

James Welling: *The Mind on Fire*

Admission free

14 September -
25 November 2012



An exhibition of early works from the 1980s charting the development of Welling's experimental and abstract photography.

Introduction

James Welling: The Mind on Fire is the first solo exhibition in a UK public gallery by American artist James Welling (b.1951). Comprising a hundred and fifty works, the exhibition at MK Gallery recreates some of the artist's seminal photographic shows from New York in the early to mid-1980s, charting the development of his abstract and experimental photographic language. Welling was an important figure in the 'Pictures Generation', a loosely-knit but influential group of artists working in New York in the 1970s and 1980s, including Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman; collectively they became famous for their pioneering use of photography, and contributed to the gradual integration of the medium into the mainstream of contemporary art.

After graduating from the California Institute of the Arts in 1974, where he was taught by John Baldessari, among others, Welling developed a keen interest in pioneering photographic figures such as Walker Evans, Paul Strand and László Moholy-Nagy. Having initially tried his hand at painting, collage and video, he eventually committed to teaching himself photography in 1976. He began experimenting with a range of processes including developing Polaroids in the heat of an oven or the cold of a fridge and constructing a make-shift cardboard camera from a shoebox.

Long Gallery

In the mid 1970s, Welling acquired a Polaroid camera and made photographs such as *Lock* and *Clock*. *Lock*, a picture of a wooden two-by-four plank leaning against a wall, used by Welling to 'lock' his studio door, has become a seminal image that encapsulates a number of key motifs in his work: simplicity, stillness and directness with minimum artifice, the juxtaposition of light and dark, and partial, close up views of the subject matter. *Lock* also demonstrates the artist's concern with evoking the materiality of an object, the knots and blemishes on the plank's surface in this instance, but also, in later works, the texture and feel of paper or velvet, for example. Around the same time, Welling photographed buildings in Los Angeles at night, fascinated by the theatricality of the illuminated city but also drawing out connections between buildings and cameras, windows and lenses for the first time. The *Diary/Landscapes* series combines his great-great-grandmother's hand-written diary, mementos found in the diary such as dry leaves, feathers, etc. and landscape photographs taken near his parents' house in Connecticut.

Welling was always interested in the relation between photography and painting and made a number of watercolours when he moved to New York in the late 1970s. By focussing on imaginary spaces, corners of rooms and dark landscapes and heavily influenced by readings of French poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire, these works anticipated the scale and mood of later photographs, such as the *Aluminium Foils*. In 1979, while working as a cook, Welling decided to photograph aluminium foil and spent an intense three months creating a large series of work, also experimenting with the surface of the images, by heating, cracking, or soaking them in brown ink. The amount of detail in these small-scale silver gelatin prints magnifies the uncertainty of the image triggering all manner of associations from starry nights to lunar landscapes.

Other early works in this room demonstrate Welling's technical experimentation, such as the intaglio test print made in his first year of art school and *Hands*, 1975, a series of photograms of his own hands. The collages contain evocative material with biological and organic associations, and play with scale and perspective. During this period, Welling was interested in drawing out imaginary potential from mundane subjects and had been captivated by an ambiguous, high contrast photograph that was widely circulated in his youth, known as 'Jesus in the Snow'.

Middle Gallery

The drawing, *Uncle Lou's Coat*, 1967 relates to a figure who may well have inspired Welling's career; his grandmother's brother was an amateur photographer whose 4x5 Speed Graphic press camera was always used for family photos in the 1950s and 1960s by Welling's father.

At the start of the 1980s, Welling began work on the first of several series of drapery pictures, close-ups of carefully arranged velvet cloth, that were more subtle and less 'melodramatic' than the *Aluminium Foils*. At first, he photographed draped velvet on its own, but soon placed objects on it and experimented with thin white sheets of pastry dough that looked like sheets of paper before they were sprinkled onto the fabric. In some respects, these works recalled the velvet used in magazine advertisements for luxury goods, although only the aura of expensive elegance remained. Welling was less interested in depicting a subject than focussing on what the images might call to mind, and quoted Edgar Allen Poe in this regard: 'I don't want to paint the thing that exists but rather the effect that it produces'.

The artist later returned to photographing the same subject matter, this time using a flat, black, non-velvet piece of fabric, initially with black and white Polaroid and later with high contrast graphic arts film, providing a more technological, stark and stripped down image. At the same time, all these images connect with the idea since the Renaissance of a picture being like a window onto the world, even if, in this instance, the view has been cut off by a curtain. As a result viewers are pressed into using their imagination, aided by evocative titles such as *Waterfall* and *Wreckage* so that white flakes may, for example, resemble torn book pages, images of wreckage, archaeological remains or even snow-capped mountain ridges. On the other hand, the viewer is faced with an image where the surface takes on a stronger presence and highlights the texture of the drapes, the pixilation of a digital image and even the quality of the photographic paper.

Cube Gallery

The relationship between the subject matter and the medium of representation, such as the contrast between the crumpled foils, folded fabrics and the smooth surface of the photographs, is a consistent area of enquiry for Welling, as is the relationship between photography and painting.

While the photographs of roughly cut pieces of gelatin show one of the elements that is traditionally used in the printing process – where a suspension of silver salts in gelatin is coated onto paper - the *Degradés* are colour images created by manipulating the photopaper's exposure to light in the darkroom without a camera. The bright red *Cliché Verre*, 1985, was made as Welling was discovering the photographic process, in this instance using a sheet of glass that is painted or scratched and then contact printed. As with monochrome, abstract paintings, traditional subject matter or illusionary space has been replaced with a focus on the real, actual materials, in this case the paper and the process of its production. In terms of photography, Welling is reminding us, that however transparent the medium, its physical properties must not be overlooked.

The shapes of the *Tile Photographs* recall the history of geometrical abstract painting and it appears that the intensity and drama of the *Aluminium Foils*, for example, have been replaced by a more playful, formal motif. Black plastic tiles have been thrown haphazardly onto a white ground creating potentially infinite variations of random configurations, recalling the importance of chance to major Modern artists including Marcel Duchamp and Jean Arp. Welling's own black paintings were also composed randomly and developed from a similar technique used by the artist when producing photograms in his darkroom. He carefully placed black museum board circles onto canvas, traced their outlines and meticulously painted in the shapes to create a series of black and white minimal paintings. The lightness of the free-hand *Sky Paintings* provide a stark contrast to these black paintings and his earlier works.

Throughout his career and particularly during this early period of experimentation, Welling has investigated photography's ability to produce images that are at once legible and incomprehensible. By focussing on simple, repetitive motifs he sidesteps the reliance of photography on its subject matter in order to arrive at something approximating the 'essence of perception', meaning the basic organisation by the mind/eye of what we see. Welling's desire to explore how we see, rather than what we see, together with his reduced yet very specific subject matter, prompts a broad range of personal associations in the viewer making the images we see in our mind more real than the subject matter itself.

About the Artist

James Welling was born in Hartford, Connecticut, USA in 1951. In 1995 Welling moved to Los Angeles to head the photography area of the Art Department of UCLA, where he continues to live and work. Welling's work is held in major museum collections worldwide, including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo. www.jameswelling.net

Touring Partners

The exhibition is presented in partnership with Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela, Spain and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, where it will subsequently be presented.

Publication

A publication will be forthcoming, with new scholarly texts on this early period of Welling's working life.

Exhibition Supporters

With thanks to Maureen Paley, London and David Zwirner Gallery, New York for their support.

Event Listings

Talks & Tours

Artist Talk

Saturday 13 October, 2pm, free
Join James Welling as he discusses his work and the exhibition. Pre-book at the Information Desk or online.

Photography Portfolio Reviews

Saturday 13 October, 10.30am - 12.30pm, free
Gain one-to-one feedback and advice from a panel of photography specialists. Pre-book at the Information Desk.

Audio Described Tour

Monday 15 October, 2pm, free

Thursday Scratch Nights

Every Thursday, 7pm, free
Experimental live music, sound art, artist film, performance and spoken word events. See website for details.

Friday Night Films

In collaboration with Independent Cinema MK

Screenings start at 6.30pm
Tickets £5* (concessions £3*)
Pre-book at the Information Desk
*Free drink for advance bookers

Friday 14 September
Pecker (1998)
Dir. John Waters
(Cert. 15, 1hr 26 mins)

Friday 21 September
Henri Cartier Bresson - The Impassioned Eye (2003)
Dir. Heinz Butler
(Biography, 1hr 12 mins)

Friday 28 September
Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus (2006)
Dir. Steven Shainberg
(Cert. 15, 2hrs 2 mins)

Friday 5 October
Stranger than Paradise (1984)
Dir. Jim Jarmusch
(Cert. 15, 1hr 29 mins)

Friday 12 October
Eloge de L'Amour (2001)
Dir. Jean-Luc Goddard
(Cert. PG, 1hr 37 mins)

Friday 19 October
Last Year at Marienbad (1961)
Dir. Alan Renais
(Cert. U, 1hr 30 mins)

Friday 26 October
Memento (2000)
Dir. Christopher Nolan
(Cert. 15, 1hr 53 mins)

Friday 2 November
Broken Flowers (2005)
Dir. Jim Jarmusch
(Cert. 15, 1hr 46 mins)

Friday 9 November
Wild Style (1983)
Dir. Charlie Ahearn
(Cert. 15, 1hr 22 mins)

Friday 16 November
City of God (2002)
Director, Fernando Meirelles
(Cert. 18, 2hrs 10 mins)

Friday 23 November
MK Film Makers Network Event

Saturday Live Music

A diverse programme of live music, most Saturdays at 7pm. See website for details.

Family Events

Free, just drop-in.

Start the Art

Parent & toddler sessions
Every Tuesday 11am - 12 noon

Mini Makers

Artist-led workshops suitable for accompanied children ages 4+
Every Saturday, 1 - 3pm

Half Term Workshop

Friday 2 November
10am - 12noon / 2pm - 4pm
Ages 7+ / Free, drop-in
Artist-led workshops suitable for accompanied children ages 7+

See website for full event listings
www.mkgallery.org/events