Jeff Wall:
Hole in the Wall
Photographs 1978 – 2004
Tate Modern, London
Duncan White

A View from an Apartment (2004–2005) is the newest of fifty works in the long-awaited Jeff Wall Retrospective at the Tate Modern this month. Two young women occupy a cluttered but orderly modern interior dominated by the imposing Vancouver docks outside their apartment window. Impossibly real, the photograph is the result of a laborious process of intricate fakery whereby the docks are as sharply defined as the upholstery. By merging seamlessly more than a hundred individual still-life images taken during the course of several weeks, both at the apartment and on a purpose-built set, the camera effectively imitates the ‘high-res’ immediacy of human sight.

The understated and quiet complexity of the huge lightbox marks a recent departure in Wall’s work towards the dramatically undramatic. Neither woman is caught in the enigmatic show of frustration that we find in Milk (1984), where a carton of milk explodes in the grip of a man crouching by a wall; nor is there much in the way of the narrative gesture found in Mmmitic (1982), where racist tensions between minority groups in an anonymous suburb are captured in a brief near-exchange. More often protagonists have their backs to us as they enigmatically disappear through a gap, a door, a hedge.

Roughly chronological from the breakthrough lightboxes, The Destroyed Room (1978) and Picture for Women (1979), which helped Wall inaugurate a new role for photography in the post-conceptual vacuum, there is a gathering
quiet as we move on to Cezanne-like landscapes, modern-day street-scenes and playful still-lifes. An impressive selection of black and white photographs taken in the past decade lurks in the middle room and mixes an inky muck with an intimate form of documentary. Again, Wall toys with the ‘classical’ role of photography; in Volunteer (1996) part of the set had to be painted in various shades of grey so that the photograph achieved the correct degree of contrast. Seen here in the company of so many glowing lightboxes, the large black and white prints enjoy a dullness or a mute otherness that is almost uncanny.

This cinematographic technique described as ‘near-documentary’ has made his photographs influential, although Wall insists that ‘cinematography is just a way of practicing photography’ (‘30 per cent of my pictures are straight photographs’, he claims). The snapshots that many of these pictures resemble are in fact a collection of momentary details reassembled long after the event. Rather than the pursuit of authenticity, traditionally the poetic principle of photo-journalism, it is the authenticating eye of the audience that Wall is, at times playfully, most concerned with. As with Fieldwork (2003), another decidedly undramatic drama of cultural archaeology, the photographs’ meaning comes from how we look for that which is absent.

The interstitial Invisible Man (1999-2000) makes this clear: Wall’s photography has come to occupy the uncertain in-between space of storytellers.

"Writing is something to experience," Wall says, "and my pictures are made from my experience." The Storyteller (1986), quoting Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* (1863), famously enacts this principle and encapsulates the tension between subject and presentation. A Native Canadian squats talking on a scratch of land under a freeway. Her dispossession is recreated and shared even as we fail to hear what she says, so that the only experience we can consider ‘true’ or verifiable – the reportage of the day – is the way the story is told. More recently, in *A Woman with a Covered Tray*, the protagonist moves away from us, taking her story with her.

Though much of the exhibition will be familiar to those who have followed Wall’s career, seeing the pictures in the flesh, so to speak, is a must. It is hard not to notice, for instance, an otherwise undetectable seam that runs through the middle of many of the transparencies suggesting that two prints had to be ‘sewn’ together in order to achieve the ‘Grand Master’ scale of the completed tableau.

This may well have been a necessary procedure at the outset of Wall’s picture-making career, but at his studio in Vancouver he now owns a printer big enough to produce an unbroken transparency. And this mark of division in the photographic surface again suggests both Wall’s abiding preoccupation with the fabricated nature of his images and, ultimately, his ambition to both foreground such artifice whilst simultaneously masking it.