

# Never Look Back: An Interview with Graham Wiebe

By Clint Enns



Graham Wiebe is a lens-based artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba who has recently moved to British Columbia to pursue a master's degree at the University of Victoria. Working with both traditional photographic techniques and experimenting with those that extend beyond the two-dimensional frame, Wiebe creates work that is both personal and intimate while still remaining playful, strange, and humorous. His work to date embodies a spirit of youthful rebellion and successfully blends natural moments with those that are staged. The artworks Wiebe creates are fun and provocative, and capture an estranged form of traditional beauty.

I began following Wiebe's work on Tumblr a few years ago and I remember being shocked when I saw many of my old friends and acquaintances appearing in his strange scenarios. Recently, I saw a photo of Wiebe playing backgammon with his girlfriend on his Instagram feed and reached out to him for a potential interview over a few rounds of the game, one of my personal passions. It turns out that Graham is a far better photographer than a backgammon player.

Recently, major life changes have resulted in a noticeable evolution in Wiebe's techniques and images. After losing most of his body of work in a studio fire, starting a master's degree, moving from Winnipeg to Victoria, and incorporating digital techniques into his work, he has now entered a new phase of his artistic pursuit. Throughout our exchange, Wiebe and I reflect upon his early work, teasing out the methodology and concepts he previously experimented with and how he reconciles these with the many changes he is currently facing.

This interview was conducted via e-mail and collaboratively edited into its current form.

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**I first saw your work on Tumblr when your feed was recommended due to sharing mutual friends. Can you talk about the role that social media plays in your work? Do you consider social media a part of your practice or just part of being a visual artist in the digital age?**

I view my Tumblr, *SHITMONGER*, as a digital exhibition—a constant flow of images updated daily—with some photographs eventually appearing in physical exhibitions, and others simply existing online. Every time I feel down about art/the world/life in general, I look back at the virtual archive and reminisce, since much of my work is autobiographical. I have a terrible memory and have always been overly sentimental, so Tumblr is not only a good way for me to keep images circulating, but is also a way to have a personal online photo album to reference. In addition, it allows me to evaluate my personal progress and growth. In contrast, I use Instagram as a way to promote upcoming shows and to post videos of my friends doing wild shit.

**In an era where everyone is documenting the everyday—where photography has become one of the most democratized art forms—what do you feel distinguishes your photography and your practice?**

Everyone is a photographer these days and I believe it's a good thing that photography has become so widely accepted within the art world; however, I don't really consider myself to be just a photographer. When people ask, I say that I'm a visual artist, working with the medium of photography. Lately, I have been working with three-dimensional objects in an attempt to challenge the language of photography and its relationship to sculpture and installation. Thinking about the photograph as an object, I incorporate images into structural works.

**What specifically are you looking to document in your photographs? Are you hoping to capture the strange and unique or a certain type of moment, composition, and light?**

I often find myself in strange situations, whether it's a chance encounter with six raccoons eating Cheetos out of a fake skeleton or a night out where someone swings a butcher's knife taped to a pair of pantyhose at me. I'm always wandering and exploring. Moments present themselves, and I instinctually make the work.

**How much of your work is actually staged?**

I would say about half my work is staged, and that percentage is increasing. I often place "street" or "happened upon" images next to staged photographs in an exhibition setting, but my recent switch to digital has pushed me towards experimenting with staged photography. Nothing to lose anymore. Everything can be tried, pushed, taken further without any consequences or financial worry. Working digitally has allowed me to produce more images which, in turn, has allowed me to experiment with the medium of photography and how I interact with both the image and the photographic print.

**Are you trying to replicate the weird situations you have encountered with your staged photography, or is there a desire to blend natural and staged moments in such a way that it's impossible to tell the difference? Or perhaps another way to think about it: does this distinction matter to you, or is it about the image produced?**

I keep a book of things that I've seen while out on walks, where I didn't have a camera on me or was too shy to capture the image, and sometimes I go back and try to reference these in a staged image, but most of the time it's circumstantial and immediate. I think it's super interesting to exhibit staged and "street" photographs alongside one another, since it constructs a confusing and fragmented narrative, demonstrating the medium's ability to lie truthfully.

**Can you talk about some of your influences and the role that Winnipeg has played in your work? For instance, there is a**



**particular brand of trash culture reclamation that can be found in your work.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the work often embodies Winnipeg's brand of self-deprecating humour.**

Winnipeg is a strange, eccentric, and sometimes scary place, and this has influenced both my early work and my personality/persona in general. I'm kind of messy, fanatical, happy, and sad all at the same time, much like the city itself. I think these traits remain present in all of my work. It is who I am. I'm drawn to uncanny and bizarre juxtapositions that are bound to disturb. For instance, I once captured an image of a butterfly perched on the top of an old handmade apple pipe with a fully packed bowl of Winnipeg's finest weed. I'm not sure you would find this type of scenario anywhere else in the world

**Can you talk about some of the recurring characters in your work? Who are they, and what is your relationship to them?**

Most of the subjects in my work are friends, family, and acquaintances who I develop personal relationships with. I think I am approachable, and people trust me and I trust people, and this lends itself to my work. For instance, my friend Carole. She is my friend Hana's grandma who asked me to come take semi-nude photographs in her apartment for her online dating account. We now go for walks by the river and play Bingo occasionally. Another example would be the time I met this shirtless guy on the street. He had a broken arm and two broken fingers on his other hand. I offered him a bit of my donut and we got to talking, and now "Dragon" and I—he never gave me his real name—go for coffee and hang out every once in a blue moon. I've never been one to judge and have always found it fruitful to be inviting and sincere with strangers. Sometimes it gets me in trouble, but I'm a smooth talker. You have to be in Winnipeg, since this will often get you out of dangerous or harmful situations.

**It seems your dad appears in many of your photographs.**

My dad often appears in my work because I spend a lot of time around him. I make work about what I know and who I'm comfortable surrounding myself with, so he naturally appears in many of my photographs. He's often topless in the photos; I'm not too sure why. Maybe it's because he likes being shirtless. I imagine that's how I'll look when I'm older. The photographs of my dad become a reflection—a mirror—a self-portrait of my future self. He's one of my biggest inspirations, and I would love to make a book or a full exhibition that consists solely of images of my dad. Love you, Dad.

**That would be great, and you already have a title: *Self Portraits of My Future Self*. In general, how do the people you document respond to your representation of them, given that you're dealing with humour?**

I think the people I photograph have enough faith in me to let down any kind of barrier or mask one might put on in front of the camera. They give me the key to their vanity, and I treasure it. I've had a lot of people tell me they do not want to be photographed, and I respect that as well. If I'm still interested in photographing that particular situation, I write it down, think about what elements first sparked my interest and stage a photograph that captures a similar essence of it later. I try to develop a level of trust before I ever take a photograph or portrait. The humour, I think, acts as an entry point into the work for both the subject but also the viewer. I'm approaching the situation with a level of irony that most of the time puts the subject at ease.

**Juvenilia, crazy antics, and youthful rebellion have played a large role in your work. Is this changing as you get older?**

This question makes me sad as I can feel my work changing. The rebellion and antics are starting to fade, but that's part of life. I'm going to bed earlier and living away from my friends, but I'm also finding new ways of working, so I think it's a good thing. The youthful and playful aspects of my work are still there because







that's just my personality, but the process is becoming, I think, more developed, and the juvenile subtext has evolved into something more subtle and sophisticated. As I get older, my photographic practice is being challenged by a newfound sense of abject. I am still trying to explore themes of rebellion and angst but, perhaps, in a more reserved way through the use of satire.

**You, and many other Winnipeg artists, recently lost your entire body of work in a devastating studio fire. How are you dealing with this? Have you been able to recover any of it digitally? Is there any optimism in this, like an opportunity to start fresh, a clean slate? Given the nature of your work, do you feel this was also like losing your personal archive?**

When I first got the email about the fire, I was devastated, pissed off, and depressed for a long time. Imagine losing everything you've collected and made over the past ten years, every work you've ever created, every photograph and print, gone. I was really sad and struggled to figure out how I was going to move forward with art making and how this event would influence my future processes. But now, being in a master's program at the University of Victoria, the fire has been a blessing in disguise. I'm making new work with no notion of past work, a fresh start for me; however, I have some photographic work from my digital archive which I have been using in new and experimental ways. As an emerging artist thrown into a new environment with a new studio and cohort, I feel like the possibilities are endless. I can develop new ways of working and can push and explore new avenues related to photography. That being said, I know so many people who have lost so much in that fire and my heart still aches for them.

**In the past, most of your work was shot on film using what is many point-and-shoot photographers' camera of choice: the Olympus Stylus Epic. Recently, you have started shooting digital. Is this due to the rising cost of film, or is this connected to your recent loss? How has shooting digitally changed your practice?**

I've recently transitioned into digital. It's allowed me to experiment with the image, not thinking about the photograph as something precious or formulaic. I make so many more images and take photographs of things not possible with shitty cameras. I do miss the accessibility of small toy cameras, but as digital cameras are becoming smaller and more refined, I'm more content using them. It's also so much more convenient to see the images instantly. Having lost most of my cameras in the fire, it seemed like a good time to make the switch. Plus, the cost of film has gone through the roof. Who has thirty bucks for a roll of Porta? I'm not much of a gear nerd, but with digital cameras you can blow up a photograph as big as you want with seemingly no consequences. I have been playing a lot with scale.

**I think I have a Porta app for my iPhone. It may be a dated discussion, but what are your thoughts on iPhoneography?**

I think it can be used super successfully and strategically in terms of making art. After losing my photographic archive, the photograph isn't as precious to me anymore. The memes, screenshots, and blurry photographs taken on my drunken walks home and stored on my iPhone are just as important to my artistic practice as analogue photography at this point.

**It might be too early to determine, but has your work changed since you moved to Victoria?**

It has been an adjustment moving to Victoria for sure. Everything here is so clean, and the people are so wealthy. I've found myself wandering graveyards, and this has been a huge inspiration for me. It reminds me of when I would go to graveyards super late at night with

friends and get into trouble with no repercussions. A quiet place that reminds me of home and teenage memories. I also love ghosts, and apparently Victoria is a haunted place. We will see where this new investigation will take me.

**Ironically, Winnipeg has a rich history of spirit photography. How are you approaching this research? Are you attempting to use photography to capture spirits or, like most spirit photography, will this also be staged?**

I'm interested in the history of spirit photography and local myths revolving around ghost and ectoplasmic seances. Winnipeg's history of spirit photography has been a stepping stone for me into thinking about the photograph as something that is always truthful. These early seance photographs were staged, faked, and sold to the public as real, confirmed cases of supernatural phenomena—documentation of real events. As we look back on them now, they're almost comically bad hoaxes. But at the time, no one questioned the authenticity of a photograph. Exploiting photography's ability to lie is something I have been interested in for a long time. I'm not taking the notion of the spirit literally but employing the use of "spooky" tropes, symbolism, and irony to make the work less solemn in order to explore serious subject matter like death and the afterlife.

**This is one of the things about your photography that resonates with me; that is, the juxtaposition of irony, humour, and playfulness with sincerity. You use humour as a way to approach a deeper truth, not as a way to undercut it or disavow it. Can you talk about your use of humour in making visual art?**

Humour has always been an accessible entry point for me, both in the work of others, as well as in my own image-making process. I'm drawn to juxtapositions that might seem unearthly or ghostly, and that use cultural references to poke fun or tease out ideas that are perverse and absurd. The way I display my work further brings out the humorous qualities of the image by creating a level of ambiguity, confusion or an incongruous narrative. It's through this type of fragmentation that I'm exploring new avenues of playfulness.

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Notes:

1. By trash culture, I am referring to what is considered by some as without cultural or artistic value. I believe Wiebe's work challenges certain perceived hierarchical structures of culture and art. It is difficult to precisely define this concept, since the boundaries outlining what is considered high or low forms of culture are always in flux, but here is an illustration provided by cultural theorist Siobhan Lyons: "Anybody who has read or is familiar with Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), for instance, will appreciate the merging of theory and trash in such essays as 'The World of Wrestling' and 'Toys,' in which Barthes shows how useful these so-called 'trashy' elements are for society" (ii). See: Siobhan Lyons, "Trash of the Titans: An Introduction to Trash Culture," *Trash Culture Journal* 1.1 (Winter 2013).

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Images:

Page 58: Graham Wiebe, *Apple Pipe*, 2017. Archival inkjet print.  
Page 60: Graham Wiebe, *Carole*, 2014. Archival inkjet print.  
Graham Wiebe, *Please Don't Smoke, I Might Croak*, 2020. Key, air freshener, notepad, stainless steel, clamps, plastic skeleton hand.  
Graham Wiebe, *Raccoons*, 2019. Archival inkjet print.  
Page 61: Graham Wiebe, *Plastic Plants*, 2018. Archival inkjet print. All images courtesy of the artist.