

James Welling

American, born 1951

24

0467, from the series

Glass House, 2009

inkjet print

103.19 × 145.73 cm (40⁵/₈ × 57³/₈ in.)

Promised Gift from the

Collection of Robert E.

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fig. 1: James Welling, *Red Dawn*, 1976, polacolor type 108 print, Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

FOR OVER FORTY YEARS, James Welling has pursued a rich and diverse photographic practice. Employing a wide range of techniques, such as photogram and both monochromatic and color processes, he adopts heterogeneous subjects: these include incisive studies of modern and historic architecture; ruminations on particular landscapes linked to his personal history; muscular still lifes of objects, textures, and light sources; and rigorous formal abstractions. Yet throughout his work, thematic constants emerge—the interplay of light and color on form, the intensity of place coupled with memory. Welling chooses different formats to suit each project; his photographs operate at the crossroads of material and conceptual practice.

In the early 1970s, Welling studied in Los Angeles at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), earning an MFA in 1974. There, under the influence of his mentor, John Baldessari (pl. 19), the young artist made videos and mounted a thesis show of collages of photographs from books and magazines. Though Welling had earlier been entranced when he stumbled upon a copy of Paul Strand's 1940 portfolio of Mexico photographs, he had only dabbled in photography when he began making experimental pictures with a Polaroid camera in 1975. The prints he produced, of confined interior spaces and objects, demonstrate his early preoccupations with surface and color—inspired, in part, by a youthful admiration for the paintings of Edward Hopper—through their carefully structured compositions saturated with lush hues, achieved by heating the prints during processing (fig. 1). After purchasing a view camera, he taught himself how to develop and print. Fascinated by the “shapes of things,” Welling then embarked on a probing study of architecture, denoting the contours of Los Angeles buildings with austere clarity from 1976 to 1978.¹ After moving to New York, he focused more intently on form to play with the line between representation and abstraction in series made in the early to mid-1980s that depicted aluminum foil, drapes, gelatin, and tiles. All of these works, which cultivated an open-ended ambiguity, participated in the shift embraced by his CalArts peers and others of the “Pictures Generation,” such as David Salle, Matt Mullican, Cindy Sherman (pls. 17, 18), and Laurie Simmons, who variously explored the ways that images dictate our perceptions of the world.

Welling's conceptual turn, however, was particularly rooted in the parameters and history of the photographic medium itself. Throughout these years, he was also making *Diary/Landscape* (1977–1986, fig. 2). Photographing the pressed leaves, flowers, feathers, and drawings incorporated in the 1840–1841 journal of his great-great-grandparents, he later realized that his ancestors' act of flattening these delicate scraps between pages mirrored the earliest photograms of botanical specimens made contemporaneously by Anna Atkins. Paired with landscapes of his native Connecticut, Welling's project, steeped in a sense of layered history, both personal and photographic, investigated the intersection of materiality, place, and memory. Other long-running landscape projects continued to keep aspects of Welling's art anchored in New England and a sense of the past. In *Railroad Photographs* (1987–2000), he charted rail lines crisscrossing the Northeast, which, while invoking earlier precedents that celebrated them as triumphs of technology, deliberated upon their vestigial effect on the landscape in the postindustrial present. He also revisited sites important to him in his youth with *Connecticut Landscapes* (1998–2007).

In 1995, Welling moved back to Los Angeles to take up a post teaching at UCLA and began a persistent engagement with abstractions and photograms in series such as *New Abstractions* (1998–2000), which used paper strips to create illusory architectonic spaces, and *Flowers* (2004–2011), in which he employed black-and-white photograms of botanical specimens as negatives, enlarging them on chromogenic paper and manipulating color filters to create vibrant prints of the floral shapes (fig. 3).





fig. 2: James Welling, A10, 1977, gelatin silver print, from the series *Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840–41)/Connecticut Landscapes, 1977–86*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Comer Foundation Fund

Indeed, color grew more and more central to his work in Southern California. In *Hexachromes* (2005), Welling sought to demonstrate how the color receptors in human eyes function. Photographing a plant by making many exposures using different colored filters on the same piece of film, he created a rainbow effect from the shadows moving across the plant's form between each exposure.

These manifold practices converged in *Glass House*, Welling's extended study of Philip Johnson's modernist glass-walled residence built in 1949 and sited on forty-seven acres in New Canaan, Connecticut. Though Welling initially began the project in 2006 as a commission for *New York* magazine, he photographed the house several times over the next three years for his own purposes. Continually revisiting this landmark further fostered his longstanding commitment to Connecticut's geography. The house also appealed to Welling's knowledge of architectural history: for Johnson had not only intended the house's transparent walls to connect the structure to the landscape, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, but also understood its modernism to be shaped by architectural precedents, from classical design to nineteenth-century iron-and-glass pavilions and, finally, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, which Welling had also previously photographed.²

In addition to their historical heft, Welling's *Glass House* photographs speak to his captivation with the union of light and color. As with *Flowers* and *Hexachromes*, Welling employed multiple filters with his digital camera—clear, colored, or fogged plastic; clear or tinted, uneven glass; and a diffraction filter, which caused bursts of light—to remake the modernist icon into something beyond itself.³ From different areas of the picture plane, Welling's prints variously emanate incandescent blues, yellows, greens, or reds, seemingly divorced from naturalistic hues. Rejecting the idea that his colors are artificial, however, Welling commented that, as he “became sensitized to unnatural colors, I realized that they were not unnatural—I just hadn't noticed them. Becoming attuned to color has led me to think that we actually see more color than we normally perceive.” Johnson's architecture became a means for Welling to “liberate color,” making a sustained commentary on the reverberation of color in human perception.⁴

1. "On Photography and Influence: James Welling in Conversation with Eva Respini," in *James Welling: Monograph*, ed. James Crump (New York, 2013), 120.
2. Noam M. Elcott, "Reflections in Glass Houses," in *James Welling: Glass House*, ed. Denise Bratton (Bologna, 2010), 69.
3. "James Welling—As Told to Arthur Ou," *Artforum*, January 26, 2010, www.artforum.com/words/id=24743.
4. "On Photography and Influence: James Welling in Conversation with Eva Respini," 124.
5. "James Welling—As Told to Arthur Ou."
6. "I am repeating the history of the Claude glass by putting colored filters in front of my lens." "A Conversation with Sylvia Lavin, Los Angeles, February 28, 2010," in *James Welling: Glass House*, 28.

Welling's views of the Glass House appear as if color has been poured into the negative space around the architecture. In *0467* (2009, pl. 24), vermilion envelops the house and magenta glows within its confines. Though punctuated by the dark, irregular forms of the trees and the controlled lines of the house's structure, the incarnadine hues create a sense that the viewer is seeing *through* the image, much as the glass house itself can be seen through as "a lens in the landscape," as Welling describes it.⁵ Welling conceives of his filters as a present-day version of the "Claude glass," an eighteenth-century optical device (named after the painter Claude Lorrain) consisting of a convex piece of dark or colored glass that reflected a scene in subdued colors to reveal its tonal values for landscape artists. Welling's picture thus resonates with this historical act of aesthetic looking—similar to the Atkins echo in *Diary/Landscape*—but the darkness and reductive scale of the Claude glass has instead been inverted and writ large in the radiant color of the print.⁶

Yet more than that, the house is a vehicle for Welling's material practice. In the physical act of making the photograph, he was gazing through numerous translucent layers: the glass walls of the building, which both reveal and reflect the landscape around and through it; the camera lens; and, most significantly, the layers Welling imposed with the tinted filters. In *0467*, he embeds a trace of this act of looking by recording his reflection, melded with his tripod, in the doorway of the house—it is one of the few prints in the series in which his figure is visible. Effectively placing himself, at one with lens and filters, at the almost perspectival vanishing point of the composition, Welling is a ghostly figure, standing at the threshold between visibility and invisibility. Fusing together the strands of his decades-long scrutiny of light, color, and form, the *Glass House* series is a luminous meditation on the ability of the photographic medium to channel the potency of place intertwined with history and serve as an emblem of the experience of perception in the present. WAGGONER



fig. 3: James Welling, 21, 2006, chromogenic print, Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles