

James Welling, From One World to Another

Alain Cuff

One of the works included in James Welling's recent survey exhibition (traveled to The Wener Center, Baltimore Museum of Art, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000–01) was *Ashes*, a 1974 video showing three sequences of shots of a pile of ashes being barely stirred by a gentle draft. Although he has used this medium only on rare occasions, choosing to concentrate on photography very early in his career, *Ashes* nonetheless prefigures many key aspects of his overall oeuvre. At first, we are struck by the strange temporality of the image. Nothing, or nearly nothing, moves or changes in this tightly-framed shot, nothing "progresses"; our gaze remains caught in a time that does not pass, or from which we feel excluded since no visual or narrative event marks its flow. In fact, what we are faced with is the very time of the image, an indefinite time unfamiliar to our habits, but through which the image manages to exist and endure, continuing unceasingly to present itself.

By going against the rules of a technology that is primarily designed to capture and render movement in its immediacy, by presenting a video as if it were a photograph, by ultimately transforming the former into the latter, *Ashes* reveals that the goal of Welling's art is not simply to fix an image of what has been (with the past reaching us only as a relic), but rather in producing images with neither a beginning nor an end. Welling's work opens on to memory wherein the past and history assert themselves in a living continuum of the present. Some of the photographic series are particularly exemplary in this regard. *Diary of Elizabeth C. Dixon, 1840–1841/Connecticut Landscapes* (1977–86), for instance, juxtaposes details of pages from a nineteenth-century private journal with photographs of New England winter landscapes dating from over a hundred years later. Here, the past is neither suspended nor depicted: it is lived out in its continuity, empathetically. It is not presented to us as a mere document; it is free of both its personal and conceptual dimensions. The relation between the journal pages with their indecipherable writing (some with flowers and leaves tucked into them), and the views of the New England forests is at once formal and sensible, explicit and implicit. They call for neither a conclusion nor a resolution: they construct a poetic space unlimited by boundaries. The series *Buildings by H. H. Richardson, 1838–1886* (1988–94) works in a more obvious manner: all the photographs present details of different Richardson buildings like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

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The part and the whole, as well as the present and history, exist in a relation that, while being allusive and metaphorical, is also very close.

Just as Richardson's buildings mark a moment just prior to the emergence of modernist architecture, Welling's series on railways (1987–94), lace factories (1993), and the industrial sites of Wolfsburg (1994) similarly capture cultures and artifacts marking the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, from one world to another. Far from being abandoned, however, these places remain inhabited, contemporary, and alive in Welling's photographs, running counter to more nostalgic views of the past. The railways, the locomotives, the looms, and the spaces given over to industrial production do not belong in a museum of obsolete traditions but remain, instruments of an active economy and vital actors in landscapes that they have profoundly shaped over many years. What has been, remains. What once lived, lives still, and this life is exactly what Welling takes up as a photographer. Which is to say, the subject of his works is not what one literally sees in his images (i.e., a metal bridge, smoking chimneys), but what one recognizes as the present-day experience of history that is both of the world and of the gaze through which it is envisioned.

Contrary to what its ubiquity may lead us to think, photography is not a simple and faithful reproduction of the real. It entails the construction of a gaze that questions appearances in order to articulate them as forms. Welling's art is not solely a matter of taking photographs. Above all, it is about continually reconsidering the gaze, that is to say, not only choosing among various prints those which may effectively become strong individual images but interpreting them as parts within an ensemble. This is the case with the works mentioned already, as well as with the *Light Sources* series (1992–98). Light is the common denominator in the photographs of landscapes, architectural elements, objects, and animals that make up this series, produced after a re-reading of *Los Angeles Architecture* (1976–78) in which light dominates as a motif. As the basic element of photosensitivity, light endows the visible with a sculptural dimension, and, at the same time, acquires its own plastic autonomy. To put it bluntly, light contributes to the visibility or creation of forms and does so much more essentially than any concrete material. "What you see isn't what you really get. There is something else—the effect of photography," Welling has said. It is through this gap between recognition and feeling, seeing and understanding, apprehending and imagining that art infiltrates photography.

Photography does not prescribe what is there to be seen; it establishes the conditions of a possible image, even when the systems of recognition and identification are in abeyance. It is possible to consider Welling's series of abstract works from this angle, including *Tile Photographs* (1985), *New Abstractions* (2000), and *Gelatin Photographs* (1984) and *Untitled (Aluminum Foil), 1980–81*. This last series, which shows crumpled aluminum in various states, its contours modulated by the light, bears an obvious formal relation to *Ashes*, just as the *New Abstractions* recall the *Railroad Photographs*. However, it would be a mistake to look for direct,

demonstrable links between the “figurative” and “abstract” works. For Welling, abstraction is not the result of a theoretical decision or a historical a priori. Rather, it is the issue, or, if you prefer, the heritage of light.

Translation from the French:
Charles Penwarden
Published in *Watershed*,
The Hudson Valley Art Project,
New York, Minetta Brook
Foundation, 2002, pp. 145-148.

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