

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

JAMES WELLING

WEXNER CENTER
FOR THE ARTS,
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As with Frank Stella back in the '60s, everyone seems to want James Welling on their team. When Welling first began exhibiting in the early '80s, his black-and-white close-ups of crumpled tinfoil, strewn chunks of Jell-O, and lush velvet drapes sprinkled with pastry flakes were widely applauded as postmodern object lessons that ironized the very possibility of reference. More recently, writers like Walter Benn Michaels and Ulrich Loock have hailed these same photos as rich in metaphorical possibility, even if what they end up referencing is photography itself by dramatically figuring such medium-specific properties as grain, gelatin emulsion, and the play of light and dark. Postmodernists and modernists alike continue to pen catalogue essays on Welling's behalf—including, for this occasion, Michael Fried, who praises the tinfoil photos for their "Mallarméan metaphoric expansiveness."

Expansiveness, indeed. The elusive coherence of Welling's art requires that categories like metaphor and self-reference be mightily stretched—short of the breaking point but certainly beyond the usual sense wherein they afford direct and immediate revelation. Welling's subjects are far-flung, ranging from railroad yards to the nineteenth-century buildings of

H.H. Richardson to the honeymoon diary of Welling's great-great-grandparents to West LA apartment complexes to the inside of the artist's own apartment from the '70s. In addition, Welling employs a variety of means to produce both negatives and prints (color as well as black-and-white), making the photos appear thick with the materiality of the different apparatuses employed. The Wexner retrospective, organized by Sarah J. Rogers, begins with the early series "Sun," 1975—five small Polaroids of a dying orange sun in a smoke-filled sky during LA's fire season—and ends with "New Abstractions," 1999, large reversed photograms showing thin black slats arranged against a white ground. In between, early and late works intermingle, and the absence of chronological order further encourages interpretation to roam—or the reverse, to call it quits in the face of an eccentricity that threatens to close in on itself.

But this seems precisely the negotiation Welling wants: Associations do surface, albeit slowly, and their power owes largely to their being neither entirely arbitrary nor wholly systematic. "A real library is always somewhat impenetrable," Walter Benjamin once wrote, and as with Benjamin's library, Welling's hunting and gathering of photo processes and images cross memory and history—the hermeticism of a personal album and the conventionality of an image bank—as if only through such disparity could he begin to figure the medium's range and complexity.

Welling's gaze tends to fixate on a static corporeal world (hardly any people trespass these still lifes), but his images are too aestheticized to be taken as straight-

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forward documentation. Unlike, say, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Welling privileges composition enough to alter image dimensions within a single series; moreover, a series's subject matter doesn't always dictate where he points his camera (among the photos of LA architecture is a frontal shot of a grubby VW bus). But his eye for composition looks beyond isolated pictures to his collection as a whole; no one work, no matter how stylish or object-bound, stands independent. As with the eclectic "Light Sources," 1992-98—the subjects of which include a horse, a landscape, and a designer lamp—even the most singular images get slotted and cross-referenced within larger groupings. Many of the series have been developed across long, overlapping periods of time. Taking a cataloguer's approach, Welling expands his oeuvre not in a linear and continuous progression but laterally and from multiple points at once.

The photos themselves suggest collectibles; their material density, still-life thematic, and emphasis on compositional framing combine to promote a frontal and iconic quality. Reinforcing this effect is the wide mat and elegant frame each picture nestles within like a curio inside a cabinet. The many shots of trains, winter landscapes, and nineteenth-century buildings

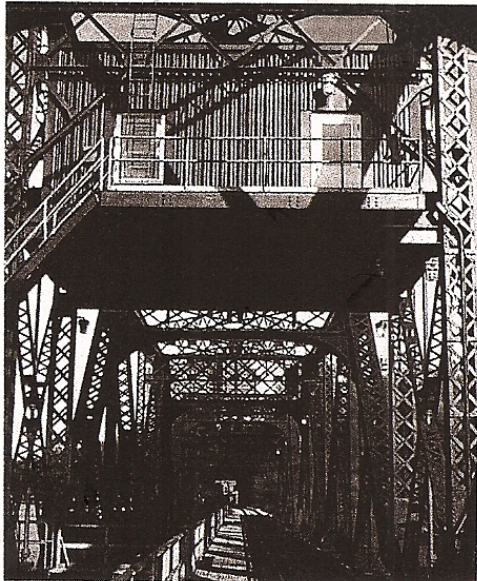
seem to refer more to vintage coffee-table books and snow-filled paperweights than to the actual sites where they were taken (one of the Richardson photos is in fact a shot of an image in a book). Like souvenirs, Welling's images are suffused with nostalgia, encroached upon by shadow and cold—conditions under which archival material is best kept.

What raises Welling's project above mere melancholic fascination with photography's nineteenth-century youth is the extent to which it is conspicuously constructed, the result of creative effort—on the part of both artist and viewer—to build connections and constellations out of a disparity verging on illegibility. Welling's practice achieves its sense of identity only through refraction: It manages to be self-referential while fully embracing photography's insistence on referring beyond itself; draws out the character and history of the medium without denying its implication in other inventions and histories; and ultimately acknowledges subjective vision as socially produced. Metaphoric ties abound (as modernists point out) but are so attenuated and branching as to deny metaphor's sense of inevitability and sufficiency (as postmodernists stress). The entire retrospective comes across as just such a metaphor for photography. Between the beaming "Sun" photos and the black crosshatched "New Abstractions"—that is, between the light source of the enlarger and the cropping blades of a photo-paper easel—a personal view of and through photography at once comes into focus and explodes. □

"James Welling" travels to the Baltimore Museum of Art, Sept. 10–Dec. 10, 2000, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 6–Aug. 26, 2001.

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Upper right: **James Welling, *August 16A*, 1980**, black-and-white photograph, 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".
Above, left to right: **James Welling, *Moveable Bridge*, New York, NY, 1990**, black-and-white photograph, 22 x 18". **James Welling, #7, 1999**, black-and-white photograph, 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".