

"The real theme of a work is not the subject the forms designate, but the unconscious themes, the involuntary archetypes in which the forms assume their meaning and their life. Art is a veritable transmutation of substance. By it, substance is spiritualized, and physical surroundings dematerialized, in order to refract essence, that is, the quality of the original world. What art regains for us is time as it is coiled within essence, as it is born in the world enveloped by essence, identical to eternity." Gilles Deleuze

In the narrow trough which you call thought, the rays of the Spirit rot like old straw. Antonin Artaud

The world of the future is already falling in an avalanche of the memory of the past. Maurice Blanchot

Images That Understand Us: A Conversation with David Salle and James Welling.

LAICA Journal, June 1980 Excerpt

James Welling: One of my first thoughts about making photographs was to construct an image of great density. That is, the image would be a point where many lines of thought might intersect. Later that ideal was deflected into the desire to make photographs which were not strictly bound by present time.

David Salle: Willful use of period, heroic style.

JW: And subject matter. In cinema, period film is a legitimate genre whereas in photography that impulse is called nostalgic.

DS: Photography is preservational, in film you make things up at will - a completely different mentality.

JW: The work should describe a world other than this one. Imagery should be descriptive of a place.

DS: Imagery is coordinates.

"When it seems that we no longer wish to begin anything it becomes important not to cease to discover a value in that nothing, that is, a sense of delight and justification in communicating values of absence. ~~(In this sense these young artists radicalize the question while remaining within a deontological framework, that is, one which still provides a foundation.)~~ The beginning is always the moment which generates time and which cannot be believed to be a complete negation."

Zeno Birolli, 1980

"Reluctant moralists, we make art that suggests our simultaneous longing for anarchy and order - to have nothing and everything. An uneasy peace is made between the reassuring mythologies society and culture provide and our wish to see ourselves as free agents. The very best in art makes public our private anguish in the face of this this ineluctable conflict."

Sherrie Levine, 1979

"So what are the big themes? Much talk about the opacity as a positive value, ambiguity, and the complex notion that there are some images or uses of images which rather than offering themselves up for a boffo decoding by the viewer, instead understand us. That is to say there is a class of images, call it an aesthetic class, that allows us to reveal to ourselves the essential complicity of the twin desires of rebellion and fatalism. To say that a work of art is dense or opaque is not to say that it is not implicative, subversive or poignant."

David Salle

My work consists of open ended images whose signification is polyvalent. The present series which I exhibited at Metro Pictures in February consists of dark fabric dusted with particles of pastry dough and printed for maximum contrast. Shearing the object of its direct reference, the pictures transcend blank abstraction through a dense screen of associations and evocations. I reject the photographic ethos wherein the camera transcribes visual appearances in favor of an aesthetic which pictures the affective aspect of consciousness.

Statement, April 19, 1982

I seek a photographic production which evokes as much as it reveals, and which resists the intelligence as long as possible. To shear the photograph of representational references produces an image of multivalent significations. These pictures emphasize that they are not concerned with what we see but rather how it is we see. In this sense the photographs fulfill my aspiration to produce images which are both densely associative and self-referencing.

I thought about nesting emotional resonance within the form. In all my work, the alternation between empty and full, Kingdom and Darkness, produces a current which lights the image. In this sense my work is representational. What it represents is the invisible, seen with the aid of a conceptual baffle.

1982

1980

Quick Schema

Very briefly my work of the past a years involved lighting and photographing various forms of matter. Size of the work and the frame used was always very specific,

~~A small image isolated on a large matte - a~~

~~Very stereotyped presentation for photographed~~

By photographing old things or abstract subject

matter I sought to draw a line between my work

and the quotidian. ~~In fact~~ street photography

was to be avoided as well as most of the History

of Photography. The formal antecedents for my work

are in graphic art and scientific uses of photography

My work is sized ~~framed subject chosen~~ to

create a virtual tromp l'oeille effect.

The small image conveys a sense of veracity

larger pictures cannot - small image floated on a large matte.

My work interrogates the representational nature

of photography by creating a facsimile

effect. The subject of the photographs ~~always and only that~~

doesn't exist/and is always the same thing

remanipulated. Using a book or a piece of

aluminum foil to generate an image collapses

tradition space in favor of something closer to

electronic space. By prioritizing representation

~~and spatial~~ I align my work with others

using appropriation.

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JAMES WELLING ABSTRACT

By sizing the print to the subject, my photographs gain a facsimile effect, a trompe l'oeil veracity not found in large images. This transcriptive, one to one size relationship counterbalances the abstract reading of my work. From a distance, the photograph reads as a dark rectangle on a white field. Closer, its manifest subject is visible and the viewer is forced to ask, what is it?

The answer to this question can be approached from four directions. First, there is recourse to materials. What I photograph is pliable, capable of arrangement and variation and deceptive in appearance. Apart from ennobling these materials in the eyes of the viewer the important thing is that they generate images. The subject is not the materials, but the procedures (tearing, folding, scattering) from which the image is constructed.

Second, my work is often understood in terms of landscape. The photograph is not primarily a picture of materials; it records something analogous to natural phenomena with the detachment of scientific photography. The configurations can only be understood through the organizing structure of landscape conceptions.

Third, art as landscape is often used to initiate discussion of non-objective art. My work approaches the abstract through its emphasis on chance and repetition. Art as landscape as abstraction serves as an armature for an emotional dimension in the work of art. The evocation of an effectiv state is implicit in cultural codes which describe nature in terms of the sublime.

Fourth. The issue of definition can be used to question itself. To say of my work, what is it, is to ask the meaning of photographic appearance. From the above inquiries, the possibility of representation has been framed so that it always gives way to uncertainty. What can be said of my work is voiced in front of a deceptive, shifting representation which is in recurrent crisis.

-- James Welling
October 1983

James Welling was educated at Carnegie-Mellon University and the California Institute of the Arts. He currently lives and works in New York City.