

REGEN PROJECTS

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[ill.]

Afterall

James Welling: The Mind on Fire

– Anthony Spira

This conversation took place during 'James Welling: The Mind on Fire', an exhibition at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes that closely examined the artist's formative years.¹ It is clear, in retrospect, how this period provided the genesis of so many of the themes and series that Welling has been pursuing ever since.

Anthony Spira speaks to James Welling about his early photographs and interests, and about ambiguity as an abiding concern within his work.

For example, the Los Angeles Architecture photographs (1976–78) prioritise a theatrical play of light and shadow over architecture itself in a way that foreshadows the Glass House series (2006–09). Another recent series of photographs related to the painter Andrew Wyeth (Wyeth, 2010–ongoing) is directly connected to Welling's early days as a watercolourist attempting to capture transitory light effects and cloud formations. Somewhat surprisingly, landscape remains a constant throughout Welling's career, from the 'phyllo dough drapes' of the 1980s, which echo Wyeth's paintings of melting snow, to the Degradés (1986–2006), with their uncompromising fixation on the horizon. The relationship between painting and photography is another constant in Welling's work: his Fluid Dynamics (2009–12) recall his early struggles with watercolour, as well as the bacterial, fractal qualities of his early collages and the disorienting scale and perspective of the seminal Aluminum Foil series (1980–81). At the same time, Welling has never wavered in his curiosity in the photographic medium, persistently testing the limits and capabilities of his apparatus.

Anthony Spira: Your exhibition at MK Gallery, 'The Mind on Fire', re-creates six different shows or parts of shows from New York in the early to mid-1980s, and includes ephemera from the 1970s and 80s, such as notes, drawings, source material, props, records and books, etc. Could you explain where the title comes from?

James Welling: 'The Mind on Fire' is the title of a literary biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson that tracks the books he read throughout his life. I just loved the phrase. The mind on fire is the way I felt during the period covered in the show, particularly in the late 1970s. I was reading and thinking very intensely and shifting through a lot of influences. I was churning out ideas and the show captures a great many of the small studies I made as I transitioned from Conceptual art into photography.

I made watercolours as an adolescent but when I went to CalArts, I was entranced by Minimal and Conceptual art and I put away my paints. Yesterday at Raven Row [in London] I met Seth Siegelaub, and told him how the work in the Milton Keynes show represented my effort to unlearn the lessons of Conceptual art. He laughed at that, but it's true. When I left CalArts in 1974 I was very confused about what to do as an artist. The image I had at the time was of a pond that had been disrupted by my five years of art school. It took about a year for the pond – my mind – to settle so I could see to the bottom of it, and to understand what I was interested in. I started making watercolours again to get out of the bind of art school.

AS: Some of your early works, sketches and source material relate to your interest in tactile surfaces and manipulated handmade things, but also to cave-like spaces – for example, a fireplace or a stage.

¹ 'James Welling: The Mind on Fire' took place at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes from 14 September to 25 November 2012. The exhibition is presented in partnership with and will be displayed at Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela from 21 March 2012 to 16 June 2013 and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver from 15 November 2013 to 19 January 2014.

REGEN PROJECTS

JW: Yes, absolutely. The fascination with dark, cavernous space began in 1975. The imaginary spaces, the corners of rooms and the dark landscapes in my small watercolour paintings were heavily influenced, first, by Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* [1958], and then by discovering Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire. You can see this in the scale and subjects of the *Aluminum Foil* and *Drapes* [1981–89].

AS: You also produced a number of collages at the time that play with different scales and perspectives, combining ambiguous images with biological, textural and organic associations. As you wrote in some of your notes then, 'One of my earliest thoughts about making photographs was to construct a photograph of great density. That is, the photograph would be a point where many lines might intersect.'²

JW: I started cutting images out of magazines in 1972, and in 1973 and 1974 I began to work with cigarette ads from the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. Some of the collages combine images taken with an electron microscope and photographs, for example, of the US Civil War, a castle in Wales and the sun in Antarctica. In a way, these images are like a compressed set of visual references predicting what I would photograph in the future. Most are combinations of very disparate spaces. And the work, if not cave-like, is an exploration of dense ambiguous spaces that anticipate my work of a few years in the future.

The idea of density that I formulated in that early statement you quote is nothing more than a fascination with multiple meanings and references. Even though I said that Mallarmé unlocked a creative world for me, it was really Wallace Stevens, whom I discovered in 1970, who laid the groundwork for my interest in Mallarmé. When I go back now and read my journal entries from the 1970s, or when I look at all the marks I made in my Stevens editions, I realise how much he helped me formulate my aesthetic. One of the great things he said was that he wanted to make poems that 'resisted the intelligence' as long as possible. That goal was something that I got from him: I was trying to make something

that wasn't easily recognisable and which disconnected the verbal from the visual. The ideas from Stevens and Mallarmé that were percolating from 1970 to 1980 finally became the engine that helped me visualise my *Aluminum Foil* photographs of 1980 to 1981. I wanted to make photographs that you could not describe, you could not remember, but which were still, nevertheless, very sharp and clear.

AS: Around the same time as you were making these collages, you effectively decided to teach yourself photography, in 1976, despite having studied at CalArts. This meant playing around with camera-less photography and constructing makeshift cameras.

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JW: In 1975 I made the first step on my path to becoming a photographer by making photograms of my hands. The hand is such an important part of photography. It's what you use to manipulate and control the camera — I was just recently on location in Maine and my hands were sore and bruised from taking photographs. I was interested at that time in the ambiguities of seeing. This was connected to a high-contrast and ambiguous photograph, very popular in the 1950s, known as 'Jesus in the Snow'.³ The problem was that I could never see 'Jesus' in the image when I was a kid. All I saw was a mask or dog's face, with these two eyes staring out at me. So this image stayed with me, as did the idea of reading or deciphering an ambiguous photograph, trying to make sense of it, and this is the direction of the hands photograms.

After the photograms, I borrowed a Polaroid camera, and somehow broke the shutter — so I was stuck with a Polaroid camera that had a fixed aperture and a wide-open shutter. I was hooked and desperately wanted to make more Polaroids and realised that I could still take pictures with it. All I had to do was put the

² James Welling, 'Statements, Drafts, Writings and Notes, 1982–88', unpublished, assembled 2008, archived at the Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
³ 'Jesus in the Snow' is an optical illusion said to have been taken by a Chinese photographer, who took a picture of melting snow against black earth.

REGEN PROJECTS



James Welling,
Untitled,
1974—1976,
offset lithography
and tape on board,
33.7 × 17.1 cm.
Courtesy MK Gallery,
Milton Keynes

Artists: James Welling | 35

REGEN PROJECTS



James Welling,
ISLB, 2004,
unique c-type print
mounted on plexi,
109.5 × 87.6 × 3.2cm,
from the series
Degradés

REGEN PROJECTS



James Welling,
Gelatin Photograph
45, 1984, inkjet
print, 50.8 × 40.6cm.
Courtesy MK Gallery

camera on a tripod and make exposures of one second or longer. I began to control the colour in the Polaroids by heating or refrigerating the film as it developed. After six months I outgrew this camera and made an experimental camera out of a shoebox and a Polaroid back. And a few months later I purchased a four-by-five-inch view camera and taught myself how to process and print black-and-white sheet film.

AS: The exhibition also includes records and paraphernalia you were interested in from the late 1970s, by various friends in bands and artists, including Dan Graham and Jeff Wall.

JW: I met Dan Graham in January 1972 and we were close for a couple of years. Dan was the first person to mention Jeff Wall, whom I met in 1983. (Jeff and I both took photographs that were used for Sonic Youth covers.) Dan was very interested in music — all kinds. He took me to a Steve Reich concert in Ojai, California, and we went to see the Avengers at the Whisky a Go Go in Hollywood. When I moved to New York in 1979, I was excited to find my friend Paul McMahon in a No Wave band,

Daily Life, along with Barbara Ess and Glenn Branca. They would practice downstairs in the building I lived in on Grand Street. Dan managed another band that Glenn was in, along with Margaret DeWys and Jeffrey Lohn, named Theoretical Girls. Glenn eventually started his own band and I became fascinated with these ensembles where he'd have, say, six guitars all tuned to low, middle or high E, playing in unison and at extreme volumes. The guitars, played this way, created standing waves that reverberated in the room, sounding like choirs or masses of trumpets. I thought that I was making visual analogues to this music with my *Aluminum Foils* and *Drapes*. And Glenn gave his pieces extravagant titles: 'The Ascension' or 'The Spectacular Commodity'. Some of my drapery pictures used similarly descriptive titles: 'Agony, In Search of...'

AS: You were also working as a cook at the time, and when you decided to photograph aluminium foil, you spent an intense three months creating a large series of works, also experimenting with the surfaces of the images by heating, cracking or soaking them in brown ink. I guess these are the

Artists: James Welling | 37

REGEN PROJECTS

dense images you were building up to earlier...

JW: When I moved to New York in late 1978, I was too broke to buy film so I began to paint on the four-by-five-inch rectangles left over from cutting window mattes. I painted a series of watercolours of imaginary, theatrical spaces. I struggled for a long time trying to figure out what to photograph there. I got a job at a restaurant, and one day, as I was finishing up my shift in the kitchen, I looked at a piece of butter wrapped in aluminium foil. I thought that this might make a good photograph and I photographed it on a sheet of white paper that night. When I developed the negative and saw how good it looked, I bought a roll of aluminium foil and started to photograph crumpled foil for the next sixteen months. I ended up making over 200 negatives. I exhibited 36 aluminium foils at Metro Pictures, New York, in March 1981, in two rows of eighteen. I was extremely happy with the foils. They were the culmination of ten years of thinking. I was really trying to make my own kind of picture, to make something new, something surprising that embodied all the mental activity of the past few years after I left CalArts. At the same time I was also experimenting with different treatments of the prints, like heating a print with an electric iron until it was scorched, and then immersing it in brown ink. I also experimented with craquelure by cracking the surface of the print in two directions. And I painted with gouache on a few prints in the Metro Pictures show in 1981.

AS: When you made the first drapery pictures, close-ups of carefully arranged velvet cloth, you wrote that you were trying to capture 'a feeling of mortality, of elegy', and also paraphrased Edgar Allen Poe: 'I don't want to paint the thing that exists but rather the effect that it produces'.⁴ You already mentioned the title of *Agony*, *In Search of...* but there were others like *Waterfall* and *Wreckage*, and you generally encouraged imaginative readings like snow-capped mountain ridges or 'the marine quality of pounding surf'.⁵ How do you now feel about these connections?

JW: Let me backtrack and explain how I began the drapery pictures. In the 1980s I rarely sold any photographs. But in March 1981 I sold three aluminium foil photographs and, very elated, I took the money and bought an inexpensive eight-by-ten-inch view camera, two film holders and some Tri-X film. I photographed the aluminium foils in a dark, small space at the back of a narrow loft I shared with Matt Mullican. In May 1981 I house-sat my friends Paul McMahon and Nancy Chunn's large, sunny loft down the street. I set up my eight-by-ten camera and began to photograph still lifes by a window. First, I photographed sheets of dried phyllo or pastry dough, which I had been unsuccessfully shooting previously with my four-by-five camera as I shot the aluminium foils.

Along Broadway, near the loft I was staying in, were a slew of wholesale fabric shops. One day I bought a large swathe of drapery velvet, arranged the fabric next to a window in the loft and began to photograph the drapes with flakes of phyllo dough in the folds. When I returned

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to my own dark loft at the end of June, I couldn't keep making these pictures because I didn't have a window, and I began a different treatment of the subject. I used the brutally stark fluorescent light of my tiny loft and switched over to exposing on high-contrast film.

So to get back to your question, the drapery pictures are very hard to talk about. Every aspect of making the work is still crystal clear, but it's very difficult to say what they are about. It seems so obvious to me that they are about entropy and decay. A friend of mine, Tom Radloff, said that for him what they pictured was a noble sadness. This seems to be very close to what I was thinking about. The aluminium foils have a glittering sensuality, a sexy feeling. But the drapes are images about the act

⁴ Tamie Boley, 'Interview with James Welling', in J. Welling, 'Statements, Drafts, Writings and Notes', *op. cit.*

⁵ J. Welling, 'Statements, Drafts, Writings and Notes', *op. cit.*

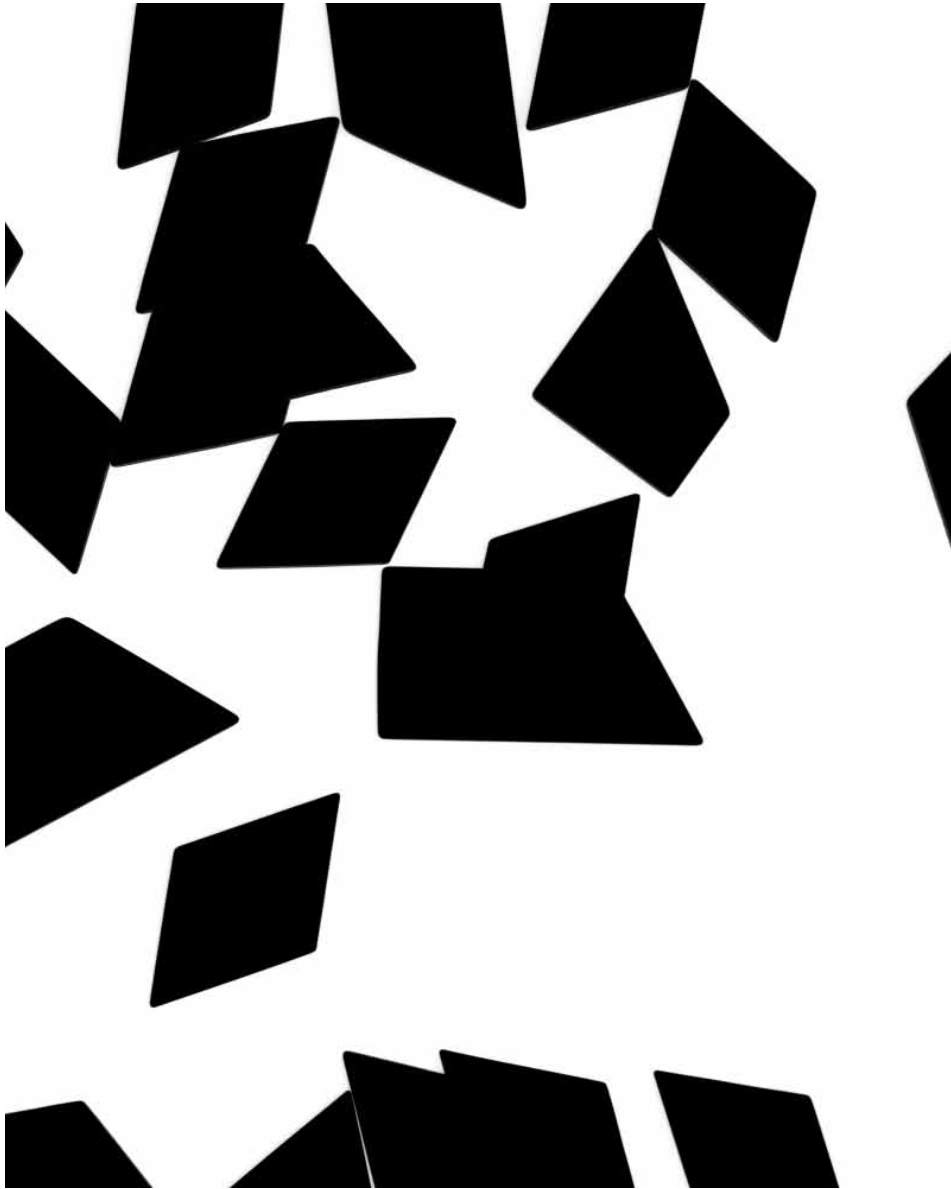
REGEN PROJECTS



James Welling,
Summation, 1981,
inkjet print,
25.4 × 20.3cm.
Courtesy MK Gallery

Artists: James Welling | 39

REGEN PROJECTS



James Welling,
Tile Photograph 8,
1985, inkjet print,
50.8 x 40.6cm.
Courtesy MK Gallery

REGEN PROJECTS

of feeling, they're almost philosophical images, if that's possible.

AS: At the same time, there seems to be a play in your work between photography and painting, ideas related to perspective, surface, materiality and process.

JW: For the *Tile Photographs* [1985], I threw black plastic tiles haphazardly onto a light box, creating, in the spirit of Mallarmé's 'Un Coup de dés' [1897], the potential for infinite variations of random tiles. These works are a perceptual puzzle, seeing these shapes animated, moving, flat, laying on top of each other, etc. I had just become aware of the 1950s black-and-white paintings of Quebec artist Paul-Émile Borduas at the National Gallery in Ottawa. In hindsight, the process for the *Tile Photographs* was very similar to photograms. I was still using a camera but the results were very close to the photogram process, making work without a camera. The next year I began to make paintings that similarly resembled photograms. I started by tossing circular pieces of black matte board onto square canvases, and then, very laboriously, taping and painting the black circles to make paintings. But they're actually photograms made with paint.

AS: What about the *Gelatin Photographs* that you first exhibited in 1985 at Metro Pictures, in a show with Laurie Simmons and Louise Lawler?

JW: I was very surprised to learn that all photographs use gelatin as their base. In early 1984 I got some black cherry Jell-O and put black ink into it. After it hardened in the fridge, I cut it up with a serrated steak knife and put chunks of it on white seamless backdrop paper. I made about one hundred photographs of the gelatin, which are extremely ambiguous images. You don't know how big they are or what you are looking at, and that's one of the things that interested me a great deal.

The idea of coming into recognition, slowly understanding what you are looking at, is important for me. This is one of the reasons that I like to make images that have multiple meanings. I prefer to make images that are not pictures of the world, that are not *street photographs*, and have no simple reading. You have to work to provide the meaning of the photograph.

Artists: James Welling | 41