

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES WELLING BY TAMIE BOLEY

James Welling is a young photographer whose work is shown at Metro Pictures. His recent body of work is photographs of set-ups of crumpled dry filo dough in draped fabric. The actual subject is less important in these pieces than the images and emotions that are invoked in the viewer. The photographs relate to forms in nature – ocean surf, mountain peaks, lichen, barnacles, piles of dried leaves – and they are small, dark, quiet, somehow melancholy.

Welling is from Hartford, Connecticut. He is thirty-one. He studied painting for two years in Pittsburgh, and then went to the California Institute of the Arts for two years where he switched to photography and video under the instruction of John Baldassari. Three of his notable peers at Cal Arts are Jack Goldstein, David Salle and Matt Mullican. From California, Welling moved to Manhattan in 1972. Since Baldassari has scorned the teaching of darkroom technique, Welling had to spend a few years teaching himself the necessary technical processes to get the results he wanted. He has been showing in New York for the past three years.

On May 10, 1982, I did an interview with James Welling at his studio, and all of the quotes I will use will be from the interview, sometimes indirectly quoting other people such as critics.

James Welling is a bright, soft-spoken man. He has a certain nostalgia for history, sentimentality towards land-scape, and idealism about art which seems to stem from his peaceful background in suburban Connecticut, which permeate his work. At the same time, he thinks a lot about formal and conceptual issues, and has a sort of scientific sensibility and attention to detail. He is interested in a whole range of types of documentation – Xeroxes, microfilm, statistical data, architectural plans, graphic arts, art reproduction, writing and books, television, maps, the press, scientific imagery, etc. He says all of these are sources for imagery in art which are just as valid as what you see on the street. It is important to see this sort of poetic/precise duality of approach in order to understand

Welling's work.

One example of this is the influence of John Baldassari had on Welling's work at Cal Arts. Baldassari showed him the importance of installation – the presentation of work in a very specific order. But Baldassari's work was too mapped-out, too didactic for Welling, who needs more or instance, Welling showed me one Baldassari that contained a number of small photographs of people looking in different directions, arranged in a spiral with the person in each successive photo looking toward the next. Very straightforward. Another was about the slight of an arrow, and how flowers grow. The title of each piece explained exactly what it was about. So Welling was reacting against this – he made very dense images so that you couldn't figure out what they were, and that were very "emotional". He said, "The idea of making photographs that are real emotional goes against Baldassari's idea about making a photo that tells you about itself."

Around the same time Welling began a series of photographs of an old family diary, paired with landscape photographs which he took when he went home to Connecticut. Here he was dealing with a sort of telescopic view of his heritage. It was, in a way, an archeological process, wherein he would bring personal artifacts back across the country and explore them in California. A typical landscape was of a country road on a winter afternoon, dark, with the sun low in the sky. Jim admitted it is a typical "Hallmark card" type of image, but it works because it's emotionally so "pumped-up." Then, there were the photos of the diary, coming out of ideas about photographing language, "the sense of writing," the idea of using new technology to make something that looks old, recording time, as well as more formal notions about making a 2-D, flat paper object that represents a 2-D flat paper object. There was a visual dialogue set up then, between the white pages of the diary photos and the snow of the landscapes, all contributing to timelessness, without being too specific.

This phenomenon of arriving at an effect in an indirect manner brings me to another influence on Welling's work – the writing of Mallarme. To quote Welling, he was interested in Mallarme's "heady ideas about nothingness and existence, the idea of man's existence of earth and what does it mean...I realized through Mallarme's poetry you could make art that questioned existence – art that gave reasons for why we exist – ambiguous images that gave you a feeling of existence."

These ideas about ambiguity began to gel in 1980 with Welling's aluminum foil series – photographs of foil which had been crumpled and then folded out again. When Welling came to New York, he continued his photos dealing with landscape and writing, but he didn't feel good about rural landscapes while living in Manhattan. The aluminum foil photographs reflect the grittiness of the city without photographing the street, while continuing to make beautiful objects. I couldn't get a reproduction of one of these photos, but they were four-by-five inch black and white photographs, dark and rather glittery. They look something like a wet, jagged wall in a coal mine. Welling later made them eight-by-ten inches, but found that the larger size began to make it possible to see what the surface was.

Other factors involves in the small size of Welling's photos, besides maintaining the ambiguity of the images, are: first, an economic factor of being to inexpensively make as many proofs as necessary to get the desired result; second, as Welling says, the "3-D relationship of the viewer to the photographs" – the pieces just look like dark rectangles from afar, so the viewer has to approach them; and finally, it eliminates

the need to make small proposals for large works, with the space they take up and their expense – the work is the same size from its inception to the final product – a very direct process.

This is where Welling's concern with perception comes in. Because of what we know about photographs, we know the subject of a photo is something that exists in the world. Yet in Welling's work, the images our mind sees in them take on more reality than the actual subject. In an article in the January 1982 issue of Art in America on Cal Arts Alumni, Craig Owens states that Welling's work "is not about what we see, but how we see." I talked with Jim about the perceptual flip-flop in his work – how you see first one image, then another, but then you end up with the puzzling photographic reality alone. First, he said that his patterns of light dealt with the "essence of perception", meaning, the basic organization by the eye/mind of what we see. He added that the aforementioned flip-flop phenomenon is termed the "trap door essence of perception", and compared it to the optical illusion of the Necker cube, in which one can see either two edges coming towards you, but never both at once.

Also, the influence of Gerhard Richter creeps in here, and formal observations about the sort of segue from external reality to the abstracted, 2-d reality of a painting to photographic reality, with different permutations of these relations from piece to piece. From my research, I found that in the late sixties Richter did representational paintings from snapshots of some (usually) mundane subject, so that there were three types of observation at work there. They were about our constant indirect experience of reality through photographs, and how our reality becomes blurred. Then, Richter blurs reality further, in a painting, the painting takes on autonomy, and the original subject matter becomes irrelevant.

In a catalog of Richter's¹ work Jim showed me, he had taken close-up black and white photographs of the brushstrokes of an abstract painting, which then too on a reference to landscape.

¹ 128 details from a picture (Halifax 1978). Gerhard Richter, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980.

This work comes very close to the ideas operating in Welling's photos. Welling said he was involved with "tapping into a pool of imagery where a thing could be anything, but because it's a photograph, you know it has to be something, because photographs ties back into reality". So, Richter's photo's were "tying back" into reality, albeit the abstract, two-dimensional reality of the canvas. Welling is also interested in "cutting that necessity of (the image in a photo) being something", and having that something be more abstract, and less recognizable.

About a year ago, Welling began working with tableaux that were more subtle, less "melodramatic" than the aluminum foil pieces. He did one beautiful photograph of a corner of a framed mirror and the wall it was against. He saw this as an allegory about art: the mirror is like the chosen slice of the world in a work of art, "capturing representation", from an idea of Mallarme's; the frame is "the edge of art, between the outside world and representation"; and the wall is the external reality.

Finally, Welling got to working with draped velvet. First he used the velvet alone, but he thought it wasn't emotional enough. Then he placed objects in the fabric, such as bowls, vases, and bells. At the time, he was experimenting with sheets of store-bought filo dough, which could be molded into folds and dried. Welling found the results to be too pure and white, too much like bedsheets, too "fetishistic", in his words.

But the thin white sheets of dough hearkened back to Welling's former interest in book pages, and when he saw how the filo tended to crumple into little flakes, he came upon the combination of filo particles and draped velvet. At the time, Welling thought the first photos looked like plane wreckage, and the whole idea of wreckage and decay had been on his mind (probably due to the influence of life in New York). So, in an allegorical way, but not with the intention of it being a "strict reading", the flakes came to represent to him the deterioration

of writing or communication. After working with this image for a short time, however, the work took on new connotations, and allegory was no longer needed.

A friend of Welling's noticed the element of sadness and decay in the work, and made a very poignant observation that this showed more of an Oriental sensibility than a Western view of the world. He pointed out that in Japanese prints there is often a dead tree, out of the concept they term "noble sadness". Welling said that whereas here we would avoid any thought or mention of sadness, in Japan it is "institutionalized" – an idea to be pursued in art.

Welling finds the contrast between this sadness his work evokes and his process of working ironic. He says he is "treading the line between 'subjectively indulgent' making sad images, and on the other hand purposefully manufacturing them", not emoting as they are being made, but working hard to achieve that effect.

During this series, Welling changed the set-up of filo and velvet for every shot, which got to be very hard work, and he only ended up being happy with about five out of fifty negatives. Also, he began to have problems with the references inherent in using velvet. For one thing, it was too reminiscent of Julian Schnabel. In addition, it was a little too lush and precious, and Welling began to want a more high-contrast, graphic look to the photographs.

Welling said that Abigail Solomon Godot, who has an article coming out on him in Afterimage this summer, said, (paraphrased here), that his use of velvet was like that in magazine advertisements for expensive wristwatches, but with the watch taken out, and the aura of expensive elegance remaining. And, as Welling said, "photographing velvet is an automatic ticket to beautiful work – it's like a ready-made for rich-looking images".

Welling felt that he was both paying homage to and making fun of the high fine art photographic esthetic in these photos. They are in lovingly-rendered continuous tones, and are very

beautiful objects.

Because Welling is who he is, with his sort of romantic sensibility, his work will always be beautiful, but he wanted it to be more technological, starker, more "stripped-down", less hand-crafted, so he switched to using plain non-velvet black fabric and high-contrast graphic arts film, even stats. The xerox I have included is from this new series. It is very starkly high-contrast (to import a connection to commercial photo techniques), black and white photograph, with the filo flakes arranged in a classic triangle formation in the bottom third – I suppose due in part to the logistics of the use of draped fabric but also to give a weighty, sort of humbling, expansive-dark-sky feel to the blank black void above. The white flakes are so like the residue of something shattered, or like archeological remnants or shards – very metaphoric and open to different interpretations.

Welling quotes Poe: "I don't want to paint the thing that exists but rather the effect that it produces". To me, this photograph quotes the intense, solipsistic loneliness of being in the wilderness at night- bittersweet, melancholy, yet somehow comforting, like sleep.

The aforementioned "trap-door" effect is definitely at work here. You can get lost in a reverie, and then it's as if the lights were turned on- you are back to this being a photograph of "really nothing".

In working on this second stage of his filo dough and fabric series, Welling stopped changing his arrangement of materials so much with each shot, so that in installation there are only infinitesimal differences between one photo and the next. He wanted to give more of a sense of continuity and time to the series, as there is in the natural processes of erosion or geological evolution. From the viewer's standpoint, this can be a curious decision – on one hand, it can seem an imposition to ask us to discern the merits of these changes, but on

the other hand, since the choices do seem so specific, it makes us want to understand anyway.

Welling states that the ultimate goal of his work is to "make the best of life's vicissitudes, with an art that is on some higher level, with a personal commitment to make things that are idealistic, beautiful works, of abstract notions...to aesthetisize the world." Admittedly, Welling feels a conflict here, in that he doesn't see himself ideal as a person, and it can sometimes be weird to be producing beautiful images when life can so often, as he says, "suck".

But this "pointing to a better world" has always been the most noble motivation for making art, and it is even more admirable today, with all the prevailing negativity which has been so popular in the art world recently, and with the world in as bad a condition as it is. So this is why I find Jim Welling's work so refreshing – hardly any art these days meets the necessary intellectual and conceptual requirements of the elitist art world, but yet is positive and hopeful.

Oh, and Shelly, just for laughs, he's an Aries.