’s rendering of the narrator of Ellison’s masterpiece in his garishly lit, yet grim, lair feels like an appropriate coda for an exhibition that leads the viewer through so many glimpses of narratives; no story is ever complete, but often the mere act of telling creates a kind of truth.