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Wim Wenders keeps looking for new canvases



Wim Wenders (Jennifer S. Altman / For The Times)

NEW YORK — Wim Wenders is standing in front of an Edward Hopper painting at the Museum of Modern Art when a quizzical look comes over his face. He turns to a museum employee who has been escorting him and says, "Is the Balthus out?"

"I don't think so," she replies, scrolling quickly on her phone to check.

Wenders begins walking down a corridor, then stops about 50 feet down. "Ah, here it is," he says, gesturing at the modernist's "The Street" and its tableaux of intersecting people and narratives.

Then, turning to a reporter, he notes with characteristic counterintuitiveness: "If you know where you're going in this place, you'll never find anything."

Wenders seems to have found his way through, or to, MoMA just fine. The famed New York institution is giving the New German Cinema auteur of movies such as "Wings of Desire" and "Buena Vista Social Club" (and a fierce art-museum groupie) one of its most coveted honors — a film retrospective, which runs through next week and offers a chance for fans to see work both well-known and obscure.

The run is a part of a Wim-a-palooza of sorts ahead of the director's 70th birthday this summer, the kind of brink-of-retirement homage that is hitting even as the filmmaker—who has a penchant for short, often dryly humorous pronouncements—seems to be enjoying one of his most prolific periods in years.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

The director's new film, "The Salt of the Earth," about the Brazilian-born social photographer Sebastião Salgado, opens in Los Angeles on March 27 after being nominated for the feature documentary Oscar this year.

And at the Berlin Film Festival in February, Wenders unveiled his new scripted movie — his first in eight years — the James Franco-Rachel McAdams family tale "Every Thing Will Be Fine." Because it is Wim Wenders, and Wim Wenders likes to do things his own way, it is an intimate character drama presented in 3-D.

This all might thus seem like a strange moment for the retrospective, which encompasses 20 movies, including Wenders' first shorts from the 1960s; digital restorations of classics such as "Paris, Texas"; a showing of his early feature "The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick" (whose MoMA screening nearly 45 years ago essentially marked Wenders' arrival in the U.S.); and the director's cut of his sci-fi road movie "Until the End of the World." After all, Wenders hopes that this canon, rich as it is, isn't yet closed.

“[The MoMA retrospective] comes at a point in my life when I'm ready for it” – Wim Wenders

But after recently regaining rights to much of his library in the wake of a decade-long legal battle, Wenders wants to revel in the work a little. "It comes at a point in my life when I'm ready for it," he said, noting a foundation he's created to take control of the films so they don't slip through his hands again.

Wenders is prepared to tackle some on-screen challenges too. After the acclaimed dance documentary "Pina" in 2011, Wenders moved to a different artistic realm with "Salt."

Juliano Salgado, Sebastião's son, collaborated as a co-director on the movie after his father and Wenders began getting to know each other socially. Wenders and the younger Salgado eventually came to make a movie that explores both the photographer's personal journey of disillusionment and redemption, along with the subjects of the photos themselves.

The movie features images from the elder Salgado's trips to places such as southern Africa and the mines of Brazil over the decades, often juxtaposed with interviews of the photographer himself. (Wenders used a unique overlaying technique that allows viewers to see Salgado and his photos at the same time.)

In so doing, Wenders and the younger Salgado examine the world through a photographer's lens, with all the attendant contradictions it creates both him and his work. "Salt" is essentially a look at an artist of the counterpoise — Salgado, the movie compellingly shows, snapped

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beautiful images of brutal scenes, and the effect on both him and the photography world was significant.

Juliano Salgado describes his co-director in similarly nuanced terms.

"Wim's internal life is very complicated, and he's hard to get to know," the younger Salgado said. "But the way his emotion comes out is in work. He just has this great feeling for the people he's making movies about.

Added Salgado, "He's also very funny, which you wouldn't always know."

After gazing at the MoMA paintings, Wenders glides his tall frame into the museum's theater to introduce the shorts. They are affairs of the most experimental kind — a man staggering down the street with a gun, in a scene shown over and over, and traffic flowing on a Munich street corner for minutes at a time.

The house was packed with eager filmgoers. But before the works were screened, Wenders — peering at the audience from the podium behind his signature owl-like blue glasses — engaged in some knowing self-deprecation. "I hope you'll still come to some of the other films after you've seen these films," he deadpanned.

Wenders moved back to Berlin several years ago after a long period living in Los Angeles. He said he embraced the Southland, particularly its solitary aspects ("I would go for a jog in the hills above the city and would love that you see nothing, no living thing, except maybe a few horses"). But family and other concerns brought him back to Germany. He still makes regular trips to the States, particularly to New York on museum trips to look at paintings he's observed dozens of times before. "You have to see your old friends," he says as he walks through MoMa.

A few minutes later, Franco materializes at the museum, because that is what James Franco does, and walks up to Wenders. Franco gives him a bear hug, then begins talking — about shooting "Every Thing"; about giving Wenders a cameo role in his own new directorial effort "Zeroville" ("Larry the Hippie," Franco says; "Larry the Elderly Hippie," Wenders corrects); about a Björk exhibit at the museum; about several other matters on Franco's mind.

After Franco leaves, Wenders turns to a reporter and asks, "Do you think there's only one of him?"

Wenders is a polymath of sorts too, not least because he's the kind of artist who can toggle between art forms. Painting and photography have long been interests — early in his career, Wenders thought he might become a visual artist — and he's been known to cut up an entire book of Edward Hopper images while prepping a film.

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At MoMA, he makes sure to pay a visit to an Andrew Wyeth painting that has been particularly influential on his thinking. "I shot a scene in 'Every Thing Will Be Fine' that was an exact re-enactment. I had Charlotte [Gainsbourg] lie down in a field and everything. But I didn't include it in the movie. People would think I stole it."



Watch the trailer for "The Salt of the Earth."

Despite his close association with several other 'W' figures of New German Cinema--Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, all three born within a few years of each other--Wenders takes pains to distinguish his approach. "Fassbinder worked like crazy, made four movies every year. It was impressive, but it ultimately killed him." For all his drollery, Wenders has also not, as far as anyone knows, tried to consume footwear.

But like Herzog Wenders has, however, enjoyed an epic-sized career of the kind few filmmakers starting out today might expect to have. He's aware this longevity has made for its share of ups and downs. Asked on the occasion of the retrospective what he might do differently, he says he wish he'd never made a period film. "The past tense," he said, "is not a good working condition for me." (Viewers of his adaptation of "The Scarlet Letter" might agree.)

But he says he has gotten past those failed experiments, and like, well, a painter with a new canvas, he's eager to dip back into one of the palettes he's been using lately.

Though known for some of the most well-regarded dramas of the 20th century, Wenders has defined himself lately as a documentarian. He is now working on an ambitious project about architecture — it is, he says, a new challenge to capture artists who start with such vast blankness — and imagines more nonfiction films to come.

"When I was working in the 1970s, I was making a narrative film almost every year. But these days, it's gotten so complicated. A documentary you can shoot spontaneously, whenever you're ready. With narrative, by the time you deal with the cast and the financing and then wait for so many people's approval, four or five year have gone by. And how many five years do I have?"