Jeff Wall at White Cube

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A series of striking oppositions is staged across the upper gallery of White Cube in the latest Jeff Wall exhibition: a weightlifter grittily portrayed in a makeshift gym, strains in mid lift, his head raised and gaze fixed with the effort. This faces a diptych, *Pair of Interiors*, in muted colours, of a woman in a luxurious living room, decorated in the bland décor of classical distinction, and tastefully scatted with antiques and *objets d'art*. In each picture, she is accompanied by a different man, although they resemble each other, and are similarly dressed. In the first picture, the man reaches out to her, while she stares away; in the second, they are stiffly arrayed on separate seats, and appear tense and distant. In all of these images, a great deal of space weighs down on the figures, though to contrasting effect: the lifter strives against it, and though the weights are held below waist height, may conquer it; the height of the living room, a register of wealth and taste, oppresses the couples within it.

So in considering these contrasts of rich and poor, colour and monochrome, absorption in physical effort and bored alienation, it may creep into the viewer's mind—as they play Wall's pretty game of chasing narrative clues and pictorial references through the details of the prints—that a pastoral message is on offer: that virtue lies amid the simple and the ordinary, and is weakened, perhaps fatally, amid sophistication and luxury. The effect is reinforced by another

pair of facing photographs: one shows a young girl gazing on mother of pearl discs in a setting that at first seems entirely historical—a scene of the interwar period perhaps—and is realised in a beautiful array of lighting, colour and props that resembles many a genre painting. Her gaze is taken by the lustre and perhaps the value of the nacre. This is matched against an entirely modern and in a sense ordinary suburban scene, *Parent Child*, in which a small girl lies quietly on a pavement while her father looks on. They are in focus while the shopping street and passersby behind fall into softness; the pastel colours of this polite area are seen in dappled sunshine; she lies, captured by her thoughts or the feel of the warm pavement in a moment of childish abandon which is treated with parental indulgence.

In 2010, I wrote a long essay about Wall for *New Left Review*, tracing his path from political radical to aesthetic conservative, and how prose—the artist's own and those of his supporters—garlanded the work to ensure its place in the museum. Along the way, Wall played down the class, gender and racial conflicts of his earlier work to reflect on what he took to be the 'democratic' virtues of quiet and steady labour by cleaners, carers and other generally unremarked workers. In a video interview for this exhibition, Wall stresses several times that various works, among them *Parent Child*, are tranquil, without tension or conflict. The shift found its theoretical lodestone in the work of critic and historian Michael Fried, especially in his stress on absorption in which depicted figures—readers, craftspeople at work, dreamers and contemplators—are captured by task or mood, and reflect the ideal state of the viewer, similarly held rapt by the art work.

Yet two contrasting versions of absorption seem to be on offer here: in *Recovery*, for instance, it is of a wondrous kind, in which a young man stares out at a painted vision of the world, transformed by his re-emergence into it after illness or injury. The view is rendered in sweet colours which smoothly fill pop art outlines, but owes much in the disposition of its figures to the modern landscapes of pastoral leisure, to Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* or Matisse's *Lux, Calme et Volupté*. Against this, there is the staged and dour drama of *I Giardini*, a triptych with a narrative

that is more than hinted at by the titles of each photograph: Complaint, Denial and Expulsion. Like *Pair of Interiors*, it is haunted by near-doppelgangers, here inhabiting a magnificent landscaped setting, which dwarfs and oppresses the actors who seem lost in social disconnection and disorientation. Plainly referring to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, once again the pastoral theme is of a corrosive hierarchy, knowledge and self-consciousness which wrench the figures from their enjoyment of idyllic woodland and glade.

Among a wide range of photographic practices, Wall has been best known for a small number of meticulously staged and controlled 'cinematographic' pictures, sometimes years in the making, which offer an extraordinary degree of control and clarity, and—like the cinema itself—imbue detail, pose, prop, lighting and colour with an expressive narrative unity. In some of these recent prints, there is some loosening of that effect: these are large prints (not lightboxes), differential focus allows some elements to fall into softness and there are places where over-exposure is allowed its play. There is some relief in this, as Wall lets light and contingency into his cinematographic work. Even so, the immensity of the work, its accomplished polish, and the way that most of its figures stand or sit beneath large expanses of sky, wood or wall, lend the works an Olympian distance and chilliness. The subjects are held in their pictorial frames much like the stuffed animals and waxworks of Hiroshi Sugimoto, and to a similarly uncanny effect, which is not just to do with their frozen stillness but to the still rare visual effect of a large-format-camera level of detail in apparently uncontrolled environments.

So one may ask: do Wall's two versions of absorption contain a subterranean critique of his buyers, of those trapped by the weight of their wealth into narrow conventions, social circles and the prison of luxury? Sophisticated self critique is also a form of social distinction and can take quite extreme forms in art fair photography, even in the sublime photographs of Edward Burtynsky or Richard Mosse the display of the disasters its buyers have caused. Wall's mild rebuke, then, is one that they are happy to hang on their walls—or at least, if they are interested only in investment value, to stow for a while in freeports.