

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

JAMES WELLING REGEN PROJECTS

In his fourth solo show at this gallery, James Welling presented recent works from three ongoing series that all borrow from—tweak, honor, and poke at—photographic traditions: the formal, the documentary, the conceptual, and the diaristic. The "Degradés" series, 1985–, are created by manipulating light in the darkroom to expose chromogenic paper and are thus unique color prints, or abstract color photographs. These atmospheric images call to mind Color Field painting and similarly make strange the divide between abstraction and representation. The compositions exist at once as dry records of media and process and as pictures that are sensual, evocative, and unclear (even pictures of the unclear).

Intermingled with this nearly romantic and suggestive series was a selection of deadpan black-and-white works that toy with their own status as documentary landscapes. Images from the "California Landscapes" series, 2003–, forgo scanning the horizon for an examination of elements that bridge ground and sky. Points of view are located above (we see thickets against dirt) and below (here are telephone lines through branches). Some photos are so tightly framed that the central concern can no longer be the panorama but only those things that inhabit it. In fact, all the images from this series take the "landscape" to mean an intimate, almost clinical examination of isolated parts, in an approach that's simultaneously forensic, formal, and playful.

In *Apartments, West Los Angeles* (part of the black-and-white "Los Angeles" series, 2003–), suggestions of formalist photography, Minimalist sculptural concerns, vintage Conceptual art, and regional Pop play out in the image of boxy structures stepping along a slope. The series continues with *Dutton's*, a dream of found composition verging on a nightmare of gridded windows, air-conditioner grates, security fencing, and a cluster of



James Welling, *Ferris Wheel*, 2003, black-and-white photograph, 25½ x 37½". From the series "Los Angeles," 2003–.

basket-weave chairs, all commingling in a cacophony of straight lines, against which a tree strives to make a stand for the organic. Formalism approaches absurdity in *Fence*, *Ocean Park*, with its utterly straight board fence, in front of a pair of identical-twin trees, against a symmetrical house. One detects a flair for the baroque in the curvy lines of carnival rides in *Ferris Wheel*; a feeling for austerity in the slatted cyclone fencing and bamboo stalks in *Bamboo*; and a flirtation with the goofy in *VW*, an image of a vintage Volkswagen adorned with a heart sticker (the picture might more accurately be titled *Love Bug*).

Part of the interest, and the liability, are the overlaps and disconnects not only between one Welling photo and the next, but also between one of his series and the next. These arrangements made for a very engaging show, but one wonders what becomes of some of these images as they go their ways in the world. There were a few supporting players here, which helped out and also benefited from the ensemble but might not hold up on their own. This is a risk in Welling's practice, and one he manages to hedge, thankfully, by presenting a majority of solid soloists.

—Christopher Miles