

APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

"In the studio with... Catherine Wagner"

By Lucy Waterson

February 27, 2025



Detail of Catherine Wagner in her studio in 2024. Photo: Francis Baker; courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and the artist

Catherine Wagner makes photographs and site-specific installations that question how culture is created and reveal elements of the built environment that would otherwise go unnoticed. In the 'American Classroom' (1986) series, she documented educational settings, while 'Art & Science: Investigating Matter' (1995) puts genetic-testing laboratories under the microscope. Wagner's work can be found in the permanent collections of museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her new series, 'Moving Pictures', are on display at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco from 27 February to 5 April. The new works draw from the Pacific Film Archive - which has one of the largest holdings of analogue film in the United States - and show stacks of circular film canisters that Wagner has categorised by colour and title. Also on show for the first time are photographs from the 'Architecture of Reassurance' (1995) series, which capture the many architectural illusions that can be found in Disney's theme parks.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Where is your studio?

My studio is in what's called the Dogpatch area of San Francisco, which is the old industrial area that borders the Bay. Moving here was quite a transition because I was in the Mission District near my home and had a 2600-square-foot space for 20 years: now I've moved into an 800-square-foot space in a warehouse with about 20 other artists, where we each have our own space. It's called the Minnesota Street Project and is a compound of three buildings: one has galleries, one is an experimental installation viewing space for performances and visual art and one has the artists' studios. There is a project manager for all the studios, there's a janitorial service, there's a community kitchen and there's someone to receive materials: the infrastructure is all there, so it's nice in terms of what I call 'the amenities'. We can also sign out the installation gallery when we have curatorial and museum visits. It has high white walls and good lighting, and that's where I begin to look at work outside of my studio.

How would you describe the atmosphere of your studio?

There are techs here, and you can liaise with other artists, whereas at the other studio I was in it was just me. Here you can connect with people when you're taking a break, when you're going to the kitchen to make lunch. And there's also opportunities for one-on-ones with people who I've made substantial rapports with. So, it's nice, but it's also very serious; it's a working space.

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SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



In Vinegar (2024), Catherine Wagner. Photo: Phillip Maisel; courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and the artist; © Catherine Wagner

What do you spend most of your time doing in your studio?

I have a team of three people including myself and I have a full-time studio manager Sophia Ramirez who is a lovely young artist, and she has become incredibly efficient at keeping things very organised for me. The third person on the team is Nathan Costa, another young artist who is so technologically inclined. He knows all these post-production things that would take me 20 years to learn. Having that kind of support allows me to move through ideas without spending years learning new software. I couldn't exist making art and going to this show and that art fair without my team.

Most people who work photographically now work with fabricators, but I've stuck to this idea that I want to make everything in my studio: it's a working studio in that my team is making the prints there. Some of the prints can be very large scale, 10 feet by 8 feet, and sometimes it takes four hands to move these pieces around. It's important to me to have my hands on the work, especially in terms of colour balance. In my new series, the colours are so saturated that they have this colour afterglow, and I can only do that by making my own prints.

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What does your studio routine look like?

My early mornings are spent by myself, having my coffee, organising my thoughts and intentions for the day. We don't officially start until around 10.30 a.m., and we'll go to 5 or 5.30 p.m., Monday through Thursday. I'm an avid list maker, so we'll start the day looking at the list I've made the night before about what we've done and what we need to continue working on. There are days of what I call 'admin heaviness' but there are also days where that's not allowed, because that admin can really get in the way of making the work. Then there are days we're having charrettes, where we're sitting around the table and discussing ideas until we get to a more refined place about what supports the foundation of the work.

I only work four days in the studio and my fifth is my personal day. That personal day is for me to have conversations with myself and whittle away at ideas. It can take place walking, it can take place in the studio by myself, but it's a day for me to not have any other confusion around me so that I can really think. There's a Buddhist form of mediation done when walking called kinhin and I find that to be a real part of my process. I'm best when I'm moving and walking, so I adopted this notion as a form of meditation.



Moving Village (1995/2024), Catherine Wagner. Photo: Phillip Maisel; courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and the artist; © Catherine Wagner

Is there anything you don't like about your studio?

I'd love to have more space, and more storage. It's important to me that my studio is orderly and I'm not digging through piles to get to anything; I don't want that tumultuous stuff in my sight line.

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I like a controlled environment, without chaos, it's not a Halloween party by any means! It's a contemplative space, and it can get very messy, but then the next day, it's time for a clean-up.

Do you have visitors to your studio, and if so, who is the most interesting visitor you've had?

It's basically curators, museum people and sometimes groups, and it's always planned. I don't really have people dropping by so to speak, that would be chaotic for me – let me give you an example. The other day, I was meeting with a curator when we heard a knock on the door, and it was a guy with a box that was jumping around and making all these sounds. When he left, I asked Sophia what it was, and it turned out that he was applying for my new studio manager job and had made this artwork for his application! So sometimes visits can go like that, but generally they're pre-planned.

Do you ever listen to anything while you work?

Years ago, we used to have National Public Radio on and sometimes an assistant would play music. But now, I have to have this quietness to do what I'm doing. To me, music is stimulating and engaging and it's very involved. I could never listen to music just as background music. I could maybe if I was doing mindless stuff, but not if I'm in the studio and working on something, because music has its own essence, its own creativity, so it's distracting to me. I work in a very quiet environment.



How to: Save a Marriage/Make a Monster/Succeed in Business (2024), Catherine Wagner.
Photo: Phillip Maisel; courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and the artist; © Catherine Wagner

What is your most well-thumbed book?

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I have a series of books that I thumb through, maybe when I'm waiting for a print. They're usually other artist's books and are very conceptual in nature and are usually quite old: early Mel Bochner, early Agnes Martin. I often will look at the work of artists from the '50s, '60s and '70s that may not look like anything I'm doing, but there are often messages in there. I find them stimulating and nourishing in way that allows me to believe in making art about very quiet ideas that are actually very important.

What is the most unusual object in your studio?

I have this Japanese plaster cast of a dog which is quite old, and I have all these pieces of wood that I used during a residency at Crown Point Press and had cut into all these geometric shapes, many that I don't even think there's a name for. Over time I've been working on them, gold leafing their sides. They're very odd, but people really gravitate to them in the studio. They're objects that continue to engage my mind.

As told to Lucy Waterson.

'Catherine Wagner. Reel to Real' is at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, from 27 February until 5 April.

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