

WILLIAM **WEGMAN**



INSTANT MIAMI

William Wegman: Instant Miami

I

It is the early to mid 1980s. I am in the confusion of preadolescent wonder about my identity, my *Cubanidad*. Holiday and summer trips to south Florida to see *familia* in Miami have left me more unsure, as I see constant examples of what a Cuban Man should look and sound like. Raised in the deep south of northeast Florida, where we lived, I could not find myself in the ways Cuban Miamians dressed, wore their hair, or spoke—at once familiar and yet foreign to me. The southern culture outside my family home did not have room for *musica Cubana* or *arroz con frijoles*; for street-level domino games; or the Spanish language gatherings of *viejitas* reciting together a rosary for the dead, for their children, for their home.

One Saturday morning on *Calle Ocho*, the main drag in Miami's Little Havana, I am 12 or 13. We are waiting in an energetic cluster at a cafeteria window for our breakfast of *pan Cubano y café con leche*, when down the street comes a beautiful ham-sandwich of a car: red with white ragtop dropped down and wide, whitewall tires, stacked with beautiful young adults in clothes that, even at that age, I know are wildly sexy. I am instantaneously drawn to this image, my eyes fix on elaborate dress hems and wide jacket collars. In this same instant I feel my father's hand cupping my head and turning my eyes away from this surprise vision, protecting me from an image of self by which I am immediately seduced. I do not get the sense from my father's gesture that these are bad people, only that this is something grown-up. Not for kids. Not for me.

II

I am talking with William Wegman in his studio. It is 2018. I am curious about the series of events that led to his being in Miami in 1984 with a large format, instant camera taking photographs of young Cuban nightclub performers at Les Violins, the historic site of Cuban cabaret-style lounge acts in Little Havana.

Wegman was invited by the University of Miami's Lowe Art Museum to visit Miami and take in the city through the eyes of an artist, with an agreement to show the as-yet unmade work at the Lowe later that year. He spent a week, primarily in three locations: South Beach, Grove Isle, and Les Violins. The exhibition took a name that played with both the nature of the photographic process and popular ideas of the city: *Instant Miami*.

Instant Miami—even the title hints at a deception. The large-format camera Wegman used in Miami was described as an “instant” camera. But this was not the popular, small, hand-held, easy-to-operate Polaroid cameras whose white-bordered 3.3-inch by 4.3-inch photos had been imprinted upon our culture's imagination as an “instant” photograph. The 20-inch x 24-inch Polaroid Land camera Wegman used in Florida was refrigerator-sized. It was one of only five made by the Polaroid Corporation and it had been specially flown from New York to Florida for this shoot. Setting up the large camera for the shoot was not quick. It required assistants to move it and set up strobe lighting and a Polaroid technician to operate its finicky mechanics. The unique 20 x 24 inch image did develop within minutes—“instant” in an era when photographers had to process film and print in a darkroom, and with its analog chemistry and visible artifacts of the development process's physicality, “instant” in appearance—but the process was anything but quick and easy.

Wegman first became known in the early 1970s as an important innovator in the developing medium of video. “My first instant material, I suppose, was video,” explains Wegman, describing the playback system which allowed him to immediately see what he had shot. But the large-format 20 x 24 Polaroid was something else entirely and Wegman found the camera and the process oddly inspiring. “Lugging this obscenely large, not very cooperative camera to extreme locations. It’s formidable.” Prior to Miami, he’d taken the 20 x 24 camera to Maine, where challenges were quite different than what awaited him in south Florida.

When Wegman arrived in Miami he spent several days scouting locations with Manuel Gonzalez, the director of the Holly Solomon Gallery who represented Wegman. Gonzalez knew both Miami and Wegman well and, suspecting a shared aesthetic, brought him to see Les Violins and to meet the people who inhabited this theatrical space. Les Violins was all the rage among Miami Cubans. This cabaret-style nightclub on Biscayne Boulevard had transferred an element of *Cubanidad* from La Habana to Miami with live bands and tropical dancers—a swanky night out for a special occasion. With their enthusiastic participation, Wegman settled into photographing the Les Violins performers for most of the duration of his time in Miami. “Les Violins turned out to be great for many reasons. The cast, the sets... It was really a treasure to find that. And everyone loved working on this project. ‘We are making history!’ one of the performers said.”

Wegman also brought the camera outdoors, onto the beach, capturing the city and its residents as abiding expressions of community and family, in which transgressive gestures such as smoking babies, kids in wigs, or public dancing become a unifying force against the opposition or indifference of the world around it. These images may have been the less comfortable, more compelling story of Miami that led to some of the local art reviewers’ cool reception when they first appeared at the Lowe.

Looking at the pictures 35 years later, in 2018, I remember that morning in the ’80s on *Calle Ocho* with my father. I think of this as a mythical space in *Cubanidad* that I didn’t have access to as a child on family trips. Now that I’m an adult and have children of my own, I can look at these images of Les Violins and think: *Oh, these are families.*

The photographs possess a richness and immediacy, framing and sense of light and color—the formal details of making a great photograph—long associated with this artist. They also provide evidence of his wit, establishing contexts for the wry and ridiculous constructions of people, objects, materials, and space with which Wegman populates them. They make me laugh and remember, and they make me laugh at my remembering. And while they make me laugh and I find them indeed quite funny, I would not call them funny pictures, I would not describe them as comical.

In Wegman’s *Instant Miami* photos, the subjects mug and ham it up, ignore all subtlety, express with their gestures and countenances an over-the-top theatricality that often stands in stark contrast to their surroundings. Miami, with all its efforts towards high culture and cosmopolitanism, yet still replete with evidence of just how far from these ideals it remained, is the backdrop shared by all these images. How can an image be at once hilarious *and* seedy *and* familial *and* alluring?

III

In March of 2018 I spoke with my mother, Carmen Gil Carmona, and asked her if she remembered a nightclub with shows in Miami, “I know we didn’t live there, Mami, but do you remember a place at all where they had cabaret shows and...”

“A, *si*, *Los Violines*”—the French name rendered Spanish by Cubans in the United States. It turns out my mother not only had memories of that place, but had gone there twice with my father: once as a gift from her uncle and once with a group of nuns who lived together in a house directly behind the club.

My mother remembers, “...we attended a wedding which was beautiful and afterward my *tio* Nino invited us to go with everyone to *Los Violines*, and Papi and I looked ashamed because we could not afford to go, but *tio* Nino, without even a pause, said he was inviting everyone, and so we went. It was fantastic...”

“The next time, we were visiting the convent *Las Hermanas Filipenses*. It was next door to the club and one of the younger nuns said, ‘Let’s go to *Les Violins* and have a sandwich,’ because in the daytime you could do that, just have a simple sandwich and a drink, but no show going on. Well, while we were in there, the head sister showed up and scolded us all for being in that club and for drinking wine in the daytime. She made us leave the club. The younger sisters, me, your father, all of us.”

IV

When William Wegman’s *Instant Miami* images were exhibited at the Lowe Art Museum, shortly after their whirlwind production in Miami, reviews were cool. Or they attempted to be. The project was compared with Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Surrounded Islands*, installed the previous year in Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami. Islands in the waterway were surrounded with wide rings of vivid pink cloth. This project had been a sensation and a big deal for a city putting energy into making itself visible as a cosmopolitan capital. *Surrounded Islands* gave the city space to enjoy and promote the Miami it wanted to be without thinking too much about itself.

Reading the reviews now, the descriptions of the circumstances of Wegman’s Miami project are telling about the city at that time. The almost defensive response to the images points to a Miami before the scale and savvy of Art Basel and its attendant circus. It was a city more cosmopolitan, by far, than the state sprawling out above it, but still provincial enough to be bothered by an image of itself in candid, apparently ridiculous reflection. The wry nature of these images rests upon the sites of a city that, in time, matured into a slick self-awareness and finish-fetish, surface treatments, and a hot sense of presentation. In the time before this maturation, however, the reviews of *Instant Miami* suggest a self-consciousness that wants to be taken so seriously that it fails to find humor when it feels its gravity challenged.

I can understand why someone in Miami’s art world might say, “This is not the Miami we want people to see,” then and even now. But now, as then, such a response to *Instant Miami* misses the point.

V

When William Wegman made the *Instant Miami* images, he was, in his words, “between dogs.” Man Ray, his video and photography muse, had died two years earlier. As such, making *Instant Miami*, says Wegman, “was really a good thing for me. I think it forced me, challenged me, in some ways to not use the crutch of the dog.”

Wegman’s photographs of his Weimaraners are widely celebrated, iconic images. Time spent in his studio, and at *Please Stand By*, the exhibition of his early drawings and videos at Lafayette College in 2017, reveal an artist who works in a wide range of media and directions. Wegman was a performance artist and video artist when people were still working out exactly what this meant; he continues to make videos and drawings and paintings and to take photographs. When he talks about the crutch of the dogs, it sounds like an artist who almost wasn’t sure what to do without them. But that sentiment is flatly defied by his deep and wide-ranging practice. “I had a really easy time working without the dogs actually. Before Fay and her puppies, there was Man Ray. He was my partner in a way where you go to the studio and he’d be on standby. When I got Fay in 1987, three years after Man Ray died, I didn’t think that I’d be photographing her. But John Reuter, the man who ran the Polaroid studio in New York and who had brought the camera down to Miami for *Instant Miami*, said, ‘Bill, come back to the Polaroid studio. You have a new dog. We’ve got to get back to work.’ So I just went and it was great. Fay loved it and I loved it again too.” He continues, “But in this period between Man Ray and Fay Ray, I made some of the worst pictures that I ever took! But I also made some of the most interesting.... That’s part of the risk of being an artist—getting somewhere with your work and not knowing where you are. I think it’s healthy.”

VI

Instant Miami recalls for me a deeply personal moment in my own childhood when I saw examples of my own identity that exploded the narrow way in which I had, until then, constructed it. The young people rising out of that red convertible on *Calle Ocho* revealed a kind of Cuban I had not before seen up close. Something like me that was forbidden! I soon dove deep into learning all I could about my own and Cuba’s histories. Visiting family there now, in areas of Miami like Hialeah, I am far likelier to see culture expressed in ways that resemble *Instant Miami* than Art Basel. William Wegman’s Polaroids make me laugh with remembering, but they also make me laugh with how current they still are.

Nestor Armando Gil
Easton, Pennsylvania
2018

Nestor Armando Gil was born in the deep south of North Florida to Cuban immigrants. He is Associate Professor of Art at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania. Operating at the crossroads of sculpture, performance, and new media practices, he produces installations, situations, and events that explore ideas of journey, borders, and interactivity. A graduate of UNC Chapel Hill’s MFA program in studio art, Nestor has shown work widely, observing his own motto, “I make and I do, and as an artist I make do.”

An illustrated catalog is in production. Please provide your contact information to the gallery monitor if you wish to receive a copy.

William Wegman Instant Miami

Opening Act, 1984
Smoking, 1984
Child's Play, 1984
Inferno, 1984
Show Off, 1984
Here's to Photography, 1984
Tub Set, 1984
Blind Ambition, 1984
Showing, 1984

Audience Solo, 1984
Side Walking, 1984
Lift and Let Lie, 1984
Beach Scene, 1984

Flag, 1984
Typical, 1984
Netted Abstract, 1984
Shipped Shapes, 1984

Welcome Club, 1984
Dual Function, 1984, diptych
Scary, 1984

Curtain Wall, 1984
Past Present Future, 1984

All images: 24 inches high x 20 inches wide; taken in 1984 with a 20x24-inch Polaroid Land Camera; Polacolor II film; Courtesy of the artist © William Wegman, 1984.

Front cover: Opening Act, 1984



Lift and Let Lie, 1984



William Wegman with the 20x24 Polaroid Camera, Miami, 1984. Photo © John Reuter, 1984.

LAFAYETTE ART GALLERIES

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An illustrated catalogue is in production. Please email artgallery@lafayette.edu for information.