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531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
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Out of the past: Portraits of the artists

STEVE WOLFE couldn't work in a more appropriate place. His studio is on a floor of a downtown office building dominated by antiquarian book dealers, and although his studio is notably tidy, the dusty ambience of a rare book shop is just his cup of tea.

Something of a bibliophile himself, Wolfe makes meticulous, fool-the-eye re-creations of old books and records that are both portraits of the artist refracted through his reading and listening and evidence of a constantly shifting cultural moment. Wolfe's work will be one of two San Francisco-based artists in the group show "Present Tense: Nine Artists of the Nineties," at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

[See WOLFE, C-3]

Steve Wolfe's *trompe l'oeil* paintings re-create cultural moments in "Present Tense: Nine Artists of the Nineties" at SFMOMA through Jan. 13.

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Wolfe: Portraits of the artists

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A diffident man with a self-deprecating sense of humor, Wolfe settled in San Francisco three years ago. A veteran of 18 years in Manhattan, he says: "I feel comfortable here now, but I don't feel like a citizen yet. In New York, I felt that I was a citizen from the beginning."

Of course, in the late '70s, extraordinary things were happening in Manhattan's East Village, and Wolfe was in the thick of it. "For the first 10 years I loved New York. It was like a big playground," he says. "Later I realized that it had become a prison and I wanted to get out." So he came to San Francisco, where his dealer Dan Weinberg had just reopened his gallery.

Wolfe didn't make any art between 1977, when he graduated from art school, and 1982. He made his living as many fledgling artists do: He did window displays at Bendel's and Bergdorf's and waited on tables. But after starting to work at the Paula Cooper Gallery as an installer, he was inspired to make art again. "I was really excited by everything I was seeing around me," he

says. "I'd been intimidated when I first came to New York, but instead of being intimidated by the great work I was surrounded by at the gallery, I decided to start painting again."

Wolfe had to start over. He dismisses his college years as "a joke," because he failed to take advantage of classes that would have taught him about techniques and materials because he didn't think they were "cool" enough.

He started painting still lifes and discovered that what he liked was the words that appeared in them — on the spine of a book or the Gitanes logo on an ash tray. "For some reason I found reading those words to be exciting, and I had to figure out how to zero in on that. Eventually, I made one book and then another and then another."

The self-portrait Wolfe creates in his work is complex and sophisticated. One box, apparently packed for moving, includes Hunter Davies' biography of the Beatles, Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation," Simone de Beauvoir's study of Brigitte Bardot and a collection of poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine. It speaks of a certain kind of self-education, and if you've been there yourself, you'll find the work intoxicating.

— David Bonetti