

Neil Wedman

STUDY FOR BLACK BRIDE

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BY CHRIS BRAYSHAW

Artist's Statement (2000)

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Artist's Statement (1992)

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Neil Wedman
by Chris Brayshaw, 1999

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Study for Black Bride, 1990

graphite pencil drawing on
paper
(43.3 x 35.7 cm)
SAG 1991.05.01

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Neil Wedman was born in Vancouver in 1954. His father, Les Wedman, was a noted film critic for *The Vancouver Province*, and many of Wedman's best works are indebted to his interest in film, an interest encouraged by his parents from an early age. Wedman studied at the Vancouver School of Art



Neil Wedman, *Study for Black Bride*, 1990, graphite pencil drawing on paper (44.3 x 35.7 cm) SAG 1991.05.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

between 1973 and 1977, graduating with a degree in Media Communications. He teaches painting and drawing at art and film schools, and at universities in Vancouver. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Equinox Gallery, Anodyne Contemporary, Or Gallery, Contemporary Art Gallery and the Western Front. In December 1999, *Burlesck: A Novel*, a collection of his drawings, was published by Advance Editions, an imprint of Arsenal Pulp Press.

Though Wedman has occasionally made photographs and short films (including the wonderfully titled *Mars Needs Helen*, 1981), he is primarily known for his work as a figurative painter. Wedman's painting practice draws from Ashcan school realism; nineteenth century *fin de siècle* decadence; and the satirical drawings of artists like Goya and Daumier. In the twentieth century, following the arguments of modernist critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, advanced painting is largely seen as a kind of radical abstraction, one from which all signs of popular culture have been purged. Wedman's works challenge the hegemony of abstraction and modernist theory by producing large scale figurative images rooted in depictions of the body and scenes lifted from popular culture. Thus, Wedman has produced images based on cheesy 1950s sci-fi films; film sets; "popular" art scenes like poker-playing dogs; and, most recently, figurative drawings based on compositions found in racy 1950s men's magazine gag cartoons. Often, his work applies the scale of nineteenth century history painting to events which, from a historical perspective, would seem unsuited to it. Thus, for instance, his loving recreation of the banned "nude" cover of Jimi Hendrix's album *Electric Ladyland*, or his mural-size rendition of Vancouver's Gastown Riots, in which pot-smoking hippies and riot-baton wielding police take on the appearance

of classical figures in a Jacques-Louis David or a Theodore Gericault painting. In this way, Wedman encourages viewers to think about modernism's shadow-side; that is to say, situations and events, mostly rooted in popular culture and social conflict, which were held by modernist artists and theorists as unrepresentable, and therefore excluded from ongoing discussions around painting's evolution in the late 20th century. Thus, while nominally a painter, Wedman's pictorial practice is far closer to the work of American Conceptual artists like Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari than the work of his Vancouver contemporaries.

Study for Black Bride (1990, Surrey Art Gallery Permanent Collection) is a large working drawing for Wedman's painting of the same name. Thematically, the image is one of a number of images based around critically outmoded gothic/symbolist imagery. Wedman had observed goths on the street in Vancouver, whose dress and appearance provoke and critique mainstream culture through the theatrical invocation of outmoded conventions, and wondered if it might be possible to accomplish the same kind of critique in visual art. Formally, the drawing moves from gestural abstraction near its base to a fully rendered female nude near its top. Here, contrary to modernist theory, naturalistic form emerges from pure abstraction. In this way the "purity" of modernist abstraction is cheerfully corrupted. The drawing also operates as an allegory of the way that Wedman's pictorial practice has been received by many Vancouver viewers, who were perfectly content with the lyrical, nature-based abstractions of artists like Gordon Smith and Toni Onley, or the messy, "expressive" figuration of the Young Romantics, but much less sure about figuration which evoked the *appearance* of expressive sincerity, only to subvert it from within.



Artist's Statement (2000)

The *Black Bride* drawing is one of a number of life studies in pencil done in preparation for a large double portrait titled *The Brides*. This latter picture dates around 1989, as do most of the studies, and depicts two Brides attired in traditional, albeit grotesquely ornate, white gowns standing in a forest glade and gazing upon a blank, featureless globe of the earth. *The Brides* is executed in graphite and linseed oil on linen and measures 8' x 8'. Most of the studies were drawn directly from nude models in the studio, delirious patterns of brocade and masses of fabric were later drawn onto the figures as if the gowns were an organic outgrowth of the body itself. For some reason, the gown in one study was rendered in a thick build-up of black graphite and the result is this drawing.

Artist's Statement (1992)

This particular study...was worked and reworked over a period of time probably extending beyond the execution and completion of the larger composition. This is the only example of a black bride extant in my work on this subject and there is no final counterpart or more finished version as the title *Study for Black Bride* suggests....

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