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### Introduction

Leigh Ledare (b. 1976 Seattle, USA) uses photography, archival material, and text to explore human agency, social relationships, taboos and the photographic in equal turns. Formally trained in photography, he has, in a relatively short time, developed a body of work that is coherent, complex, biting in its intelligence, and decidedly provocative. His resulting images are often sumptuous, saturated with color, and surprisingly beautiful. But they also, and importantly, disconcert us, they make us uncomfortable, and, in the process, they raise questions about the functioning of the image and the construction of subjectivity in contemporary culture. WIELS presents the first institutional solo exhibition of Ledare's work, a survey of over 100 pieces, with examples from nearly all of his series to date, along with video works, text-based pieces, as well as a number of new pieces, never shown before.

The exhibition's trajectory is deliberately not chronological. At its core, occupying the entire back area of the exhibition, sits the artist's first photographic series, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, perhaps his best-known work, which pictures the fantasies and realities of his mother's life with images alternately graphic, tender, and strange. Around it radiate the various projects that have emerged out of it, which reveal not only the range of the artist's practice, but also a set of persistent concerns at its heart. Ledare has, almost from the start, made work in series form. These distinct but related bodies of work are studies not only of their visible subjects, but also of photography itself: how it mediates identity, relationships, love, loss, and, perhaps above all, human vulnerability. They are also indexes of the relationships of the artist with others – mother, family members, ex-lover, collectors, anonymous patrons, etc. – which, from the start, have played a central role in Ledare's work. It is against this background that the artist chose to call his first institutional solo exhibition *Leigh Ledare, et al.*

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*Alma*, 2012  
Oil stick and ink on c-print  
89 × 63.5 cm



The exhibition opens with an artwork made with the collaboration of a child. A three-year old was presented with a photograph of Ledare's naked mother and given oil-based crayons with which to scribble and draw on the image at will. The work is one of several Ledare has made with children that, in each case, were too young to fully read what the image represents or to understand a pose or nudity as erotic, forbidden, sexualized, etc. The result of their scribbling is that the image of the photographer's "Mom" is partially obscured, hidden behind the frenetic coloured lines drawn by a child's hand. The action sets the child's "innocent" viewpoint against adults' socially constructed viewpoint: perception and the moral formation of the individual are reflected in the impossibility of the child to understand the image as an adult understands it. Significantly, this work opens the exhibition with an evocation of the figure of the mother, foundational to Ledare's oeuvre, and of the element of collaboration that underpins much of his work. But it also raises questions fundamental to his practice about when and how we are able to understand the meaning of images.

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### Invitation

Seven large-scale lithographic montages and an accompanying contract comprise *An Invitation* (2012), a project that resulted from an unusual request. Ms. ■■■, a socially connected figure from a prominent family who was fascinated with Ledare's series of photographs of and with his mother, invited him to her home and commissioned him to take erotic photographs of her for her private use. Ledare accepted on the condition that he would be allowed to make two sets of images, one for her use and one for his own, with the caveat that her identity and identifying features be kept anonymous – by contract – in those he used. He made a nude photograph of the woman each day of the week that he was staying with her and her husband. For the resulting series, he redacted her face and superimposed each of the seven images on an enlarged copy of the front page of the *New York Times* corresponding to the day he took the photograph. He also added his own, subjective commentary, at the bottom of each work; these act as diaristic footnotes to a project about the slippery line between privacy and publicity. The whole is accompanied by a seven-page contract that Ledare, aided by lawyers, drafted to ensure the terms of the agreement that premise the work. The combination of elements juxtapose the extraordinary world events and everyday occurrences publicly recorded in the newspaper's text and images with the erotic poses and private interior of the anonymous woman and her home; it also pins the cold, abstract language of the contract and its imposition of law to legislate relationships and erotic content against the personal, subjective images and language of the artist.

Next page: *An Invitation: Tuesday, July 26, 2012, 2012*  
Photolithograph on archival newsprint, silkscreen, pencil  
144.8 × 76.2 cm

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Next page: *Personal Commissions: 'Let the Good Times Roll. 1 Blond, 53 yrs old, curvy, buxom, slim, clean, petite. No diseases or drugs. Seeking healthy, honest, reliable, financially secure younger man for descreet sensual fun. Ext#1084', 2008*  
C-print, 50.8 × 36.2 cm

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### Personal Commissions and Collector's Commissions

For the works that comprise Ledare's *Personal Commissions* (2008) series, the artist sought out newspaper ads similar to those that his mother had been in the habit of taking out in the *Seattle Weekly* to advertise her search for male benefactors, thinly-veiled requests, essentially, for support in exchange for erotic companionship. He contacted the strangers who had taken out the ads, proposing to pay each of them a fee in order for him to meet them in their homes and allow them to dress, stage, and photograph him. The title of each piece, which cites the original wording of the advertisements, not only makes the basis of the transaction apparent, but also exposes what the women, in each case, were initially looking for.

The series connects to the *Collector's Commissions* (2008, ongoing), where, following a similar logic, collectors are asked to position Ledare amidst artwork that they own. They choose his pose, his location, the objects he is to be surrounded by, and then photograph him. The two projects function as reflective mirrors, the latter revealing the desire, ostentation, and power present in collecting and equating the artist with the willing trick of the first series. The prescribed plot, which determines the protocol for the images and the quiet economic implications of each, is the crucial backdrop to both projects, which, significantly, put Ledare in a position similar to that which his mother had constructed for herself: in them, he becomes the subject of the photograph and the willing object of another's desire.

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## WIELS

Leigh Ledare, et al.  
08.09 – 25.11.2012

This exhibition contains nudity and explicit images.

Curator: Elena Filipovic  
Curatorial assistant: Fiammetta Griccioli

Opening Hours  
Wed.–Sun. 11 am–6pm  
Nocturne 11 am–9pm (every 1st and 3rd Wed. of the month)  
Free entry every 1st Wed. of the month

There is a complementary program of guided tours by the artist and curator, lectures and other events. A full colour, richly illustrated catalogue with contributions by Elena Filipovic, Nicolás Guagini and David Joselit, accompanies the exhibition. More info on [www.wiels.org](http://www.wiels.org)

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. WIELS thanks its partners for their support in 2012



WIELS thanks all of the lenders who have so generously lent us works to make this ambitious exhibition possible

Cover: Leigh Ledare, *Mom and Catch 22*, C-print. All images courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias Gallery, London and Office Baroque, Antwerp

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### Pretend You're Actually Alive

*Pretend You're Actually Alive* (2000–08), the artist's best-known work and his most subversive to date, was made in collaboration with his aging ex-ballerina mother over a period of eight years. In the images, she offers herself with disarming explicitness to her son's camera and to the unknown public of the resulting images. She appears in the most compromising poses, engaging in the most private actions, posing and performing for the camera *au naturel*, occasionally with a sex partner. The result is unsettling, as gripping as it is disconcerting. And there is little else like them in the history of photography.

Despite the blatant imagery, there is often more to these photographs than what we are immediately shocked to see. Certain details give an inexplicable gravity to the even more inexplicable strangeness of the photographs. Their titles, moreover, are significant: the denominator, "Mom," that appears so often in them makes the pictured Tina Peterson both universal and particular. She is the photographer's mother, yes, but "Mom" is also a stand-in for the category of motherhood in itself. They are accompanied by a paper trail of the mother and son's odd shared life as seen through journal-like notes, hand-scribbled documents, carefully saved magazine pages, old photographs, and other ephemera, which contextualize and complicate the in-your-face explicitness of some of the images. And, alongside the apparently crude photographs are other images in the series: Mom ethereal in the living room in soft afternoon light with a wrist brace; a family snapshot of mother and son as she helps him adjust his tie for a high school dance; hospital images of Ledare's dying grandmother; his new wife, innocently, buoyantly striding down stairs in white on their wedding day. It is precisely in the ambivalence created by bringing these tender and strangely touching images into contact with the others that the contradictory force of Ledare's project reveals its complexity.



### Videos

Beyond his work with the photographic image, the selection of videos presented in the exhibition reveal the relationship of the artist to the moving image, both found and newly-shot. *The Gift* (2007), for instance, is comprised of edited footage from his mother's failed attempt to make a soft-porn "spanking" film. The original footage was "gifted" to the artist by his mother when it was deemed not commercial enough, with the request that he make something of it. Ledare, in turn, cut out most of the apparently finished or successful sequences of the film, leaving the awkward moments of its construction: the original director's instructions to Ledare's mother; her attempts to comply and, at moments, her own differing interpretation of what gestures and poses would advance the erotic spectacle; the movements of the actors into position; the off-screen commentary of the film crew; etc.

*Shoulder* (2007), on the other hand, features Ledare and his mother on screen in a strange and touching video that unravels any simple notion of authenticity that might be applied to his work. With camera set in place, the artist's mother is prompted to begin weeping on her son's shoulder, and her performance is perfectly on cue. However, what begins as seemingly staged quickly devolves into what appears more as real-life anguish in a gripping release of emotions and confessions, all of which ends, abruptly and confusingly, with the mother in control of it all, clearly conscious of the camera and having, in the process, turned every preconception of truth or authenticity on its head.

Previous page, top: *Me and Mom*, 2006, C-print, 50.8 × 61 cm

Bottom: *Shoulder*, 2008, single channel video, 8:45 min

Next page: *Double Bind* (detail), 20 Gelatin Silver Prints, 26.7 × 39.4 cm each



### Double Bind

*Double Bind* (2010) is a vast, ambitious project that involves another woman in the artist's life, his ex-wife. It is the result of a rather simple plot: Ledare would go away for three nights to a secluded cabin in the woods with his ex-wife, Meghan Ledare-Fedderly, shortly after she married another man. Ledare would photograph her. He would cover the costs for her to go back to do it all over again, this time with her new husband, Adam Fedderly. Ledare hand-developed the two sets of resulting photographs, totaling nearly one thousand images in all. He created diptych juxtapositions with some, placing his photographs in black mats and his ex-wife's husband's in white mats. He also presented some of the out-takes in vitrines or created framed montages with them, placing them alongside an archive of found images, pornographic magazines, tattered memorabilia, and family photos. These combinations recontextualize the black-and-white photographs, it holds them against media figurations of news events and wholesale eroticism and provides associative means of interpreting the two trips. Together, they are the subjective "evidence" that Leigh Ledare, Meghan Ledare-Fedderly, and Adam Fedderly were caught in an untenable paradox premised on an agreement, the "double bind" of the title.

In one set of diptychs, you see Meghan Ledare-Fedderly looking friendly, familiar, distressed, frustrated; in another, tender, voluptuous, playful, offering. And yet, at moments, you might also think you perceive a similarity, a sameness in her gaze, an equality of love in her eyes. *Double Bind* continues and extends *Pretend You're Actually Alive*'s reflections on photography: how the medium mediates relationships and reveals the intangible, inexplicable traces of emotion, including love, loss, desire, or rejection. It is also, like so much of Ledare's work, an index of the relationships and agreements that the artist constructs with others, the protocols of which are the foundations of the photographic for him.

Next page: *Upon the Death of My Grandfather* (July 29, 2008 – August 17, 2011)

Paper, 3 pieces, 30.5 × 24.5 × 3.3 cm each

### Upon the Death of My Grandfather...

At the origin of *Upon the Death of My Grandfather* (July 28, 2008 – August 17, 2011) is an unusual gift from the artist's grandfather. Before his death, Ledare's grandfather purchased a grave plot for each member of the family and gave the receipt and certificate of proof of the act as a gift to each of them. The gesture was an attempt to physically reunite the estranged members of a dysfunctional family in death; it was also a testament to the imminent death of the giver, as well as an insinuation of the eventual fate of each of the recipients. The artist responded, in a way, by refusing and turning the emotionally loaded gift on its head: he offered his empty plot to the Museum of Modern Art in New York as an artwork instead. Sitting somewhere between an earthwork sculpture and conceptual art piece, Ledare's promised gift of a forever empty plot would take effect upon the death of his grandfather and from the moment that it enters the collection of the museum. The triptych of documents that make up the subsequent work – the grandfather's original hand-written land lot memo and receipt, Ledare's formal gift letter to the Museum of Modern Art, and a folded blank piece of paper, standing-in for the museum's still absent reply – trace the complex familial, emotional, fiduciary, and institutional implications of the two acts. They also point to the relational and contractual premises that lie at the heart of all of Ledare's work.

