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PHOTOSENSITIVE

On James Welling at the Cincinnati Art Museum

Much is said these days about crumbling boundaries within the field of art – regarding medium specificity, the networks in which artworks circulate, and the consistency of an artist's style. Once the prerogative of both historians and critics in order to bolster understanding via classification, boundaries are now treated in a way that follows artists' refusal of such distinctions, most prominently during the era of postmodernism.

James Welling's radical stylistic diversity within the albeit singular medium of photography represents a prime example of what motivated this turn. Face-to-face with a sprawling retrospective of the artist's work, however, one is forced to grapple with the perennial question of how – as well as if – one can find meaning not just in difference, but in an artist's perhaps inevitable return to subjects and styles.

Billed as the most thorough presentation of the artist's work to date, "James Welling: Monograph" is a long-awaited summary of this fascinating and influential artist's work from 1975 to the present. The last exhibition of the artist that approached this level of inclusion was organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2000, and much has transpired in Welling's work as well as within the realm of contemporary art since then, making this endeavor quite timely. At once frustrating, poetic, revealing, and stingy, the exhibition in many ways mirrors Welling's own practice. His peripatetic meanderings amid the byways of photographic style are in fact exaggerated by the dense and non-chronological installation, which offers no interpretive material to explain the drastic shifts from darkroom abstractions, to romantic documentary, to digital fabrications save for Welling's supertitles that identify groups of works by theme and date of production and are shown high on the wall above the photos.

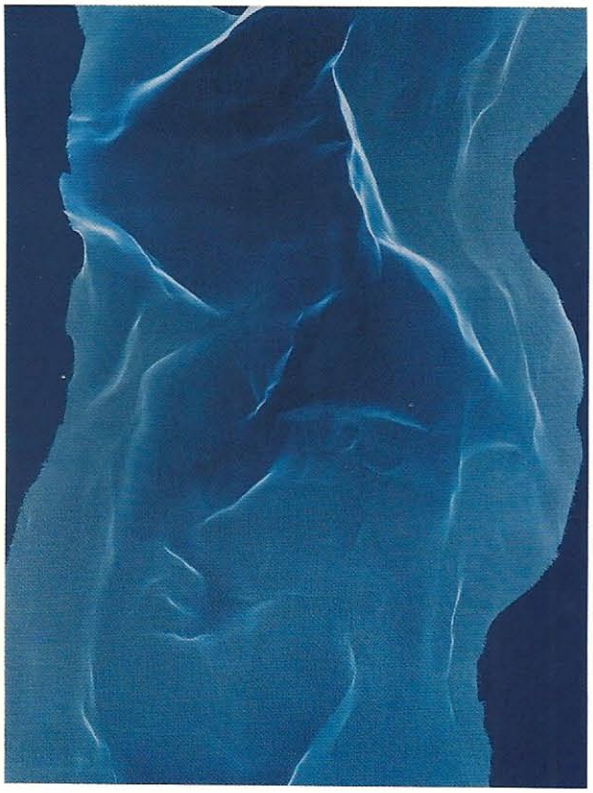
James Welling, "Monograph", Cincinnati Art Museum, 2013, exhibition view

Visitors entering the show may doubt they are seeing a single artist's work, especially when faced with psychedelic, large-scale photograms from 2008 flanking one side of a door and serene black-and-white images, from 1988–1994, depicting H. H. Richardson's nineteenth 19th-century architecture on the opposite side. But for those familiar with Welling's liberatingly catholic approach to image making, the show was a boon for better appreciating the overarching tendencies that have guided his work since the beginning. I've always suspected that Welling is to photography what Gerhard Richter has been to painting, as he levels distinctions between different types of photographic expression, driving home the point that all of it is fair game. Even more importantly, the work tells us that every image we encounter is a subjective construction, tied to some portion of reality, but coaxed away from it in innumerable ways by photographers, artists, photo editors, designers, stylists, and everyone else who uses images. As such, Welling's example has opened the field to the immense possibilities enjoyed by various artists now working with photographs – Wolfgang Tillmans, Sharon Lockhart, Roe Ethridge, Annette Kelm, Walead Beshty, Torbjorn Rodland, and many others.

If one burrows into the exhibition and tries to piece together a chronological progression, the symbolism of Welling's varied production appears latent in the earliest work, especially in the seemingly modest Polaroids taken in his Los Angeles studio in 1975 and 1976. Here, shots of a bicycle leaning against a wall take on strikingly different artistic personalities – from Warholian to Whistlerian – when captured under a range of lighting conditions, while other household banalities are rendered as if by Vermeer in "Clip On Lamp" (1976) or by Stieglitz or Strand in "Lock" (1976). Already one can see the multiple tongues that would later define his multilingual practice, and in the early images he appears similarly unattached to a single aesthetic worldview. One especially senses this in the architecture he chose to shoot in his Los Angeles Architecture and Portrait photographs of 1976–78, using the veritable encyclopedia of building types found around the neighborhood of Hollywood to piece together a wide-ranging essay on stylistic eclecticism. A less pliable sensibility could have led him to only shoot modern masterpieces, or perhaps just their kitschy counterparts, but Welling's choices are hardly dogmatic and benefit from this openness.

In the artist's well-known Drapes works from 1981, made after he moved from Los Angeles to New York, he nevertheless borrowed tricks from the movie trade to conjure snowy landscapes out of phyllo dough flakes on velvet – his range and guiding fascination with both fact and artifice leading him in new and varied aesthetic directions. Works such as "The Waterfall" (1981) or "Wreckage" (1981) are now icons of postmodernism and link the artist to the concerns of fellow Pictures generation artists like Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, and others. A less-heralded but equally relevant series from 1984 called the Gelatin Photographs similarly collapses distinctions between abstraction and representation in its high-resolution portrayal of slabs of black, ink-infused gelatin against a seamless, white backdrop. These grotesque, graphic images perform the sort of self-reflexive perversion of Greenbergian medium specificity – silver gelatin prints of gelatin – that would later be a primary characteristic in the work of artists such as Simon Starling and Walead Beshty.

James Welling,
1 "Torso 9", 2005–2008
2 "War 2", 2005/2011



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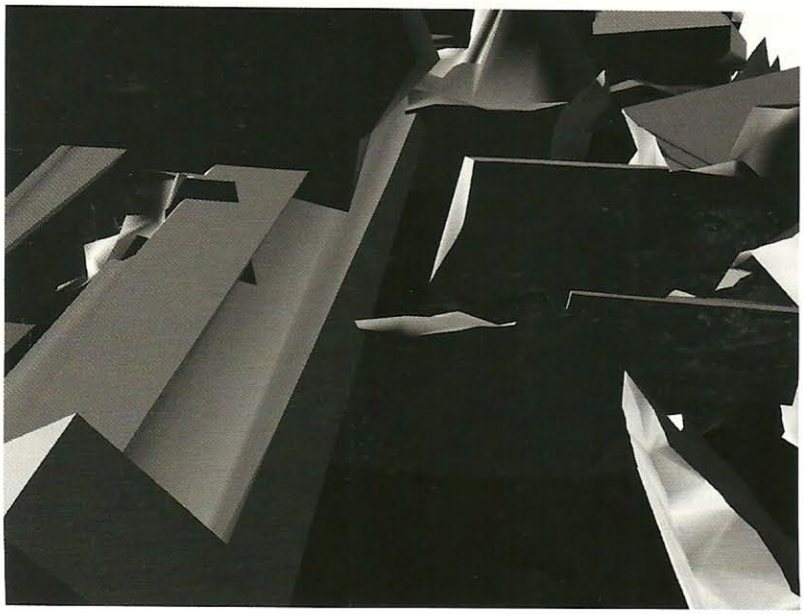

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The sensitive organization of the show by former chief curator James Crump – who, one guesses, was closely guided by the artist – allows the repercussions of these early forays to be felt in more recent works. For instance, the moody, chromatic lighting of the Polaroids finds a more pronounced application in the recent color-suffused images of Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House, where color filters and post-production manipulation persuade this chaste emblem of high modernism to take on myriad new guises, from tie-dye hippie hallucination to brooding horror film set. Likewise, the studio ephemera depicted in those early Polaroids returns in the recent images taken in Andrew Wyeth's former studio, where everything from empty easels to well-worn door locks is given haunting psychological weight. Even in the lush accompanying catalogue, "Easel" (2011) from the Wyeth series is presented across from "Lock" (1976) to hammer home this consistency within a practice that otherwise exudes a willful embrace of inconsistency.

With so much work on hand (almost 200 images), we can also see other underlying tendencies that stabilize the seeming disorder, like the artist's predilection for sturdy, classically balanced compositions; an interest in playing clear geometry against diffuse, organic forms; and an untroubled willingness to have his photographs tell stories that someone witnessing those scenes in person would not see. Sometimes such fabrications are easy to spot – such as in the digitally drawn War pictures from 2005, and of course in the cameraless photograms that have been an ongoing part of his practice since 1975. But in others, Welling makes us work to detect the deceit. A group of images taken in Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre in 2009, for instance, must be scrutinized to surmise that the artist has played fast and loose with the colors of books, columns, and other details, digitally altering the pictures for heightened visual impact.

As installed in Cincinnati, with the wan "9754" (2009) next to the pumped-up "9766" (2009), images of the same library/living room, the evidence is there for the patient viewer to discover. We know we are not looking at interior design trade glossies, but rather rarefied essays on vision, perception, and belief. The catalogue helps us understand these subtleties as well. It features an unusual but helpful section detailing the technical underpinnings – from paper and camera types to post-production or onsite tricks – that the artist used to make the images. Welling's career could be parsed endlessly for the connections, iterations, and elaborations that arise across a wildly productive four decades. And this exhibition allows us to speculate more comfortably about just how pervasive Welling's influence has been on the lively field of photo-based art today.

MICHAEL DARLING

James Welling, "Monograph", Cincinnati Art Museum, February 2, 2013–May 5, 2013.