

# National Post

Ampersand

## Ian Wallace: Portrait of an 'artest'



"The idea of creative impulse is a pretty romantic way of putting it, but in the end, it's really just a lot of hard work," Ian Wallace says of being an artist.

Handout

Postmedia News February 24, 2011 – 6:30 pm

By Katherine Monk, Postmedia News

He's the avuncular godfather of photo-conceptualism, and as conscious as he is about the artifice of his own creative exercise, Ian Wallace is nothing but sincere.

If you want to take a measure of this international art star's ease with his own taste, he'll happily tell you he's a huge fan of Diana Krall. He even prefers Krall's piano-jazz version of *Case of You* to Joni Mitchell's original paean to former love, Leonard Cohen. The Nanaimo, B.C.-raised chanteuse's tunes travel with Wallace all over the world. The music of Krall, and many others, is part of his portable studio, along with grease pencils, paper, camera and computer. Wallace says he's constantly creating, as he was just before he picked up the phone in Valencia, Spain.

"I've been making art for 40 years," says the recent winner of the Molson Prize for contributions to Canadian culture. "It's just something I do. I'm always working, even when I'm on the road. It's part of my lifestyle as an artist. And frankly, I can't imagine doing things any other way."

Wallace gives his audience insight into the dimensions of what he calls his creative "obsession" in *Picture Start*, a new documentary directed by Harry Killas that premieres Feb. 27 at Toronto's Bell Lightbox as part of the Reel Artists Film Festival (and plays other cities, including Calgary and Vancouver, later this year, in addition to a broadcast date on Bravo!).

*Picture Start* takes on the rather daunting task of trying to understand the phenomenal rise of what's become known as, for some, "The Vancouver School." It's an easy term for a complicated movement rooted in photo-conceptualism, but one that shares few aesthetic, political or even artistic goals — outside of asking the viewer to think about what he or she is seeing. "The Vancouver School" has several members, but Killas focuses on the three biggies: Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham and Jeff Wall.

Over the course of the film, he asks them why Vancouver became the spawning ground for such a notable generation of artists. They each offer different answers. Some dismiss the "phenomenon" as hard work, good luck, timing and meeting the same people at the same time. Wall says the whole legend may be premature; time will be the final judge.

Wallace says it's not such a huge mystery at all: "Look at the city. ... It's young. It's natural that modernism grew out of Vancouver." The most important thing, says Wallace, is that the rise of Vancouver as a photo-conceptual destination will help the next generation of artists find their own voice.

"We were seeking freedom. Maybe I'm an old hippie, but it's about doors — opening doors, not just for me, but the people after me. Anyone can do this. But you have to do it. You can't just talk about doing it. You have to open up your mind and do things," he says.

"The idea of the creative impulse is a pretty romantic way of putting it, but in the end, it's really just a lot of hard work."

Wallace has been working hard since he started, and he started early. He says he painted his first self-portrait at the age of nine. "I painted myself as an artist, and I even had the word 'artist' written underneath it so you could tell for sure what I was ... but I spelled it 'artest.'"

Now a veritable rock star amid the ranks of artistes, Wallace continues to work just as hard at the age of 67.

“My wife would like it if I could compartmentalize my life more. But really, it’s one whole thing. I’m an intellectual person. I’m always processing things. It’s hard to separate that part of my life. It’s impossible, actually.”

*Picture Start* premieres in Toronto on Feb. 27 as part of the Reel Artists Film Festival at the TIFF Bell Lightbox. The film opens in Calgary on March 27.

Posted in: Ampersand, Movies Tags: Diana Krall, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Joni Mitchell, Rodney Graham

© 2011 National Post, a division of Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication, transmission or republication strictly prohibited.

MORE FROM POSTMEDIA NEWS »



Johnny Depp's a Belieber

Short film Oscar nominees: The short end of the award stick

Top 5: Nicolas Cage at his absolute cagiest

Randy Quaid: 'Thank you, Canada'

Melissa Etheridge, Royal Winnipeg Ballet to perform at Genie Awards