

Museum
Of
**Contemporary
Art**

Toronto Canada



Educator Resource: Secondary

Jeff Wall Photographs 1984–2023

October 19, 2025 — March 22, 2026

Exhibition Overview

Jeff Wall's exhibition, aptly titled *Jeff Wall Photographs 1984–2023*, fills all three floors of MOCA Toronto. This show features over 50 of his pictures from his four-decade-long career. Students are invited to explore the museum filled with his unique approach to photography: large back-lit cibachrome light boxes.



Wall prints his large photos on transparent paper and illuminates them from behind, a display style usually used for advertisements. Here, Wall uses this technique to display his photographs as fine art, rather than an ad at a bus stop. His subject matter ranges from landscapes and interiors, to explorations of texture and detail, to posed commentary on societal issues and human interactions.

These photographs have been exhibited around the world. Each museum presents the same photographs in different ways, shaped by the exhibition space, the curators choices and the individual perspectives of each visitor. Here at MOCA Toronto, Wall returns to his home country of Canada.

This resource supplements visits to MOCA Toronto during Jeff Wall's 2025–2026 exhibition. It is designed for educators: offering context, discussion questions and in-class activities that consider the Ontario Curriculum for Visual Art, English and Media Studies.



About the Artist

Jeff Wall, born in Vancouver in 1946, has exhibited his large-scale installations internationally for forty years. Wall is a celebrated photographer, art historian and writer. He is an Officer of the Order of Canada and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and his art is held in numerous public and private collections in Canada around the world.

Themes

Reality v. Fiction:

Jeff Wall's images show ordinary people in overlooked moments, including labourers, immigrants, and unhoused people, giving visibility and dignity to those typically excluded from art.

Staging & Performance:

Wall is known for elaborately staged photographs that mimic candid moments. He disrupts the idea of photography as only a form of objective documentation, showing instead that meaning can be crafted.

References:

Wall directly references classical painting and literary traditions, translating their themes and composition into contemporary photography.

Human Interaction:

His work explores modern urban life and feelings of detachment and quiet suffering. Interior and exterior spaces reflect emotional isolation or powerful institutions.



Guiding Questions

Jeff Wall calls his photos “cinematographic” as he stages them like films, creating recreations of scenes he has seen or imagined. **Can you see that some of these images are staged? Why or why not?**

These photos are not documentary, as the scenes include actors and are carefully created. **Thinking about your day-to-day life, what tools do you use to figure out what is real and what might be edited, generated or staged? Why is it important to know what is true and what is not?**

The photographs in this exhibition are carefully staged, but people also use photography as journalism, for proof or to represent reality accurately. **How does Wall's photographs challenge traditional notions of photographic truth and representation?**

In his photography, Wall often tells stories of events he has witnessed. **What other mediums do people use to tell a story that has plot, themes and meaning? What is your favourite?**

Wall's photographs often feature observations on social, political, and environmental topics. **Did any photo stand out to you? What issues or topics did you recognize in his work?**

Ontario Curriculum Connections

Activity | Visual Studies

Grades 9–10

Jeff Wall's photographs explore core themes in both visual art, visual studies and media studies. This exhibition features images that blur the line between reality and fiction, prompting students to analyze media production, public perception, and context-based interpretation. This exhibition can enhance students' understanding of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of contemporary photography.

Prompt

Students each choose a photograph and communicate its imagery, context and message through a different medium. Students will create new narratives that question or challenge its original meaning.

Suggestions

- **Interview:** Using the figures in the image, record an interview between yourself and the character(s).
- **News Report:** Pretending that this art is an example of photojournalism, develop a front-page news story that reports on the social issue or event depicted.
- **Fictional Narrative:** develop a short story where the image serves as a visual representation and inspires the themes.
- **Music:** Think of your chosen photo as an album cover. Create a title, an artist, then create a track list. Write a song inspired by the photograph.



Guiding Questions

- How does Wall use composition and setting to tell a story in his photographs?
- What narrative or message are you constructing through your soundscape, and how does it relate to or challenge the original photograph?
- In what ways can a staged photograph still convey a sense of truth?

Learning Objectives

This learning workshop introduces students to the themes explored in Wall's exhibition, encouraging them to analyze how the artist communicates narrative through visual media.

Ontario Curriculum Connection
Visual Studies | Grade 9 – 10

A.1 The Creative Process
A.3 Production and Presentation

Ontario Curriculum Connections

Activity | Media Studies

Grades 11-12

Bring this exhibition into your English or Media Studies classroom with Jeff Wall's inventive imagery, cinematic techniques, and storytelling. This exhibition and following activity encourage your students to analyze and critically engage with visual media, deconstruct codes and conventions, and consider how power, identity, and narrative are represented through art.

Prompt

After your visit to *Jeff Wall: Photographs 1984–2023*, reflect on one photograph that stood out to you—whether because of its subject, composition, emotion, or story.

Imagine that your chosen photograph is the centrepiece of an advertising campaign. What product, idea, or message could this image promote? How would the photo's meaning shift when placed in a commercial context? How can we use text, logos to persuade potential consumers? For example, *Fieldwork*, 2003. (Top right) could be reimagined into an outdoor apparel advertisement, selling hiking boots.

Learning Objective

This activity prompts students to consider photography not just as art, but as a form of media that shapes culture, values, and creates consumeristic desires. Wall's photography connects with current discussions around photo editing, image generation and media literacy in a changing world.



Activity steps

1. **Select your photo.** Write down the original title of your photo and why you selected it
2. **Plan and design your advertising campaign.** What are you advertising? It could be a product, a cause, or an idea. Consider: who is your target audience? What colours, fonts, and writing style would reach my audience? Why?
3. **Reflect.** How does the image influence its addressed audience? What emotions does the ad evoke? How does this sell your message? Write about your thoughts.

Ontario Curriculum Connection
Media Studies | Grade 11 – 12

1.2 Interpreting Messages
1.5 Critical Literacy
2.2 Conventions and Techniques



Online Resources

Watch

[Jeff Wall: Retrospective](#) (2007) directed by Michael Blackwood

[Jeff Wall Interview: Pictures Like Poems](#) (2015) distributed by Louisiana Channel

[Jeff Wall in "Vancouver"](#) (2016) distributed by PBS Broadcasting

Read

[Why the photographer Jeff Wall relies on memory — not his camera — to make his art](#) (2021) published by NPR, written by Susan Stamberg.

[Jeff Wall - A Closer Look](#) published by Cluster London, written by Kieran McMullan.

Image Credits

All photographs in this guide are by Jeff Wall.

The Guitarist, 1987. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall. Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland.

Passerby, 1996. Gelatin silver print. © Jeff Wall. Collection of Alan Hergott and Curt Shepard. Promised gift to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Bad Goods, 1984. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund.

Children, 1988. Nine transparencies in light boxes. © Jeff Wall.

Insomnia, 1994. Transparency in light box. © Giverny Capital Collection

Fieldwork. Excavation of the floor of a dwelling in a former Sto:lo nation village, Greenwood Island, Hope, B.C., August, 2003, Anthony Graesch, Dept. of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles, working with Riley Lewis of the Sto:lo band, 2003. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall.

In front of a nightclub, 2006. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Katherine S. Schamberg by exchange, 2006.30.a–c.