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IAN WALLACE: "Monochrome Meets Photograph"

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Ian Wallace in front of *Who will I Become?* in Catriona Jeffries Gallery. (Arlen Redekop photo/ PNG)

Hanging on a long, white wall, the image stood out from the other framed works on either side. What was different were the brush strokes. The marks looked surprising in a work by Ian Wallace, an artist with a reputation for suppressing any sign of expressiveness in his work.

From about a metre away, it was easy to see how the strokes of green didn't completely form a neat rectangular shape. It looked messy, uneven and not at all like the smooth blocks of colour on most of Wallace's signature monochromes.

There were other signs of the artist's paw as well. The work has two images in black and white stacked above one

another but separated: one was of a woman looking at a mirror and adjusting her hair; the other, of a man in profile with most of his head and body excised out of the image. They looked like photographs that had been cut with a sharp knife and then laid on top.

Bordering the edge of the work was an uneven, intermittent black line. There was even a soft-edged shadow around the bottom edge of the material.

As I stood in front of *Study for Masculin Feminin I* in Catriona Jeffries Gallery, I remarked on the brush strokes and how it looked like a collage. He corrected me. It wasn't a collage at all: it was a high-resolution ink-jet print of much a smaller work meant as a study for painting – a painting that probably won't ever be made.

So what I thought was an expressionist gesture, wasn't. It was an enlarged copy of the original. Rather than a partial monochrome and a photograph – the usual combination in Wallace's work since 1980 – it's a mediated image.

"I'm kind of anti-expressionist," he said in an interview in the gallery. "I suppress gesture in my work then it comes back in through the back door."

The print is one of 12 inkjet studies in Wallace's solo exhibition at the gallery called *Masculin/Feminin*. The black and white images are all taken from various French New Wave and 1960s films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mepris (Contempt)* and *Masculin, feminin*. Some of the black and white images are stills captured directly from DVDs; others are photographs of the films taken from televisions.

In the studies, for example, the images are single stills that Wallace has divided and separated to show the distance and lack of communication that occurs in troubled relationships between men and women. The difference between the masculine and feminine parallels the contrasts he's pursued in his works between figuration in the photograph and abstraction in the monochrome.

In some of the bigger paintings, Wallace has added text that heightens the gulf between the two figures. In one, beneath a man in a tweed jacket, is the line: "Who will I become?" Underneath the woman, "You forgot me."

On one side of the painting is a bright red band of colour. As a colour, its emotional register is pitched much higher than the two cool and reserved black and white figures who look preoccupied with their own thoughts.

"The colours – sometimes you want to do a painting with a lot of colour in it. 'What does it look like it with a lot of red?'" Wallace said. "It's very pop colouring. I wanted slightly strident, strong colours."

In the canvas works, the monochrome and the photographs have a much more equal relationship to one another. That contrasts with some of Wallace's earlier works where photographic images of intersections and street scenes was so strong, it overwhelmed the monochrome.

"In this series, the structure is quite different," he said. "Instead of the photograph from top to bottom, the photograph only occupies a portion of the field. It balances between of the dialectical tension that exists between the two photographs that are staggered. I kept them the same staggered formation to keep a unity for all this work."

In Wallace's signature works of photographic images and monochromes, he's aiming to bring together two opposing traditions of modernity. On one side is the photograph and the way its mediated view of the world has supplanted painting's representational role; on the other, the monochrome with its drained image as an outcome of abstraction, one of the 20th century's most significant contributions to the history of art.

"The photographic aspect is bringing meaning and representation of the everyday into focus," Wallace said on the website of Hauser & Wirth, his London gallery, "The monochrome is almost like the antipode of photographic meaning – its about historical positioning."

Described as a poet of images, Wallace has been exhibiting art since the 1970s. Widely regarded as a teacher and writer, Wallace has played a key role in putting Vancouver on the international art world map. While at what is now called Emily Carr University from 1972 to 1998, he made a number of innovations, including the now accepted idea that recent art history should be included in the curriculum.

A biography of Wallace on the Canada Council website says the impact of Wallace's courses and teaching method shouldn't be "underestimated" for the effect it had on artists and the art scene in Vancouver in the 1980s.

Considered to be the father of photo-conceptualism, he's the senior member of a group of internationally acclaimed artists from Vancouver such as Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas and Ken Lum.