

James Welling *Thought Objects*

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533 West 19th Street, New York



James Welling, *Staircase, Villa Savoye*, 2020/2022.
© James Welling. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of new and recent works by photographer James Welling at the gallery's 533 West 19th Street location in New York. Welling has been represented by David Zwirner since 2005. *Thought Objects* marks his tenth solo exhibition with the gallery.

Since the 1970s, when he was a student at the California Institute of the Arts, Welling has become known for a relentlessly evolving body of images that considers both the history and technical specificities of photography. His work signaled a break with traditional ideas of photography by shifting attention to the construction of images themselves.

Thought Objects will present a group of loosely connected works, achieved through a range of digital processes, that together extend Welling's ongoing investigation into what a photograph can be. Taking his long-standing interest in experimental procedures, such as 1960s psychedelic imagery, as a starting point, with these images Welling expands his inquiry into how these historic analog processes can be modeled in the digital environment. Borrowing from the physicality of printmaking, the artist marshals the digital tools available to him in unconventional ways to create compositions that are alternately built up in layers, over-saturated, collaged, reticulated, and tonally inverted.

While the works in the exhibition echo subject matter from earlier series, including modernist architecture, flora, and abstraction, Welling's pictures ultimately gesture towards the process of their own making. United in their physical appearance, each work is printed in UV-curable ink—which results in a vibrant, almost painterly application of color—and presented with an artist-designed armature that causes the thin panel to appear to float just off the wall, thereby emphasizing their object-quality and imbuing them with a feeling of immateriality that is inherent to the digital realm.

[*] *Thought Objects* is the title of a 1987 photo book, the seventh and final installment of *Just Another Asshole*, a "magazine" issued across different media, organized by Barbara Ess and edited by Ess and Glenn Branca, which contained photos by 125 artists, including Welling.

In 2021, Welling began working on a group of digitally collaged images composed of thin strips excised from different photographs of the same location, aligned in such a way that they read as a coherent image of the place while also appearing abstracted, as though flash-cut from an impression or memory. In photographs such as *Pier 24* and *The Battery* (both 2021), Welling pieces together fragments in varying orientations within a vertical composition, bolstering them with digitally rendered shadows. Likewise in *The Salk Institute* (2015/2021), he revisits his own images of these two iconic architectural sites, deconstructing and reconstituting them as impressionistic renderings that incite in the viewer an uncanny sense of both recognition and disorientation.

Welling deploys the notion of collage in a different way in an image of architect Paul Rudolph's Orange County Government Center in Goshen, New York, which he photographed prior to its 2015 demolition. Here, he combines a morning exposure and an afternoon exposure of the brutalist structure—which appeared in the background of several of his *Choreograph* (2014–2020) photographs—to create an image of the building reflecting itself, a play on the notion of photographic self-reflexivity.

Welling's work with photographic layers in the digital realm is informed by his decades spent working in analog photography, shooting on film and making prints in the darkroom. In 2022, while making his *Cento*, photographs of ancient statuary hand-inked with oil-based paint, Welling became interested in the dappled and uneven patterns left behind on the sheets of newspaper that he used to clean his rollers. He started to photograph these accidental offset prints, and used these as the basis for new works. In *Hansaviertel Apartment Building* (2017/2022), an Alvar Aalto structure in Berlin is overlaid with one such chance impression, retaining the edges of the newspaper as though it were a sieve through which the scene is filtered. In *Prouts Neck near Winslow Homer's Studio* (2015/2023), the patterning added on top of a photograph of the area of coastal Maine where Winslow Homer worked seems to conjure the seascapes of painter John Marin. An orange and blue offset print overlaid on an image of the neutral-toned Le Corbusier-designed 1928 home in *Staircase, Villa Savoye* (2020/2022) gives the image a grainy quality that recalls the inadvertent overprints found in makereadys or in double exposures.

In another group of images, Welling repurposes digital processes designed to sharpen pictures to create distortions, causing the photographs to appear as dimensional bas-reliefs. In works such as *Paeonia* (2021/2022) and *Canna Lily* (2021), flowers—an enduring subject for the artist—uncannily seem to extend outward from the work's surface, and in *Oak* (2013/2023), a vast tree separates from its verdant surroundings. Finally, in other images, including *The Royal Salt-Works of Arc et Senans* (1988/2023), Welling takes these manipulations further, bringing together positive and negative images of the same subject to create heavy, almost cartoonish black outlines and strong primary colors. As in all of his *Thought Objects*, Welling's novel and unexpected transformations, achieved with simple digital tools, underscore the fluidity and malleability of photographic images.

James Welling (b.1951) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. He studied at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, and the University of Pittsburgh before receiving his BFA and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.

In 2022, *Dark Matter*, a two-person exhibition featuring the work of Welling and Thomas Ruff, was on view at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany. *Cento*, an exhibition focusing on Welling's recent work on architecture and ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, was presented at Musée des Arts Contemporains,

Hornu, Belgium, in 2021. In 2020, *Choreograph* was on view at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. In 2017, the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent, Belgium, and the Kunstforum Wien in Vienna co-organized *Metamorphosis*, a traveling solo presentation encompassing the artist's work from over four decades. *Things Beyond Resemblance*, a solo exhibition hosted in 2015 by the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, presented fifty photographs from the artist's *Wyeth* project. The museum also commissioned Welling to create eight site-specific installations, *Gradients*, which explore the intersection of photography and sculpture. In 2013, a major survey, *Monograph*, was organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum and accompanied by a catalogue published by Aperture. The exhibition traveled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In 2012, *The Mind on Fire* at MK Gallery in Milton Keynes, England, explored the origin and development of Welling's abstract photographs from the 1980s. The show traveled to the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver.

Welling's work has been exhibited widely in the United States and internationally, including solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago (2014); Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2013); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut (2012); Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota (2010); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (2002); Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2002); Sprengel Museum Hannover (1999); Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (1998); and the Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland (1998). In 2000, the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, organized a major survey of his work, which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Baltimore Museum of Art. In 1990, the artist's first museum exhibition was presented by Kunsthalle Bern. In 1999, Welling received the DG BANK-Förderpreis Fotografie from the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany. He was a recipient of the 2014 Infinity Award given by the International Center of Photography, New York, and in 2016 he received the Julius Shulman Institute Excellence in Photography Award from Woodbury University, Burbank, California. From 1995 to 2016, Welling was Professor in the Department of Art and Area Head of Photography at the University of California, Los Angeles, and since 2012 he has been a Lecturer with the Status of Professor in the Visual Art Program at the Lewis Center at Princeton University.

Welling's work is held in major museum collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Vancouver Art Gallery; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Welling lives and works in New York.

For all press inquiries, contact
Julia Lukacher jlukacher@davidzwirner.com
Erin Pinover epinover@davidzwirner.com