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Destination Art: James Welling and Pennsylvania's Brandywine River Valley

by David Ebony



View of James Welling's *Gradients*, 2015, dye sublimation on aluminum; at Brandywine River Museum of Art. Courtesy Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pa.



In "Things Beyond Resemblance," Conceptualist photographer James Welling pays homage to a youthful inspiration—the art of realist painter Andrew Wyeth. The exhibition, of recent photos and a new series of outdoor sculptural objects titled "Gradients," is on view through Nov. 15 at the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, a rural area of southeastern Pennsylvania.

The museum is well known for its extensive holdings of works by Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) and other artists of the Wyeth clan, including his father, N.C. Wyeth, and son Jamie. Located amid the museum's 200-acre surroundings are the intact studios of these legendary painters, which the museum's 200,000 annual visitors may visit on guided tours.

The Brandywine launches a new program of contemporary art with this James Welling show, organized by guest curator Philipp Kaiser, formerly of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Welling, who was born in Connecticut and now lives in L.A., often uses art historical landmarks and famous art works as starting points for new compositions. Pushing his own work far beyond the source material, he often digitally alters the color and many other formal aspects of his historical subject matter.

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The photo series at Brandywine—comprising some 50 images and begun soon after Wyeth's death in 2009—was inspired by Wyeth's work, by Chadds Ford and by Wyeth's home and studio in Maine. In the photos, Welling concentrates on details of the painter's bucolic environs and refers to his iconic works. He highlights the cracked ceiling of Wyeth's humble studio, for instance, and the glistening waterfalls and streams he often depicted.

A prominent part of the exhibition is the "Gradients" series—nine large rectangular metal sheets punctuating the verdant landscape either vertically or horizontally, in places that held significance for Wyeth. Fastened to perforated steel supports, the sheets are printed with wide bands of hazy color that appear to shift subtly with changes in the sunlight. One of the works is visible above a sink inside the kitchen of the Kuerner family house, which was a favorite Wyeth hangout and is part of the guided tour.

At the show's preview, on Aug. 7, Welling sat down with *Art in America* to discuss the exhibition's evolution and aims.

DAVID EBONY You had an interest in Andrew Wyeth's work in your youth. What specific aspects of it attracted you? Do they still resonate with you today?

JAMES WELLING It has to do with landscape. The depiction of certain types of landscape. Wyeth was interested in a kind of timelessness. He caused me to look at the world very closely, in a specific way, which I still do. It's this idea of visual experience, training yourself to see, and then using your eyes.

EBONY Your previous series, like the images of Philip Johnson's Glass House, are closely connected to the avant-garde. Unfortunately, for some critics, Wyeth is the poster boy for the anti-avant-garde. How do you reconcile the situation with Wyeth?

WELLING Interestingly, both Wyeth and Johnson were close friends of arts patron Lincoln Kirstein, a great champion of figurative painting who was married to Paul Cadmus's sister. There are avant-garde currents in Wyeth's work—sometimes hidden. You have to come around and put together your own view of it. There's a kind of "don't-give-a-shit" radicalness about the work. Wyeth didn't care what people thought of it. I see a connection between Wyeth's work and the avant-garde—but that's just me. I can see, for example, some relationship to Joseph Beuys, in certain subjects.

EBONY In the photos, did you try to capture or evoke the color, light and sense of space in specific works by Wyeth or specific places where he painted?

WELLING No. I don't think I could. I looked at what's there in Wyeth's work and in his surroundings, but that was just the conceptual starting point. I think of Wyeth's work as a kind of skeleton or armature on which I built or made my own work.

EBONY Let's talk about the new outdoor sculptures, the "Gradients." How did they evolve? Would you call them interventions?

WELLING Yes. [Museum director Thomas Padon] encouraged me to do something outside the museum. I thought of the Brandywine Conservancy that encompasses many

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acres of land surrounding the Brandywine Museum. I thought about matching the colors in nature, and freezing this moment in time—making site-specific photos. They are not really sculptures. I imagined them as street signs. They are frontal. They look kind of scientific. They are also like sound works, sampling and recombining tones. It's a very new project for me. We'll see where it goes. It's the absolute beginning of something.