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James Welling: Meriden, 1992, from the "Light Sources" series, 1992-98, vegetable dye on rag paper, 35 1/2 by 27 inches. Collection Shaun Casey Regen, Los Angeles. Photos this article courtesy Gorney, Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

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Surface Histories: The Photography of James Welling

The remarkably diverse work of James Welling, who first emerged in the '70s as a mercurial inquisitor of photographic norms, was recently presented in a career-long survey. The show suggested that the artist's engagement with light and time has unified his heterogeneous concerns all along.

BY DAVID JOSELIT

James Welling's retrospective exhibition, organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, demonstrates a paradox which haunts the artist's work. Welling was first known for producing non-referential studio images from materials like aluminum foil or phyllo dough and velvet during the 1980s. These pictures, neither traditional still lifes nor reliable representations of the materials depicted (the foil can resemble topographical maps, and the dough often looks like ashes), frustrate photography's presumption of documentary truth. Yet in the course of his career, Welling has made several series of pictures that appear to fit squarely within the conventions of documentary photography in their straightforward renderings of landscapes, buildings and machines.

Such apparent contradictions within Welling's work have been heightened throughout the exhibition's tour by installations that emphasize unexpected juxtapositions rather than a strict chronology of the photographic series, which date from 1974 to 1999. This unconventional sequencing, devised by exhibition organizers in close collaboration with the artist, foregrounds the discontinuity in Welling's choice of subject matter. But by showing lesser-known early works—such as a 1974 videotape titled *Ashes*, a series of Polaroids made in the artist's studio in 1976 and a group of architectural shots taken in Los Angeles between 1976 and '78—the retrospective documents Welling's idiosyncratic vision sufficiently to indicate a coherent perspective.

The paradox in Welling's art emerges for me with a series of photographs begun in 1988 of buildings designed by the 19th-century architect H.H. Richardson. The stately esthetic of these pictures, which seem destined for a luxurious monograph on the architect's work, would be unremarkable but for the fact that by 1988 Welling had established himself as one of the most conceptually inventive photographers of an era characterized by fertile redefinitions of photography. His pathbreaking untitled pictures of 1980-81, for instance, in which richly shadowed fields are pockmarked with light, initiate Welling's consistent, though intermittent, investigation of photographic abstraction. These works, produced from close-ups of crumpled aluminum foil, situate Welling alongside a group of artists, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince among them, who in different ways insisted on the arbitrary nature of photography.

The appropriations of Levine and Prince during the late '70s and early '80s, in which fine-art and commercial images were repho-



LA-C 33, 1977, from the "Los Angeles Architecture" series, 1976-78, gelatin silver print, 4 1/4 by 3 1/4 inches.

tographed, demonstrated how easily the meanings of a picture may be modified by changing its context. A Marlboro man on a billboard, for instance, is a very different thing from a Marlboro man rephotographed by Prince and presented as his own product in a museum or gallery. In such works, appropriation functioned as a form of

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Bike, 1976, from a series of Polaroids, 1976, Chromogenic print, 2 1/4 by 3 1/4 inches.



Still from Ashes, 1974, black-and-white video, 4 minutes.

abstraction by demonstrating that meaning is fundamentally arbitrary and contingent upon the conditions of display.

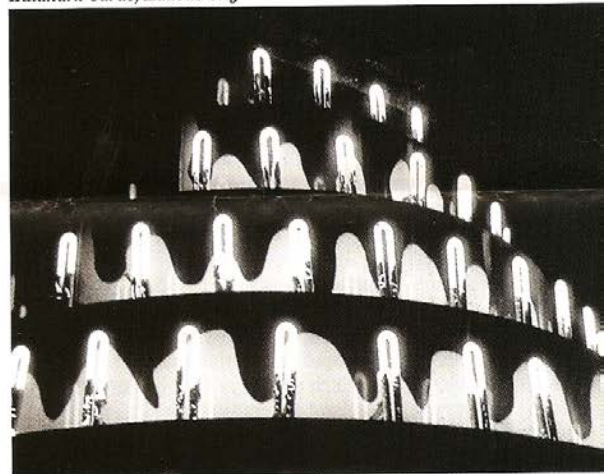
Welling's aluminum foil series explored abstraction in photography in different and more self-referential ways. First, the photographic field is hunted back to its constituent elements in these works: light and shadow are unmoored from the contours of any recognizable object. Second, these pieces of glossy paper—the pictures—represent other thin and shiny surfaces—aluminum foil. For many commentators, including myself, Welling's work constituted one-half of an important esthetic and philosophical revision of photography in the early '80s. If appropriation dramatized a picture's arbitrary and contingent meaning, Welling's nonobjective pictures demonstrated photography's arbitrary rhetoric of form.

So how, then, can one reconcile the monumentality of the architectural subject with the ineffable surfaces of photographic abstraction in the oeuvre of James Welling? A series of mid-1970s photographs of Los Angeles buildings suggests an answer to this riddle. In most of these pictures, typically exposed at dusk, architectural

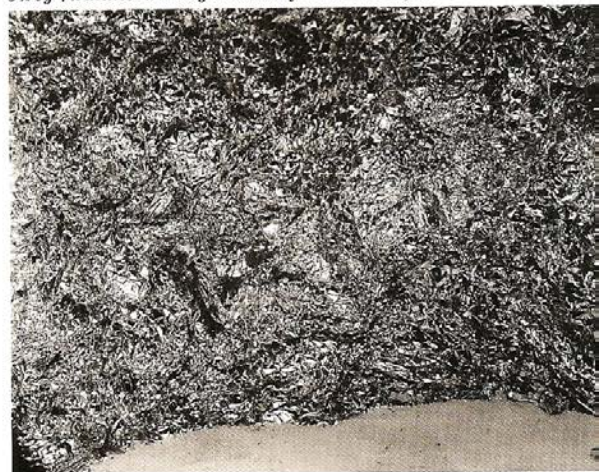
The exhibition emphasized startling juxtaposition over strict chronology, foregrounding the discontinuity in Welling's choice of subject matter.

facades function as two-way screens that simultaneously emit and catch light. One of the best examples of this effect is *LA-C 33* (1977), which centers on a building's corner where two shaded windows glow from the inside. Playing across the right side of the photograph, encompassing part of the facade as well as the solid corner between the windows, is an extravagant shadow of branching palm fronds, evidently cast by an outdoor spotlight facing the building and just detectable as a point of intensified light. The building facade is thus rendered as a surface lighted from both sides—it is, to use a rather oxymoronic term, a surface in the round. And what is a building if not

Brussels, 1996, from the "Light Sources" series, 1992-98, vegetable dye on rag paper, 27 by 32 1/2 inches. Hallmark Photographic Collection, Hallmark Cards, Kansas City.



January 8, 1980, from an untitled series, 1980-81, gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 by 4 1/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



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The Waterfall, 1981, gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 by 7 inches. Collection Robinson and Nancy Grover, West Hartford, Conn.

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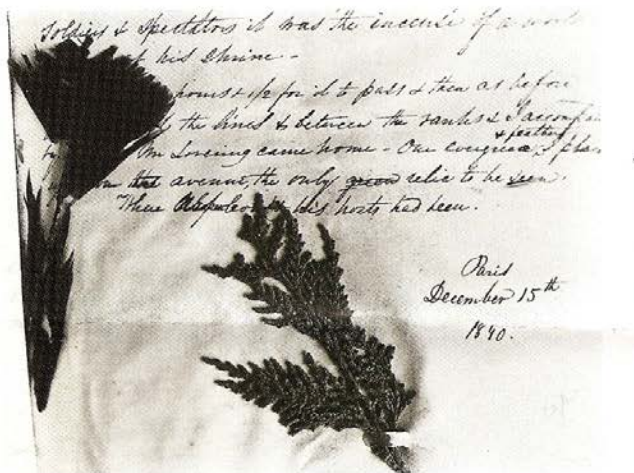
a sequence of surfaces that constitute a volume? Many of Welling's best critics have pointed to the importance of surfaces in his work,¹ but I don't think it has been sufficiently realized that his art does for photography what modernism did for painting: it captures volume as a play of surface.

The notion of the photograph's own surface as a screen that is not only lit but backlit is a theme to which Welling returned in his 1992-98 series of black-and-white photographs titled "Light Sources." In *Meriden* (1992), for instance, the sun burns through a lacy pattern of leaves whose rich dark tracery contrasts sharply with the bleached sky. With its nearly abstract play of form, this work is an aerated version of the denser aluminum foil pictures of 1980-81, in which each glint of reflected light is a source of illumination winking back at the viewer. In *Meriden*, as in many of the "Light Sources," the viewer is forced to look too closely and too long at the sun—or, in other works, fluorescent or incandescent light—a protracted and dangerous gaze

his still photographs. In a text explaining this work, the artist states: "With a [video] camera on a tripod, I made four long, static shots of a fireplace. It was through working in video in an almost studio manner that I came to feel comfortable working with a view camera on a tripod." Welling used the video camera as if it were a still camera, and in doing so he consciously rendered the act of looking as an event with its own duration.

This sensation of dilated time is also present in several 1976 Polaroids showing ordinary things in Welling's studio and the restaurant where he worked during that period. In these photographs a dense, tinted atmosphere descends on quotidian places, giving them the muffled timelessness characteristic of dreams. Welling's effort to slow or even to stop time comes to a head in a series of black-and-white photographs of trains begun more than a decade later, in 1987, in which ostensibly dynamic engines are arrested like monuments in a town square.

Although they may seem at cross purposes, Welling's two tech-



Above, left and right, #16 and #119 from the "Diary/Landscape" series, 1977-86, gelatin silver prints, each 3 1/4 by 4 1/4 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

which, if sustained in life, would lead to bedazzlement or blindness. Welling's photographic surfaces shine back on the viewer, metaphorically if not literally "photographing" those who stand before them. And in looking back at their spectators, these photographs function much like the facades of buildings whose apertures permit inhabitants to look out and passersby to look in. In Welling's tightly composed pictures of Richardson's buildings, such as *Service Entrance, Glessner House, Chicago, IL, 1885-87* (1988) or *Allegheny County Courthouse, Pittsburgh, PA, 1883-88* (1990), the framing of the architectural facades accentuates Richardson's somber cadences of window openings and doorways.

If Welling's photographic surfaces resemble facades in their weaving of light in and out of the scrim of buildings, there are other ways in which the artist draws an analogy between architecture and photography. In his work, photographic surfaces attain a certain monumentality. Welling's pictures seem to expand the instantaneous photographic exposure, to build time as one constructs a building. Once again, a little-known early work included in the retrospective gives helpful clues to the artist's enduring preoccupations. *Ashes* (1974), a videotape made soon after Welling graduated from CalArts, literalizes the accumulation of time which one feels when looking at

niques of mobilizing light to produce "surfaces in the round" and his dilation of time within the instantaneous moment of still photography each serve to endow the surfaces of pictures with density—a density both visual and conceptual that is belied by their literal flatness—and with history. Indeed, in the course of his career Welling has addressed history in a variety of ways. At one end of the spectrum are his 1993 pictures of lace factories in Calais, France. These tonally rich prints, largely empty of human workers, center on the dazzling, up-to-the-minute machinery used to engineer and manufacture a product traditionally associated with women's laborious handwork. There is the *Jacquartronic Bobbin Array*, a massive scaffold holding countless bobbins of thread, and the impressive *Jacquartronic Loom*, which produces lace in large sheets.

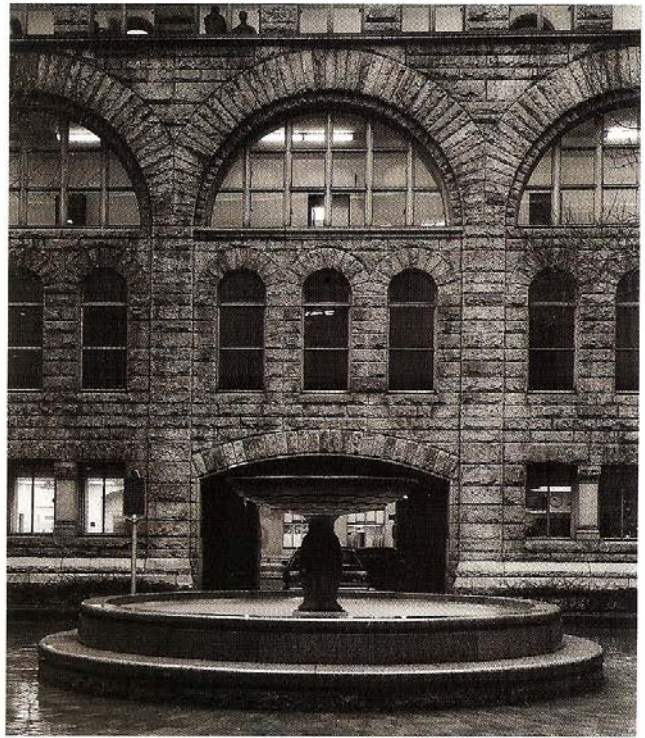
Despite their resemblance to documentary photography, I can't help thinking of these factory pictures as an allegory of Welling's own abstractions of the camera's rhetoric. Like the artist's photographs of architectural facades or his abstractions derived from aluminum foil, lace is a permeable screen through which light is broken and dispersed. And like Welling's various efforts to inject duration into the moment of looking, the Calais factory absorbs the past into the present by producing a very old handicraft through modern mechanical techniques.

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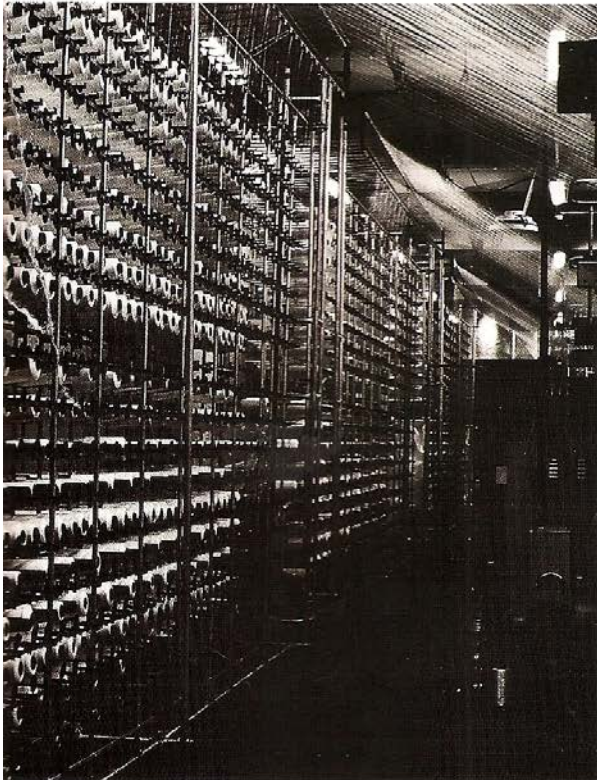
A series of photographs of Welling's great-great-grandparents' 19th-century travel diaries addresses history in a different way. Here, closely framed fields of handwriting, sometimes obscured by dried flowers inserted long ago between the pages, render script as pattern. By closely cropping the pages, Welling intimates a break in the flow of writing, as though the diarist had looked up from his or her desk, perhaps to gaze out a window. Welling typically exhibits these works alongside a series of Connecticut landscapes, but this only furthers a dislocation of time and space: the entries were written during a trip to Europe, while the landscapes signify the New England home of the authors. For the viewer, who is afforded an intense intimacy with the page, the act of writing is evoked but suspended, as though the original moment of inscription some 160 years ago had never ceased to unfold. Just as in *Ashes*, where the spectator's regard of a single image was extended indefinitely by video, these pages, with their furrows of light and text, seem to arrest time.

At the Wexner Center, the exhibition ended with a gallery of Welling's recent black-and-white pictures, collectively titled "New Abstractions." These large-scale photographs were generated by a three-part process. In the first step, 8-by-10-inch photograms were produced by arranging a set of Bristol board strips of differing widths on top of photosensitive sheets and then exposing them to light. This



Allegheny County Courthouse, Pittsburgh, PA, 1883-88, 1990, from the series "Architectural Photographs, Buildings by H.H. Richardson (1838-86)," 1988-94, toned gelatin silver print, 22 by 18 inches. Collection Hal Foster, Princeton, N.J.

Jacquartronic Bobbin Array #1, from the "Usines de Dentelle" series, 1993, toned gelatin silver print, 6 1/2 by 5 1/2 inches.



operation resulted in a pattern of white lines or bands (where the underlying paper had been blocked from light) on a dark ground. In a second step, Welling digitally scanned the photograms and made high-contrast negatives from them; in a third operation, the final photographs were produced from these negatives. In the resulting pictures, values have been reversed with respect to the original photograms, so that black lines stand out on white fields. The "New Abstractions" establish a technical circuit in which a photograph made without a negative—a photogram—is transformed into a negative in order to produce another photograph. This circular procedure is matched by an optical vertigo induced by the shifting arrays of lines pictured in the works, which scramble any stable positioning in space.

Despite the rejection of a strict chronological ordering for the main body of the exhibition, it makes sense that the most recent works on view, the "New Abstractions," concluded the Wexner show. In my view, Welling's significance as an artist hinges on his multifaceted meditations on the possibility of abstraction in photography. Unlike modernist nonobjective painting, where form is generated as an autonomous language, abstraction in photography is typically derived from something. Think of Aaron Siskind's midcentury pictures of urban wallsapes, which mimic Abstract Expressionism; Andres Serrano's bold fields of milk, blood or semen; or Welling's own pictures of the early and mid-1980s. In such works, abstraction in photography is achieved through framing and camera angle, provoking a kind of guessing game with regard to an obscured or distorted referent. But Welling's "New Abstractions" are photographs generated from other photographs: by

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Kline? Why work so hard to invent a photographic mode of abstraction that seems to mimic a painterly one which preceded it? Of course, the flat, glossy surfaces and geometric precision of the "New Abstractions" belong to an entirely different universe: to the cool rhetoric of reproduction in an era of digital photography, virtual reality and the Internet. They also relate to recent developments in abstraction by Los Angeles artists such as Pae White, Jorge Pardo and Kevin Appel, who in various ways incorporate the vocabularies of product or graphic design into their art.

Nevertheless, the strict nonobjectivity of the "New Abstractions" links them not to the instrumentality of design, but rather to earlier gestural practices of painting. Welling injects the hyper-accelerated temporality of digital and analogue forms of reproduction into an image rhetoric—Abstract Expressionism—rooted in the lived time of successive applications of paint. In a move converse to that of *Ashes*, where duration was built into an image, time is sucked out of the picture. But it returns, as it does in Abstract-Expressionist canvases, in the act of looking.

Like optical puzzles, Welling's abstractions fascinate the eye by allowing nowhere for its restless gaze to settle. In his allusion to the New York School, as in his architectural photographs, two different experiences of time collide: the instantaneous exposure of the camera and the long duration of the built monument or the painted canvas. It is this dilation and contraction of time, and not any particular subject matter or technique, that has consistently marked James Welling's photography. □

1. See, for instance, Walter Benn Michaels, "The Photographic Surface," in *James Welling: Photographs 1977-1990*, Bern, Kunsthalle Bern, 1990, pp. 102-13, and, in this exhibition's catalogue, Michael Fried, "James Welling's *Lock*, 1976," in Sarah J. Rogers, ed., *James Welling: Photographs 1974-1999*, Columbus, Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2000, pp. 25-28.
2. Michaels, p. 108, makes an analogous point when he argues that Welling's photographs suggest both trompe l'oeil and abstraction while remaining apart from both.

"*James Welling: Photographs 1974-1999*" is on view in Los Angeles at the Museum of Contemporary Art [May 6-Aug. 26]. The show originated at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus [May 6-Aug. 13, 2000] and traveled to the Baltimore Museum of Art [Sept. 10-Dec. 10, 2000]. It is accompanied by

an illustrated catalogue with essays by exhibition organizer Sarah J. Rogers and Michael Fried.

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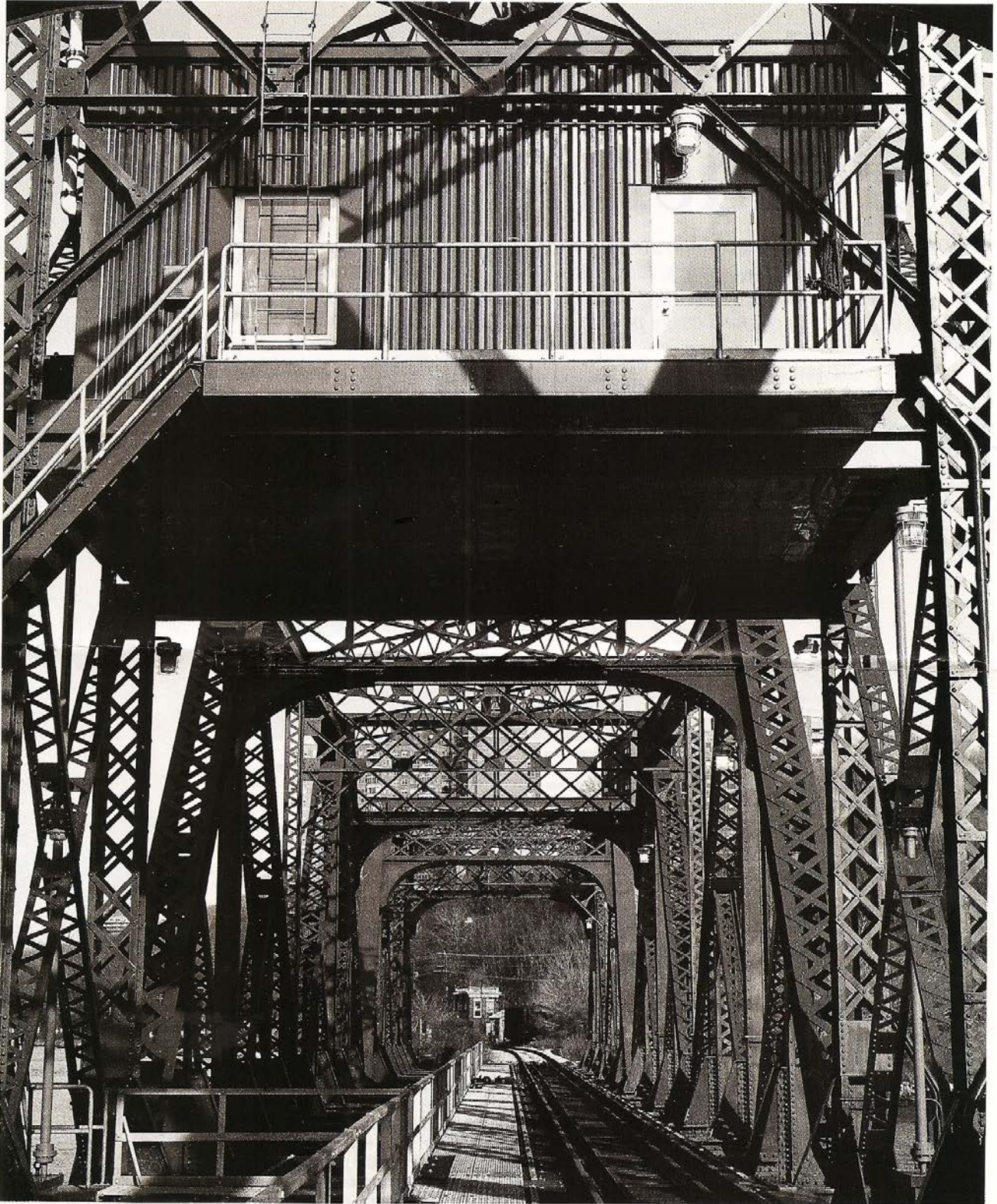


#23, 1998, from the ongoing "New Abstractions" series, gelatin silver print, 35 by 27 inches. Collection Robinson and Nancy Grover.

applying the second-degree nature of photographic abstraction to photography itself, the "New Abstractions" achieve a form of nonobjectivity specific to the medium.²

But a further question arises: why make pictures that seem to adopt a gestural rhetoric reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionist Franz

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Moveable Bridge, New York, NY, 1990, from the "Railroad Photographs" series, 1987-94, toned gelatin silver print, 22 by 18 inches.
Collection Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

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