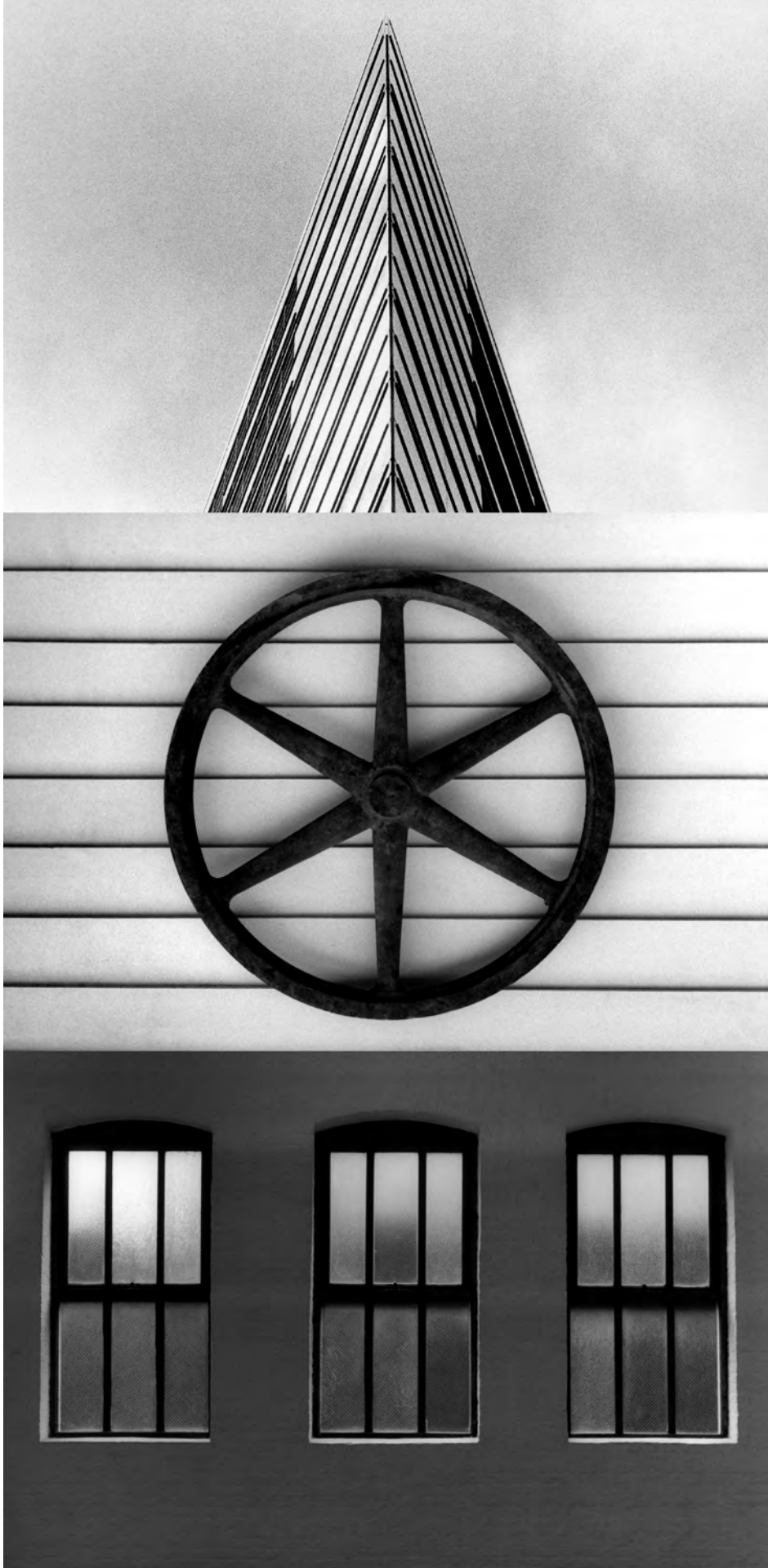


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Photographic Collage, 27 x 14 in.



Convergences, Chance Discoveries, and Going Back to Kindergarten

Dan White in conversation
with Lawrence Weschler

Lawrence Weschler has long been fascinated by Wunderkammern—Renaissance-style miniature museums housing collections of wildly disparate materials. Imagine a set of drawers stuffed with mud wasp nests, jewels of uncertain provenance, doll parts, charts, maps, styluses, stuffed birds, glass eyes, potions, and rusty old sextants.

A classic Wunderkammer, or “cabinet of curiosities,” is not strictly scientific. Some groupings are more intuitive than taxonomic. Part of the charm, and the mystery, comes from the power of objects in juxtaposition. Place two things from different categories next to one another. Chances are, these objects will find something to talk about. Just for a moment, take a look around the room where you are now. Find the two objects that have the least in common: a camera tripod and a container of raw clover honey, a container of Advil and a Sharpie permanent marker, a blank CD and a battered Walkman. Place them next to each other. You may be surprised by the overlaps that emerge as you ponder them.

The Wunderkammer figures repeatedly in Weschler’s work, as a subject, a context, or a metaphor. A contemporary version of a Wunderkammer—the puckish, semi-veracious Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles—is the sub-

ject of one of Weschler’s best-known works, Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder (1995), while a recent book, Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences (2006), is in effect its own cabinet of curiosities, complete with exhibits in juxtaposition and Weschler’s thoughts about them. A similar attitude underlies his collections Vermeer in Bosnia (2004) and Uncanny Valley (2011), companion volumes that Weschler describes as “wildly disparate [but] thematically braided.” In fact, Weschler’s body of work—starting with the book that launched his career as a lauded creative nonfiction writer, Seeing Is Forgetting The Name of the Thing One Sees (1982), a study of Robert Irwin, the Los Angeles artist “who one day got hooked on his own curiosity and decided to live it”—can be seen as a Wunderkammer in its own right.

While his subjects range widely, his books can be arranged in pairs. For instance, it is impossible to really get where he’s going with the Mr. Wilson book, and its assertions about truth, fiction, process, product, and static performance art, unless you also read Boggs: A Comedy of Values (1999). By the same token, you’ll get the maximum benefit from reading Calamities of Exile (1998) in conjunction with A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts With Torturers (1998). Nor will you enjoy the full benefit of a mighty debate about figuration and post-cubist art without reading his collections of interviews and writings about Robert Irwin in juxtaposition with True to Life: Twenty-five Years of Conversations with David Hockney (2008).

Weschler’s mind is famously associative, and if you happen to have a chance to speak with him—as I did for a Catamaran interview in early May—you must allow his mind to wander, taking confidence that, like a spiraling gyre, it will return to the starting point, at once familiar and, now, totally new.

Before my talk with Weschler, I read just about everything that I could get my hands on and prepared several drafts of the questions I would ask, all the while imagining my list of questions as a spool of string through a maze. I’m glad I read up on Weschler, but the prepared questions were a folly. Usually he was two or three questions ahead of me. Our conversation would loop and double back and turn so quickly that I found myself flipping through pages of questions, cutting and pasting and rearranging my queries—an unnerving thing to do when you’re right in the middle of a