

Biro, Matthew. "James Welling: Cincinnati Art Museum." *Artforum International* (Summer, 2013): 364-365 [ill.]

## ARTFORUM

### CINCINNATI

## James Welling

CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM

In part because of the sheer variety of subjects, genres, and techniques that James Welling's work traverses, it has always been difficult to pin down. The Los Angeles-based artist has likewise maintained an unclassifiable place within the Pictures generation, departing from his postmodern peers in his exploration of formal abstraction and photographic craft. In this exhibition, diverse works—ranging from tiny 2 ¼ x 3 ¼" chromogenic photographs made from Polaroids to large-scale four-by-five-foot ink-jet prints—drawn from the artist's nearly four-decade career reveal Welling to be a master of "postmodern modernism," if you will, in that he freely combines the formal aesthetics and medium specificity of the earlier mode with the critique of subjectivity and media-savvy conceptualism of the later.

Such a combination is clearly apparent not only in the "Aluminum Foil" series, 1980–81, which depicts that household material crinkled and at very close range, but also in "Drapes," 1981, a series of photographs of creased velvet studio backdrops dusted with crumbled phyllo dough. In addition to obeying modernist photographic conventions—including rigorous composition, precise exposure, and masterfully executed printing, as well as the eschewal of narrative subject matter—the gelatin silver prints in these series evoke abstract painting, deriving meaning primarily from formal qualities rather than from iconographic content. Through their extreme detail and realism, these works are, however, simultaneously anchored to the physical world. Like the contemporaneous output of fellow Pictures artists Cindy Sherman and Jack Goldstein, Welling's photographs, in addition to their investment in product display and the aesthetics of mass-media imaging, conjure subjectivity only to undermine it.

While Welling's work seems to support the modernist belief that photography can help us understand and refine perception, the artist continually introduces a (postmodern) gap between the image and what is depicted, severing the signifier from its referent, so as to suggest the weakening purchase of the real and

James Welling,  
*Waterfall*, 1981,  
gelatin silver print,  
18 x 14".



concomitant triumph of the simulacrum. Throughout his career, Welling has often used the photogram to explore the material boundaries of photography. For example, in his “New Abstractions,” 1998–2000, and “Flowers,” 2004–11, he used this technique to push the work’s tactility and opticality toward the extremes of what this medium can achieve. In both series, Welling used a photogrammic process to create a negative and then placed this original in an enlarger to create a positive print. In the “New Abstractions,” the tonal reversal makes the series’ black-and-white constructivist arrangements of scattered bristol board seem more real, more referential, almost as if it were an extension, compositionally speaking, of Welling’s earlier architectonic images of railroad bridges. Likewise in “Flowers,” a series notable not least for its brilliant color, Welling made prints using a cameraless technique—but here, after following the same procedures used in “New Abstractions,” he introduced variously hued filters between the black-and-white negative and the color photo paper, thereby creating images whose resultant spectrums have no indexical relation to the subject depicted. In both cases, Welling merged touch with vision—as well as the real with the fictional—to form a richer image with greater depth than could normally be achieved in a standard photogram. In so doing, he pointed to the ontological substrate of photography: a territory in which the artist aims to disclose forms as much as show us the tenuousness of these representations.

Recently, Welling applied this matrix of operations to modern architecture, reproducing its rational geometric forms through overlays of color filters that evoke both psychedelia and the history of abstraction. In a work from 2006, featuring Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, as well as in his “Glass House” series, 2006–2009, Welling has transformed canonical modernist spaces into stunning simulations of subjective experience. Merging straight photography with Color Field abstraction, these images create a play between inside and outside, reflectivity and transparency, subjective consciousness and the real. Through shadows, lens flares, distortions, and kaleidoscopic superimpositions of acidic color, Welling’s photos undercut the modernist rationality of their subjects. At the same time, because of their intensity and novelty, they also remind us of the untapped potential inherent in the modernist project at a moment when it is but one option among many.

—Matthew Biro