

12 ABSTRACT, REPRESENTATIONAL, AND SO FORTH

An Interview with James Welling

Chris Balaschak

Since he was a student at CalArts in the mid-1970s, James Welling has maintained a constant engagement with photography. Exploring a variety of analog and digital technologies, and myriad subjects from abstract to representational, Welling's photographs continually bring into question the limits of photographic language. On July 10, 2008, I sat down with James Welling to ask him about his recent Torso series, featured in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, their relation to his earliest abstract photography, and the relationship he sees between these works and one subject he continually revisits: architecture.

Octopus: Could you talk about your recent work exhibited at the Whitney Biennial?

Welling: The *Torso* series began in 2005. In 2004 I had been working with large pieces of window screen to make photograms. I made about 100 images from 5 or 6 different pieces of screen, refolding them, flipping them over, treating them almost like a negative.

I had always been interested in half-tone screens, moiré patterns, and things like that. So in 2004/2005 I started working with half-tones and window screens and tried to explore some of these phenomena that take place when you have overlapping halftone screens, halftone dot-patterns, or window screens. I made a whole separate series of works called *Screens*, which were large, horizontal photograms made from two or three window screens that I'd bunched up and put in front of an enlarger lens and projected light through.

In this period of time when I was probably working on three or four different groups of pictures, *Screens*, *Torsos*, *Flowers*, as well as representational work that I made with my 8x10, the *Torsos* came forward and I wanted to "finish" them. It seemed there were a lot of variations in the individual photograms. I selected a group of the *Torsos* and I processed them through Photoshop, scanned them, worked on the images and produced a more consistent group of pictures which became known as the *Torsos*. So they started out as a photogram, which was then electronically... I don't want to say manipulated, but smoothed, finessed. Recently I've been doing that with a lot of work; pushing it through a digital intermediary stage.

Octopus: It seems the *Torso* series was a chance for you to revisit the *Untitled* 1980-81 series (the aluminum foil abstractions) and the *Untitled* 1981 series (the phyllo dough and velvet abstractions), both of which are camera-based. Were you revisiting this earlier work, and what do you feel the relationship is between the *Torso* series and the earlier abstractions?

Welling: It wasn't a conscious revisiting, in the sense that I wasn't aware of it until actually you pointed it out to me. But some of the work, including *Torso 9-006* (Fig. 1) has this very muscular or geographical sense that reminds me a lot of the typologies of the aluminum foil photographs. With the aluminum foil photographs, *Untitled* 1980-81, I took a couple of large pieces of aluminum foil and bent them and crinkled them to make them into as many crevasses and wrinkles that I could create on the surface without destroying it. So I formed it, shaped it, laid it, and photographed it. So there is this uncanny similarity to forming these screens and bending and folding them.

When I began to make the *Torso* photograms, they had this spatial depth that I wasn't thinking about initially. The

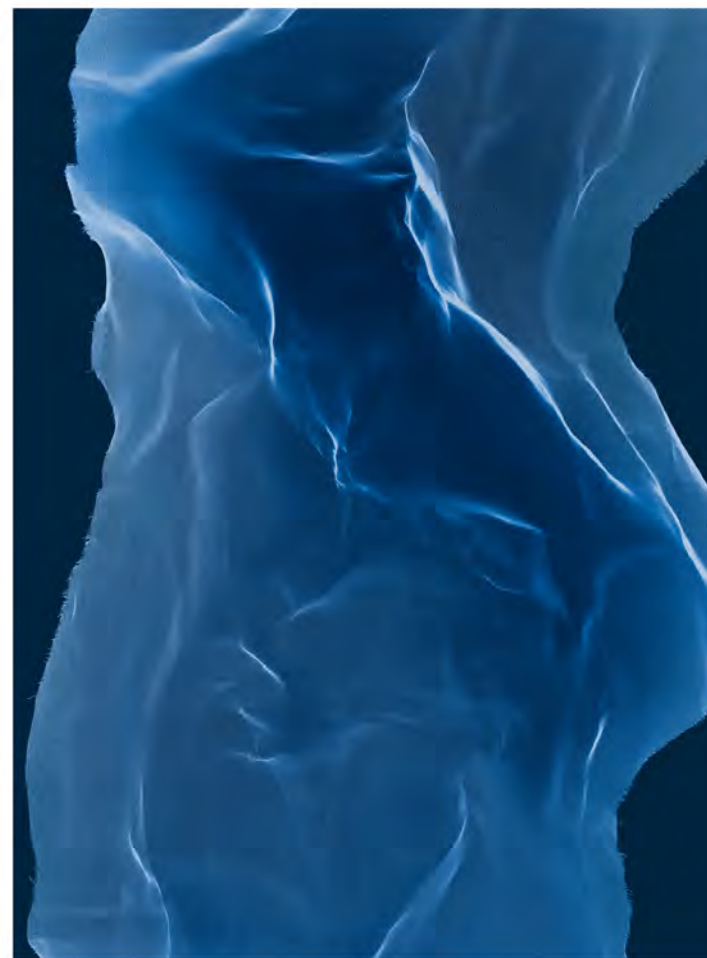


Fig. 1. James Welling, *Torso 9-006*, 2006.

aluminum foil pictures were made when I was much younger and it was my first foray into abstraction. I really wanted to make pictures that were almost invisible, which were very tactile, and which were hard to even remember, as they all kind of look the same, though there are significant differences in each. With the drapery pictures which came out of the aluminum foil pictures, there was this idea of folds. (Fig. 2) As I look back now I see it as a continuing conscious thinking about the idea of tactility, issues of what I think of as sculpture, or traditional spatial relationships.

Octopus: We've been talking about the abstract photographs you've made throughout your career, but you originally had done more referential photographs, such as the *Los Angeles*



Fig. 2. James Welling, *Untitled (Wreckage)*, 1981.



Fig. 3. James Welling, *LA-C 33*, 1978.

photographs (1976-78), and you've also made photographs of H.H. Richardson's buildings. How did you move from an interest in architectural subject matter to an interest in abstract subject matter?

Welling: Initially I started out photographing architecture with *Los Angeles Architecture*. (Fig. 3) As I was learning about photography, I was really struck by the New Topographics, in 1976, when I came out to Otis, and especially Stephen Shore's work.

I'd like to say now, in retrospect, and I didn't think about this in the 1970s, that Los Angeles has two types of weather: day and night. I was very taken by the way LA is lit at night. Coming from the East coast, I was shocked to see all these buildings spot-lit in West LA, around where I lived. Such as this (Fig. 3): a shaded window that has both shadows, and silhouettes, a whole mixture of things that are happening, that at the time I thought of as being para-photographic, like photographic phenomena.

Octopus: It seems the difference between your work in Los Angeles and parallel New Topographic work, is that the New Topographic photographers used the camera as a descriptive tool, in order to describe the landscape, where you focus on abstractions or places where you can translate the architecture and the light on the architecture to the surface of the photograph, and play with volume in that way. Where you thinking about abstraction at the time, or was it primarily the architectural motifs?

Welling: In one sense these pictures are more about reflecting on the medium in the same way that certain structuralist filmmakers like Michael Snow, or Hollis Frampton, reflected on the medium of cinema. Those were the people who I was really looking at and thinking about in the 1970s. A lot of my ideas about photography come from the writings of Hollis Frampton. He writes about photography, but he also writes about cinema, and these kinds of structures that, what later Craig Owens calls, *en abyme*. Where you would have these images inside the picture that replicate or retell the narrative of the photograph. I was interested in referential signs in the picture, like shadows, and points of illumination, and silhouettes. So it became this world of para-photographic, symbolic images.



Fig. 4. James Welling, *Service Entrance*, 1988.

Octopus: What do you think are the parallels between a history of architecture and a history of photography? Are there parallel developments or issues?

Welling: Photography was extremely important for Revivalist movements in architecture of the 19th century. Richardson had a whole archive of photographs that he would buy of buildings and use as his vocabulary. (Fig. 4) I was just talking to David Salle recently and he is writing an essay on John Baldessari. Baldessari would bring suitcases of images to a classroom at CalArts, and say “here is your raw material.” So this idea of making architecture out of photographs is really a couple hundred year old idea of recycling images. Even before photography, artists were working from images. That was Ivins’ point, this whole idea of translation, from painting to etching, engraving.¹ As soon as images could be reproduced, as woodcuts, intaglio, there was a huge change in culture.

Octopus: Ivins liked the term “syntax.” Were you drawn to Ivins by that term?

¹ William M. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge:MA: MIT Press, 1969).

Welling: He is often quoted as saying photography is a medium without syntax. What he means is that when an engraver translates a painting into dots and dashes, there is a visual grammar. Photography does that too, in some sense. So this idea of syntax and grammar was an important idea for my generation coming out of CalArts, and looking at style: what were the questions about style, and not using style innocently.

When you start taking photographs, questions of style—how do you take a photograph?, how do you frame it?—seem paramount to me. This is mirrored in the questions of architecture. There is a question: in what style do we build?

Octopus: Is this part of your interest in moving between different types of photography?

Welling: One of my earliest revelations about working with a view camera, was that it had history built into it. It was this box that had a 400 year history in it. The idea of the picture from Alberti onward is built into the camera, built into traditional ways of making lensed pictures. That is something that I find extremely fascinating and I find it less apparent when you talk about abstract painting. You don’t have the history of image making built into a canvas. You have the history of image making always on the surface of any photograph you make. All these technicians made all these decisions about what kind of light rays will be rendered on this material surface. When you take a piece of chalk and a piece of paper, no one is telling you what to do. But photography is so specific about what can be rendered. I think that specificity is something that I have always found exciting. I’m trying to work with and work around all of those decisions that are built into photography.

All images courtesy of James Welling