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# AT HOME WITH: WILLIAM WEGMAN; A Far and 8 Paws

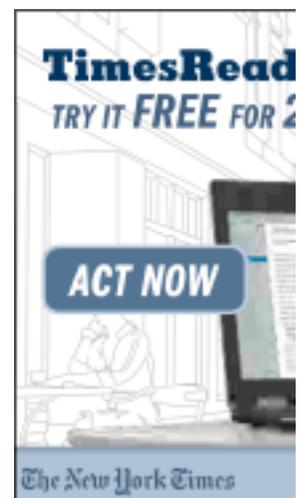
By JULIE V. IOVINE  
Published: June 10, 1999

THOSE citronella eyes, set in a velvety gray pelt, stare out from every corne studio, a sprawling converted nursery school in Chelsea. It is also the family Wegman, the conceptual artist and dog-theme merchandiser, whose fans re outpouring of videos, PBS programs, books, commercials, posters and kitch answering the siren call of a high-pitched dog whistle. He is just now finishi published Oct. 1) of life with Fay Ray, one of the Weimaraners who inspired

"Ah, you might not want to sit there," one of Mr. Wegman's five assistants s was about to drop into an upholstered chair last week. "It's covered in dog l

Indeed, while the walls are covered with posters of bewigged Weimaraners : scattered with stuffed-toy versions, the sparse furnishings are covered with gray hairs. And a live Weimaraner snoozes in the only other chair near the c especially her own celebrity.

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Mr. Wegman's wife and operations manager, Christine Burgin, calls this We that as a child she loathed dogs and lakes. "Now I spend half of each year by a bunch of dogs," she said, alluding to their summer house.

From the potential tedium of five dog walks a day to the exhilaration of wor drooling to please, their life has its pros and cons. The Wegmans try, in the caninecentric careers, to raise their own two children (Atlas, 4, who doesn't and Lola, 18 months, who does) and live normal human lives. Mr. Wegman them -- the dogs -- alone just to go to the movies. His wife is restarting her l after a seven-year hiatus.

The intimacy of being in residence with two large dogs (Mr. Wegman works Weimaraners, but only Battina, 9, and her son, Chippy, 4, live in New York) 5,300-square-foot loft. But for anyone familiar with the Wegman book "AB where each letter of the alphabet is shaped by pretzel-pliant dogs' bodies, th seem almost perversely doglike. They didn't spell anything for a visitor, and in flouncy outfits, displaying eerie human hands. They pretty much lay spra trotted off in whatever direction Mr. Wegman led.

The loft didn't smell like an animal house. But all the doors and windows w breezy roof garden. Deborah Berke, a New York architect, renovated the lof The built-in cabinets are plywood. The floors are polished concrete "to prot doggy nails," said Ms. Berke, a dog enthusiast, who integrated dog-food bin cabinets.

For the roof garden, Ms. Berke consulted specialists from the Bronx Zoo to surface treatment -- a mixture of concrete and rubber used in the gorillas' h survive the assault of dogs' relieving themselves. Rebecca Cole from the Pot Greenwich Village landscaped the roof, using copper-plated planters. Thanl they will age to a charming "antique" verdigris. Green splatter marks are all

Inside, dog nests, a kind of beanbag chair flattened to a lumpy canvas panc under a desk, in the hall, in the bedroom. There are none in the living room on the couch, which is upholstered in a moss green-gray velvet, like the coat dog breed.

"People don't sit on the couch," Mr. Wegman said. "The dogs look so good c wants to make them get down. Not even my mother."

Most guests, he added, prefer to sit at the kitchen table. And when the visit at how free of hair the white coverlet on the master bed looked, Mr. Wegma they sleep under the covers." Battina, called Batty, sleeps on Ms. Burgin's si Wegman's feet. And when Crooky, Batty's sister, pays an overnight visit (sh in Maine), she curls around Mr. Wegman's head. The children stay in their

Neither of the Wegmans grew up with dogs between the sheets. The dog Mr child in Springfield, Mass., slept in the basement. ("It wasn't my idea," he s "not a dog person," she said. She recalled the early days of Mr. Wegman's c Fay Ray, the Weimaraner that followed in the paw prints of Mr. Wegman's

went along on their first date. Mr. Wegman remembered the click of his feet on the cobblestones of SoHo. She recalled thinking, "There's no way I'm going to separate these dogs apart."

Sleeping arrangements were straightforward. "I was the dispensable one," she said at the start that sleeping with the dogs came with the territory. I might end up sleeping with them. They wouldn't."

Three litters later, Ms. Burgin can tell all the dogs apart (an assistant, however, is identifying who was who in four large dog portraits in the office), and she is crowded out of bed when Mr. Wegman is not there to defend their turf.

Mr. Wegman has worked with 25 Weimaraners but still seems in awe of the differences. Man Ray was "an everything guy," who grew up with Mr. Wegman in the 1970's. "He was so inside me it was spooky," he said.

Then came Fay: "I was in my 40's, and I was a man. Fay was like a woman. It was a tug of war with her the way I'd done with Man Ray, and she'd just look at me and say 'shoving me?'" Her death from leukemia four years ago is still painful for them to think about.

And now there's Batty: "She's got these eyes I've looked at for 10 years, and they get more and more each year."

The simple life of walking, working and sleeping with dogs got complicated when the dogs arrived and assumed center stage. In the couple's private quarters, the large dog portraits on the walls are all Atlas and Lola, not the dogs.

At nursery school, when the children were asked if they had pets at home, Atlas said no. His favorite stuffed toy is a cat. And when his father told a separation-anxious dog howls being audible all the way across the lake in Maine, Atlas added clarity of childhood: "That's because you were with me, and they like you."

While Atlas doesn't like the dogs on his bed because they make it hot, Lola is a doll, sitting between their paws and flinging herself on them with abandon. "I'm sensuously involved with the dogs," Mr. Wegman said.

Mr. Wegman clearly relishes the mundane tasks of dog care, brushing and grooming himself. But does he let them lick his face? He reacted with revulsion. "They have germs!" he said.

The dogs may appear at Barnes & Noble book signings, on "Sesame Street" and at the Academy of Music, but, Mr. Wegman contends, "I don't parade them around. Even though I dress them up, I know they're animals."

Their life with dogs is a kind of Zen art of appreciation. Ms. Burgin spoke of delight at waking up and "lying in a piece of sunlight" was contagious. Mr. Wegman didn't mind giving them five walks a day (or having an employee do it) because

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much to me," adding: "They are heartbreakingly good."

And time is relatively short. "Bill knows the clock is ticking," Ms. Burgin said and Fay were taken away before their time. He wants to work as much as possible has them."

Last week, Batty and Chippy had lumps (benign, it turned out) removed from thought of losing his dogs triggered an existential moment: "It really upset me died," he said. "I lived alone then, and it was just so quiet. The whole idea of meaningless. It didn't matter if I went out or came in."

As he got up to take the dogs out for yet another walk, he added, "I just love though it's not as often as people think, maybe one week out of the month. I they're just pets."

And when Mr. Wegman needed to fill a role in a photo shoot, he had no qualms walker out with a dog. In the coming book "Surprise Party!" the punch line of pizza man with eerie human hands. It's Jake, a yellow Labrador.

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