# DOGS

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his Weimaraners, places his deadpan canines in the most unlikely situations: in a canoe on a lake, riding an exercise bicycle, on a mantle, testing out rollerskates, or in bed together, watching TV like a long-married couple.

His exhibit, "It's a Dog's Life: Photographs by William Wegman from the Polaroid Collection," opens at the von Liebig Art Center in Naples on July 12 and runs through Aug. 10. (A special preview reception takes place from 5:30-7:30 p.m. Friday, July 11. The reception is free for Naples Art Association members and $10 for non-members.)

Wegman's work is well known, even among those who don't frequent art galleries.

His photos have not only been widely reproduced in books but in calendars and on postcards. His videos and films have been shown at film festivals and on 'Saturday Night Live," "Sesame Street" and Nickelodeon.

The works on exhibit at the von Liebig are one-of-a-kind: 20-by-24 Polaroids shot with an oversized, 5-foot-tall camera that creates a photograph but no negative.

"Bill Wegman was first invited to work with the Polaroid 20-by-24 camera in 1979," says Barbara Hitchcock, Director of the Polaroid Collection and curator of the exhibit. "That was shortly after it was introduced to the public. There was an initial program where artists were invited to use this camera, with a resulting exhibition that was going to be held at the Hayden Gallery at MIT.

"And Bill Wegman, as you may know, came out of the '60s minimalism focus and was a real black and white photographer and videographer. And at the time, we only had color material, so when he got this invitation, he wasn't quite sure if he wanted to do it.

"But that was the very first time, and his reluctance dealing with color versus black and white soon changed. He became one of our regular artists, through our Artist Support Program, and one of our regular customers too. He was one of many fine art photographers who was renting the studio to develop his work, primarily with the weimaraners."

Wegman used the camera from '79 through the '80s, and then somewhat less in the '90s, she says. During the first few days of using color film, he would shoot things that were black and white.

Hitchcock attended a few of the photo shoots over the years.

His black Weimaraner, Man Ray, named after a Dada artist, "really loved to perform, loved to be in a picture," she recalls. "He would howl if he was tied up away from the set, until he was released. Then he would pose, and he'd be the cat's meow. It was very funny. He just didn't like to be sidelined. He loved being photographed, and he loved to invade the sets.

"Bill was not excited about anthropomorphism. And he really tried to transform Man Ray, avoiding it, but as we know from the photographs, he succumbed to it: pictures like Man Ray looking like a frog, like Kermit ["Frog/Frog II"]. There's another one where he has an elephant's nose. ["Elephant"] And of course he dressed up to look like human beings, in dresses and hats."

Hitchcock describes Wegman as very serious about his work.

"He's very committed to getting a certain amount of work done, and he's kind of shy," she says. "He's a maverick. He's also totally dedicated to the dogs. He's had them since they were puppies. He had Man Ray initially."

COURTESY PHOTOS

**Fay & Andrea, 1987**

But after Man Ray died in 1982, Wegman didn't think he'd make any more photos with dogs.

"He said he dreamed of him for years," Hitchcock says.

But in 1986, he saw Fay Ray, a 6-month-old puppy. She was named Cinnamon Girl, because of her taupe coat, but Wegman renamed her Fay Ray, a play on the name of the actress Fay Wray.

**Not Food Dog, 1982**

"She had yellow eyes – Bill called them 'Village of the Damned' eyes," Hitchcock says. "He didn't want to photograph her, because of his love, allegiance and reverence for Man Ray. But ultimately he did. Bill was totally seduced by her physique. She was gorgeous. He wrote this in his book 'Polaroids': 'Her fur was taupe...and she had yellow eyes like in a Rousseau painting...In a short time Fay matured from a coltish youth into a Garboesque beauty. My pictures grew with her. Now she was the muse, the adored one. Skin-deep beauty became the soul of my work.'

"She was sort of a vamp, a thespian, and a fashion model, all at once."

In fact, one photo shows Fay and Andrea, one of Wegman's assistants, posing together. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, the duo looks like two fashion models. Andrea has dark hair, dark eyes and long lashes, and Fay Ray has those yellow eyes ...and a pair of false eyelashes.

Wegman was one of the few photographers to take the 20 x 24 camera out of the studio. The first time was in 1980, when he brought it up to Rangely, Maine.

"He had it up there for a week, and on one of those adventures, they put the camera and all the gear on it in the back of a Suburu mini truck, and drove it into the water," Hitchcock says. "And they didn't manage to electrocute themselves!"

He took photos of the dogs in canoes and in the water. On land, he shot photos of them standing on boulders. And one day, when it was raining, they had to shoot inside. That was when Wegman took his famous shot, "Ray & Mrs. Lubner in Bed Watching TV." The photo shows the two of them in a rustic bedroom, in bed, under the blankets, leaning against pillows and watching TV together.

Other artists who have used the oversized camera outdoors include Tim Burton, who took it to Death Valley, and Robert Rauschenberg, who put it in the back of a truck and drove around the streets of Miami, taking photos. Rauschenberg, she says, would take the photo and pin it to the wall.

"He wouldn't coat it right away," she says. "In some cases he'd bleach part of it...and maybe hand-embellish a part of the film. He'd leave part of it uncoated so it would oxidize, and it'd turn sepia. So it was that ability to take the picture and allow it to change and got it to where they wanted it."

Wegman's photos are humorous, but never cute. Part of the appeal of his work is its wit and cleverness, Hitchcock says.

"For example, he did a diptych called 'Chow' with Man Ray, sitting with his head in a very large red bag of dog food," she says. "And in the next part of the photo, he's pulled his head out, and his head is all red. That's the kind of funny humor [he employs.] He likes puns. He likes word play. Many times the titles of the piece are important.

"There's one of Fay Ray, and she's wearing a cowboy hat, and in her mouth is a little plastic miniature horse. And the background is a painted mural backdrop. And he called it 'Rustler.'

"There's one piece that he shot on kind of marble granite floors, that was black with white speckles. And he had Man Ray with white confetti on him, and it looked like camouflage."

Polaroids have a long history with artists. Location scouts for movies have long used the medium, to take instant photos of potential locations for directors. Many professional photographers take Poloroids of their subjects