Jeff Wall suggests that we look at his photographs the way we might read a poem. In a recent interview, he stated: "People relate to photographs by looking through them at what is in them, not at them, as pictures... Most people think that photographs are simple because they are accompanied with a lot of verbal description. Take away the verbal description, you get into the pure picture—and then you have to relate to it as a poem." With their emotive and unusual subjects, carefully structured compositions, and abstract, open-ended narratives, his pictures use visual elements similarly to how poems use language. Wall's photographs demand close examination, and they reward our attention through the cultural questions they provoke and the consistent ways in which they question and push our understanding of the photographic medium.

For the Bank of America Project Gallery at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, Wall presents three photographs that vary in scale and differ in their manner of production. Each depicts low-income individuals inhabiting city streets. Marginalized people navigating the city has been a recurrent subject for the artist since he first began presenting his works in the 1970s, evolving out of his close observation of the changing environment of his home city of Vancouver. The city's rapid urban development in the 1970s and '80s displaced homeless people, and many of them came to inhabit the streets near Wall's studio.

Approach (2014) is a large black-and-white photograph that presents a street scene in which a black woman, wrapped in blanket, approaches a low shelter made from cardboard boxes. A shoe protrudes from the shelter, but it is unclear whether it has been discarded or if it is worn by someone lying within the boxes. Two shopping carts are included in the scene, one close to the structure, and another farther away to the right, giving the picture a diagonal sense of depth. The walls behind the structure are made of textured concrete, and the dull lighting recalls the fluorescence of highway underpasses. At first glance, the female figure appears as if she could also be homeless, but looking closer, her carefully styled hair challenges this assumption, and we’re left to wonder: Who is this woman? Does she know the person that may be in this structure? Is she looking for someone in particular? This single image presents an intriguing, unresolved narrative. The richness, textures, and depth achieved by Wall through his use of blacks and grays enhance the photograph's quiet drama.

This work represents an amalgamation of elements and subjects that Wall observes, then reconstructs, restages, and works into a final photograph. The process to create this particular photograph might involve Wall's study of dwellings built by homeless individuals and include an investigation of lighting in spaces like this one. Amateur actors would be hired to play a particular role in the piece. Much of the resulting photo's composition is developed during the process of putting the scene together. Its objects, characters, and lighting exposures all adapt to the variables experienced during the shoot. Wall describes his approach to photography as "cinematographic," in that he mixes both fiction and fact.

---

in a manner similar to that of an experimental filmmaker. His methods take inspiration from avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s and ’70s, such as Ingmar Bergman, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Stanley Kubrick, who mixed scripted with improvised scenes, and recordings of found scenes with composed studio shots. Wall is credited with emphasizing the constructed or artificial nature of photography, rather than highlighting its traditionally understood position as the quintessential medium of reportage. What is less recognized in Wall’s practice is how he consistently shifts between constructed and found images, continually blurring the lines between artifice and documentation.

Searcher (2007), also included in this project gallery, is a documentary image. The artist was driving along the street when he observed a figure crouched close to the asphalt, looking for something along the sidewalk. Wall quickly took a photograph using a Nokia phone. This process recalls the tradition of street photography, exemplified by the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson wrote extensively about “the decisive moment,” placing value on capturing a fleeting scene or an individual’s expression, most often recorded in urban environments. In Searcher, the found image is refracted through the simple technology Wall uses. The digital camera phone produces a rough, pixilated image, similar to a video still. Through it, the green wall, gray concrete, and royal blue of the figure’s jacket are all depicted in saturated tones, giving the overall image an abstract and expressionist character.

The large-format color photograph Intersection (2008) also depicts individuals in an urban environment. The flat, triangular shape created by the green grass in the foreground is juxtaposed with the densely layered details of the architecture, streets signs, and shop awnings in the background. Bright red details and a burgundy minivan create a strong contrast with the green of the grass that dominates half the composition. At the center of the image are two men with haggard faces, dressed in worn clothing. An older man addresses the slightly younger man, who sucks deeply on a cigarette. In a manner similar to Approach, this image poetically suggests unresolvable questions about the subjects it depicts. The position of these men within the image feels staged, a
sensation accentuated by the many formal elements that point toward them at the center of the picture. The artist, however, encountered these men accidentally. He had gone to this site with a large-format camera to shoot something else, but then turned his camera to the street and quickly captured these men passing on the street.

While Wall's depiction of people living on the street grew out of his observations of his immediate environment in Vancouver, it has continued to engage him as he has begun to shoot in other urban centers. Wall has recently produced a series of photographs (including Approach) at locations in Los Angeles. These depictions of marginalized subjects are additionally tied to the artist's interest in traditions of realism within art history, and a desire to incorporate everyday, contemporary subjects into a longer tradition of art. In today's wealth-saturated art market, Wall's depictions of homeless individuals also take on a critical edge, pointing to harsh economic disparities in our society. In the context of Miami, his images recall the many individuals that live in the streets just blocks from the museum, along the vacant lots that have yet to be filled as part of Miami's expansive urban development.

Wall's photographs ask to be read distinctly as pictures, as visual poems. Each of the figures in these images plays an intricate role in his complex and enigmatic works. As these photographs slow the viewer's reception of them and demand our active engagement, they complicate the subjects and individuals they depict. Through this process, they facilitate new ways of thinking and looking, forming new imaginaries; not just for the medium of photography and its future manifestations, but for new social imaginaries as well.

Tobias Ostrander
Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs
Project Gallery: Jeff Wall
October 22, 2015–January 17, 2016

Jeff Wall
b. 1946, Vancouver; lives in Vancouver

All works courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Approach, 2014
Silver gelatin print
74 1/8 x 94 7/8 inches

Searcher, 2007
Inkjet print
10 1/2 x 14 3/8 inches

Intersection, 2008
Lightjet print
79 1/2 x 99 1/4 inches

Project Gallery: Jeff Wall is organized by Pérez Art Museum Miami Chief Curator Tobias Ostrander. The exhibition is presented by Bank of America with support provided by Knight Foundation.