

# REGEN PROJECTS \*

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LOS ANGELES

## JAMES WELLING

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At first glance, the group of photographs presented in this show seemed to have absolutely nothing in common with the serial photographs for which James Welling is known. Gone was any thematic link; the selection seemed arbitrary, like a puzzle flown in on the red-eye from nowhere.

Welling's past work had used repetition to downplay the significance of any individual image, critique originality, and accentuate the differences that existed among the photographs. His concisely engineered, conceptually tight work was dense with meaning, though virtually opaque to the casual viewer. In one series, Welling used crumpled aluminum foil, tile, and dough to suggest the pictorial representation of landscape without having to leave the studio. Another showed images of the 18th-century lacemaking machines still used in Calais factories.

In his new work, theoretical concerns were not completely abandoned. Rather, the framework for understanding has been loosened and expanded. Mute beauty and stillness have been augmented by a mischievous liveliness. Because of the inclusion of images from past series, it can be assumed each print is representative of an unseen group of similar photographs. Whether or not this is accurate is immaterial. Welling's copious preparation has finally paid off by yielding work capable of suggesting an infinite multiplicity of like images without ever needing to burrow into the boredom of redundancy.

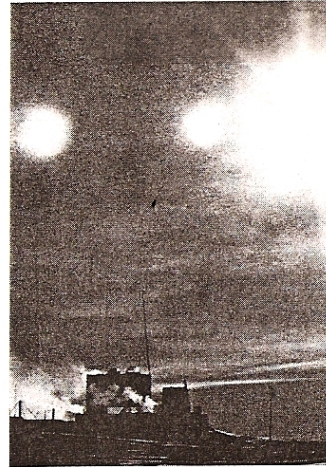
Shot at a variety of locations in Europe and the United States, the show included images of buildings, trains, boats, and peo-

ple. Though the subject matter was diverse, formal seriality was apparent through consistent lighting and printing. Master technician and darkroom cosmologist, Welling produced emulsions oozing with depth and tone, primarily composed of the gray to black end of the monochrome spectrum. Although the subject matter ranged from portraiture to landscape to architecture, the common thread was the style of light within the image.

From the center of the gallery, the consistent lighting could be fully appreciated. The backlighting of the subjects made the rich prints seem almost like stained-glass windows. Light streamed through trees, over oceans, past trains, and seemingly spilled into the gallery itself. Although the vantage point of most of the photographs was skyward, the work was hung suspiciously low. The taller than average viewer looked down into the work, while the petite connoisseur stood face to face with the images.

*Ravenstein, Brussels, 1994*, a geometric pattern of rectangles against a black ground, is an image of glass bricks transmitting light in a large ceiling. The pattern of bright white bricks is a mesmerizing, Op art revival, except that a broken brick brings the image back to the reality of wear and tear.

Ruthlessly white, specialty magnetic-steel frames mimicked the eight-ply mat that surrounded the image within. An exotic German-made magnetic system held the work securely with no messy seams, gaps, holes, screws, or blemishes. Like the magnetic frames, which at first glance were "just frames," Welling also used clever and barely noticeable tricks in producing these photographs. Nestled among the apparently "straight" images were those that had been slightly reticulated, scratched, or outright rephotographed, but these treatments were subtle. They



James Welling, *Arctic Sun, 1994*, toned silver print, 10 1/4 x 7".

only contributed to the brisk beauty of the whole. Freed from the tyranny of seriality, Welling's work is consistently cohesive, scattershot yet savvy, and as surprisingly elegant as crumpled tinfoil.

—Lisa Anne Auerbach