

THE MIND ON FIRE

Interview took place at the MK Gallery, Milton Keynes in October 2012

Anthony Spira:

Your exhibition at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes recreates about 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 1970's. 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 Cal Arts, I was entranced by minimal and conceptual art and put away my watercolours. Yesterday at Ravens Row I met Seth Seigelaub who was a very important gallerist of conceptual art in the 1960's. I told him about the Milton Keynes show and how the work in the show represented my effort to unlearn the lessons of conceptual art. He laughed at that, but it's true. When I left Cal Arts 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 (1975) for the pond---my mind---to settle so I could see to the bottom of it, and to understand what I was interested in after I shed all my conceptual art influences. I started making watercolours again to get off the bind of art school.

AS:

Some of your early works, sketches and source material relate to your interest in tactile surfaces and manipulated hand-made things but also to cave like spaces, for example a fireplace or a stage, with perhaps your first 'drapes' in the form of theatre curtains.

JW:

Yes absolutely. The idea of the cave, of a dark, cavernous space, was a fascination that began in 1975. The imaginary spaces, the corners of rooms and the dark landscapes in my small watercolour paintings were heavily influenced, first by reading Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' and then by discovering Mallarmé and Baudelaire. The images that I got while reading Mallarme from 1977-80 were very rich. You can see my interest in small cavernous spaces in the scale and subjects of the Aluminum Foil and Drapes.

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 at the time, '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.'

JW:

I started cutting images out from magazines in 1972 and in 73-74 I began to work with cigarette ads from the Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine. In the work "And Should" I'm making both a commentary on the prevalence of cigarettes in photographs of artists and much more importantly I'm zeroing in on the hypnotic phrases that these ads employ. In this case the text that fascinated me, "There's a lot of good between Winston and Should," refers to the whole catch phrase for this cigarette brand, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." What fascinated me at the time, and still fascinates me, was the implicit reference to the catch phrase that you already had to know. So I cropped three cigarette ads to make a point about both the reference to that specific branding phrase and to the general condition of language as a vast set of semi-closed, or semi-hermetic references.

There are other collages in the show that combine microscopic views and normal views. One, for example, includes a set of images including an electron microscope photograph, a photograph from the American 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 of those images 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.

This idea of density that I formulated in that early statement you quote is nothing more than a fascination with multiple meanings and references. Something dense would take longer to understand. In 1970 I discovered the poetry of Wallace Stevens in a poetry class at Carnegie Mellon University where I studied for two years. Even though I said that Mallarme unlocked a creative world for me, it was really Stevens who laid the groundwork for my interest in Mallarme. And I think Stevens had a more lasting influence --- for instance I always carry a small volume of Stevens poetry in my travel knapsack. When I go back now and read my journal entries from the 1970's or when I look at all marks I made in my Stevens editions I realize that Stevens really helped me formulate my aesthetic. And one of the great things Stevens said was that he wanted to make poems that resisted the intelligence as long as possible. So that goal was something that I got from him. I was trying to make something that wasn't easily recognizable and disconnected the verbal from the visual. And those ideas that were percolating from 1970-1980 that I got from Stevens and Mallarme finally became the engine that visualized my Aluminum Foil photographs of 1980-81. I wanted to make photographs that you could not describe, you could not remember but 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 Cal Arts. This meant playing around with camera-less photography and constructing makeshift cameras.

JW:

In 1975 I made the first step on my path to becoming a photographer by making photograms of my hands. I borrowed my friend Bart Thrall's darkroom off Lincoln Blvd in Venice, CA for an hour and I made 5 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 on location in Maine Thursday and my hands were sore and bruised from taking photographs. After the photographs of hands I borrowed a Polaroid camera from Bart. Somehow I broke the shutter on the camera. I replaced the camera and I was stuck with a Polaroid camera that had a fixed aperture and a wide-open shutter. I was hooked on making Polaroids and I desperately wanted to make more. . I looked at the broken camera and realized that I could still take pictures with it.. All I had to do was put the 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 shoebox and a Polaroid back. And a few months later I purchased a 4x5 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. He would visit Los Angeles and I would drive him around. Or I would meet him in New York and we would go to shows and eat Chinese food. Dan was the first person to mention Jeff Wall, who I met in 1983. Dan was very interested in music. All kinds. He took me to a Steve Reich concert in Ojai, CA and we went to see the Avengers at the Whiskey 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 building I lived in on Grand St. Dan managed another band that Glenn was in, along with Margaret DeWys and Jeffrey Lohn, named The Theoretical Girls.

Very quickly I began to follow another band, a power trio, that Glenn founded, along with Barbara Ess and Gail Vachon, named The Static. I made a recording of The Static live at Tier 3 in Tribeca in 1979 that captures the raw urgency of this music. Later I became fascinated by Branca's ensembles where he'd have, say, six guitars all tuned to low, middle and 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 Aluminium Foils and Drapes. And Glenn titled his pieces with extravagant titles: The Ascension or The Spectacular Commodity. Some of my drapery pictures used similarly descriptive titles: Agony, In Search of...

Before a particularly memorable Branca concert at Great Guildersleeves in New York in 1981, Sonic Youth was the opening act. That was the first time I heard Sonic Youth and I was blown away. I'd met Kim Gordon in Los Angeles in 1978 when I was dating one of her classmates from the Otis Art Institute where Kim had studied. Later Kim and I both worked for the art dealer Annina Nosei. For an early Sonic Youth album, Kill Your Idols, Jeff Wall photographed the band with his Minox 35mm camera. In 1984 Kim asked me to shoot the cover of their new LP, *Bad Moon Rising*. I got my 4x5 view camera and tripod and met the band on Canal St before we took the subway to Queens. Thurston Moore wanted me to photograph a burning scarecrow and had all the makings for the scarecrow except for the straw to stuff him with. Thurston finally realized that the equestrian police stables were just two blocks away on Varick St. So we went over and watched as Kim very politely

procured enough hay from the cop in charge of the horses. We rushed out to Long Island City and made the photograph just before sunset.

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 work, also experimenting with the surface of the images, by heating, cracking, or soaking them in brown ink. I guess these are the 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 4x5 inch rectangles left over from cutting window mattes. I painted a series of watercolours of imaginary spaces. I struggled for a long time trying to figure out what to photograph in New York. I got a job at a restaurant and my finances improved. 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 16 months. I ended up making over two hundred negatives. I exhibited 36 Aluminum Foils at Metro Pictures in March 1981 in two rows of 18. 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 metal activity of the past few years after I left Cal Arts.

At the same time I was also experimenting with different treatments of the prints, such as heating a print with an electric iron until it was scorched and then immersing it in brown ink. This was somewhat similar to my heating and chilling the Polaroids as I processed them. I also experimented with crackle by distressing the surface of the print. And I painted with gouache on a few prints that I showed in the Metro Pictures show in 1981.

AS:

At the start of the 1980s, you began work on the first of several series of drapery pictures, close-ups of carefully arranged velvet cloth that were less 'melodramatic' than the *Foils*. The series started with a luxurious texture but gradually became more technological, stark and stripped down as you used high contrast film. You mentioned in previous writings that you were trying to capture '...a feeling of mortality, of elegy...' with these works and also quoted Edgar Allen Poe: 'I don't want to paint the thing that exists but rather the effect that it produces'. You used titles such as 'Waterfall' and 'Wreckage' and encouraged imaginative readings of, for example, archaeological remains, snow-capped mountain ridges or 'the marine quality of pounding surf'. How do you now feel about these connections?

JW:

Let me backtrack and explain how I began the drapery pictures. Between 1976 and 1982 I probably sold 10 photographs, total. On day in April 1981 the art buyer for Atlantic Richfield, Betty Gold, bought three of my 8x10 aluminium foil prints for \$450. Elated, I took the money and bought a very inexpensive 8x10in view camera, two film holders and some Tri-X. film. Where lived in and where I shot the aluminium foils, was a dark, small space at the back of a narrow loft I shared with Matt Mullican. In May 1981 I house sat my friend Paul McMahon and Nancy Chunn's large, sunny loft down the street. I set up my 8x10 camera and began to photograph still lifes. First, I photographed

sheets of dried phyllo dough. I'd been shooting this phyllo unsuccessfully with my 4x5 alongside the foils.

Along Broadway, near the loft I was staying in, there were a slew of wholesale fabric shops. I went with my mother one day to help her buy some fabric to cover a sofa. The next day I went back and bought a large swath of drapery velvet. When I returned to the loft I was house sitting, I arranged the fabric next to a window and began to photograph the drapes with flakes of phyllo dough in the folds. Beginning in mid May and continuing into early June I made about 20 negatives of drapery and phyllo dough, some of which are in the show. When I returned to my dark loft at the end of June I couldn't keep making these pictures because I didn't have a window. I made one more phyllo and drape picture at my parent's house in July and then I began a different treatment of the subject. I used the brutally stark fluorescent lights of my tiny loft and switched over to exposing on high contrast film. A group of these "High Contrast" photographs are in the show. In my 1982 Metro Pictures show I exhibited both types of phyllo and drape images.

So to get back to your question, the drapery pictures are very hard to talk about. I vividly remember buying the fabric, making the arrangements and exposures, processing and contact printing the negatives in the cramped bathroom at the back of my loft. Every aspect of making the work is still crystal clear. But it's very difficult to talk about 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 what they pictured for him, 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 feel. But the drapes are images about thinking, philosophical images, if that's possible. Another friend, who was doing his PHD on Heidegger said that he associated these photographs with topological manifolds.

AS:

Could you say something 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 I put chunks of it on white seamless backdrop paper. I made about 100 of photographs of the gelatin which are, I have to say, 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 like making images that are not pictures of the world, not *street photographs*, and have no simple reading. You have to work to provide the meaning of the photograph.

I am interested in sorting through the ambiguities of seeing. This goes right back to my early photographs of hands and to a list I wrote in 1975 describing different ideas for photographs I wanted to make. This list is in one of the vitrines in the room with the foils. One of the items on the list refers to *Jesus in the Snow*, a very popular photograph in the 1950s. Or at least it was popular with my father who was studying to be an Episcopal priest at that point in time. *Jesus in the Snow* is a high contrast photograph which is very ambiguous. At times you see a dog's face or a mask, other

times you see the bearded Jesus figure. I could never see the Jesus in the image when I was a kid. All I saw was the mask or the 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.

AS:

This connects to your interest in Symbolist poetry but also possibly leads towards a focus on process, not only of seeing and understanding, but in the production of the work at a time when your efforts with photography and painting seemed quite interchangeable.

JW:

As I said earlier, encountering the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé was very important. For the *Tile Photographs*, I threw black plastic tiles haphazardly onto a light box creating, in the spirit of Mallarmé's *Coup des Des*, 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 seen the 1950's black and white paintings of Quebec artist Paul-Émile Borduas at the National Gallery in Ottawa. I was very moved by his work and you could say that the Tile Photographs are an homage to Borduas.

In hindsight, the process for the Tile Photographs was very similar to making a photogram. I was still using a lens, a camera system, and shooting on high contrast film but the results were very close to the photogram process, that is making work without a camera.

This idea of a 'near' photogram leads us to the last body of work in the show a small group of black circle paintings. Here I'm just sketching out the potential for a body of work that I would continue to make over the next few years. After working on these circle paintings I realized that they were, like the Tile Photographs, almost photograms. I took circular templates and tossed them onto a 52 in square canvas and then very laboriously taped cut and painted the black circles. They're photograms made with paint.

The exhibition is presented in partnership between MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, UK; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada.