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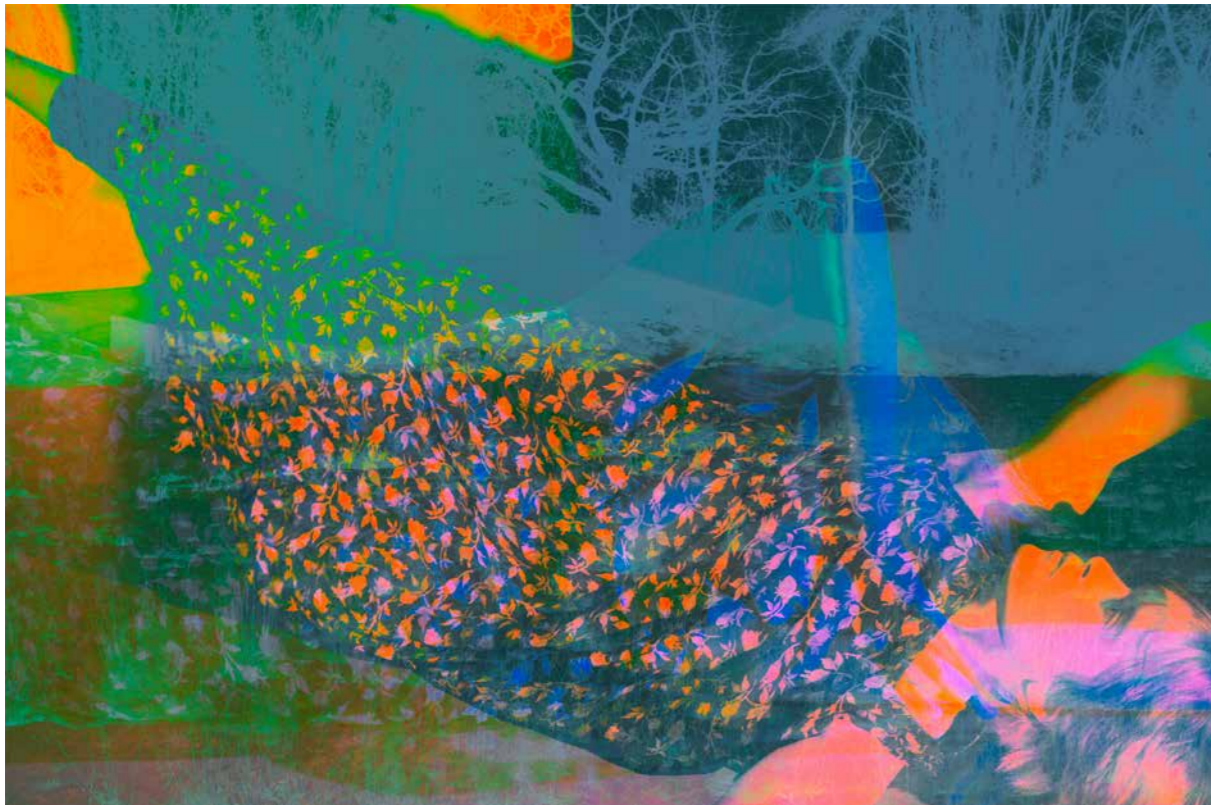
Arun Misra interviews:
James Welling

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James Welling Arun Misra interviews



James Welling, an American photographer based in New York City, currently teaches at Princeton University. His international reputation for experimentation and innovation spans a 40 year career. James has received numerous recognitions and awards and his works are held in over 50 private and public collections spanning America and Europe. His inquisitive approach, innovative styles and vast array of works display a glorious fusion of photography, art, sculpture, dance and poetry and speak to something inside all of us – awe, fascination and a yearning for joy.

Metamorphosis a 35-year survey and his first solo exhibition in Greater China was on display at David Zwirner Gallery in Hong Kong this past spring. The show included works from five bodies of work including *Flowers*, 2004-2017. So I was truly delighted when speaking to him a few months ago that he agreed to give an interview for fLIP magazine. Here is what he said.



left:
Welling Studio Floor,
Venice, CA 1973-4
 right:
from Choreograph, 2014-20
 both © James Welling

Arun Misra *How did you first become interested in photography? What were your early influences?*

James Welling My great uncle was an amateur photographer. My dad and uncle inherited his Speed Graphic kit and for many years that was the family camera. Dad used it with a roll film back. I never had any interest in learning how to use the camera, but I do remember the smell of the inside of the case, velvet and leather. When I was at college, they consigned the camera to a secondhand store in town. Thirty years later I bought my own Speed Graphic and used it constantly in the early 1990's.

As a teenager I owned books on Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa that I bought at the Museum of Modern Art bookstore. I read Edward Weston's Daybooks when I was 16, as much for his sex life as for his thoughts on photography. At that age I was a watercolourist, and my heroes were John Marin (1870-1953) and Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009). Marin was a good friend of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and I encountered Stieglitz's work, and

the photographs of his friend Paul Strand, in Marin catalogues. In a 1970 monograph on Andrew Wyeth, I saw my first Walker Evans photograph as a comparison image between Wyeth and Evans. When I went to art school my freshman drawing professor passed around a book on Atget. Why he did that I have no idea, but I remember being struck by Atget's photographs.

AM *What happened next - I think you got drawn to sculpture quite early on?*

JW In my sophomore year I made impermanent sculptures and I documented them with a Kodak Instamatic camera. Using an Instamatic permitted me to see how the camera added its own vocabulary to documentation. When I went out to California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) out west in my junior year, I brought my Instamatic. If I needed a better camera to make video stills, I borrowed a Nikon from the school or, later, I used my girlfriend's Pentax. In John Baldessari's class at Cal Arts it seemed that there was always a camera being passed around for anyone to use. A

friend taught me the rudiments of black and white printing and I made a dozen or so 8x10 prints that I still have. Out of this ragtag sequence of cameras I made some early photo pieces.

All the while I was making these occasional photographs at Cal Arts, I was cutting images out of magazines making proto-appropriation art along with my Cal Arts friend and roommate David Salle. It was as if the magazine and book images we collected enabled us to enter a bizarre half real, half media fabricated image world. Salle, in his 40 year-long painting career has kept a foot in that world of media images. My relationship to those media images was more tangential. I contemplated the cut-out magazine photographs I put on my wall

and thought I might remake them with a camera sometime in the future.

After I graduated from Cal Arts, I alternated between collecting images, drawing, taking photographs and making sculpture. One day as I complained about my lack of direction to Matt Mullican, another Cal Arts friend, he answered, *Why don't you get a view camera and take pictures like Ansel Adams?* This was a strange idea coming from Mullican who, like me, was a hard-core conceptualist. But it made sense at that moment, and it was the encouragement I needed to get serious about photography. Soon after I bought a used 4x5 camera equipped with a 127mm lens and I taught myself how to process and print sheet film.



AM In some of your works you use abstraction for creating images. Your 2014-20 work, *Choreograph*, comes to mind. Can you talk about what made you create this?

JW When I was 19, I saw Merce Cunningham's Dance Company perform in Pittsburgh and the dances blew my mind. I started modern dance classes the next semester and, because I was the only boy in class, I went on stage immediately. I don't think I was a particularly good dancer, I started too late, but I spent the next year immersed in dance. Then, after I transferred to Cal Arts, I had to choose a discipline and I chose art.

In 2009 Cunningham died and a tremendous outpouring of articles about his legacy followed. Reading about Cunningham, who had been so important to me when I was young, brought me back to dance. For a couple of years I tried to imagine a way to work with the art form. In 2014, during one of my classes at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) where I taught, I noticed that there was a cohort of art students studying dance, just as I had done at their age. I asked them to improvise short movement sequences based on a selection of dance photographs I'd collected over the years, and I photographed them on three consecutive days.

With this reservoir of images I experimented with various approaches for finishing the work. I was making psychedelic images at the same time, and I thought that the dance photographs might work in this psychedelic color space. So I combined intense color with dance and made *Choreograph*.

AM Is there an element of happenstance and serendipity in *Choreograph*?

JW After working with the UCLA students, I sought out professional dance companies and for six years I photographed over two dozen dance troupes and soloists, making from 1-3 works with each company. I say "with each company" but the projects were not collaborations. I photographed dress rehearsals, and then made works from the photographs I'd taken and gave the dancers a print. Serendipitously one of the

first dress rehearsals I photographed was a revival of *Rain Forest*, the dance I first saw Cunningham perform in 1970.

In *Choreograph* I evolved a workflow where I composited images of architecture and landscape imagery with the dance. I created dozens of color alterations on these composites and by turning the alterations on and off, almost at random, I could quickly change the image. It's hard to say if there is any real chance or happenstance in *Choreograph* because in the end, I selected the final image from all the variants.

AM *Choreograph* took about six years to make. How do you see the work now?

JW I'm still amazed by the colors and the image configurations. I finished *Choreograph* in April 2020, right as COVID was shutting down society. That summer as things opened up a bit, Lisa Hostetler, a curator at the Eastman Museum in Rochester, NY mounted a small show of *Choreograph* and the Aperture Foundation produced a beautiful book of photographs. Meridian Printing in Rhode Island printed it and the plates are extraordinary. Because of the pandemic the show and the book disappeared without much notice. I hope everyone who reads this interview will check out the book. I am very happy with it.

AM You have at times referred to the writings of the poet Wallace Stevens who wanted to delay the reading or intelligence of a poem for as long as possible. This is an interesting idea that resonates with Russian Futurist thought of the early 20thC. They experimented with prolonging the difficulty and duration of perception. It seems that many of your works do just this. Can you comment on this aspect of your practice? How do you go about slowing down the recognition of an image?

JW Good question! Why slow down the reading of the work? When I was young and I quoted that line by Stevens, I thought my ideal work of art would be a clear and precise photograph but one that would never resolve itself into a fixed meaning. Initially I did this by working with abstraction. Now every new group of photographs I make looks



from *Choreograph*, 2014-20 © James Welling

completely different from the previous one. I think my audience expects to be surprised when I debut a series. And isn't constant change another form of slowing down the reading of the work?

AM Can you talk about your two projects on antiquity, *Julia Mamaea* and *Cento*?

JW As I worked on *Choreograph*, I became interested in photographing sculptures. I went to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and spent a day photographing torsos and busts from antiquity. When I reviewed the digital files on my computer, one image jumped out at me—a portrait of a third century Roman noblewoman, Julia Mamaea. I was deeply moved by the expression on her face—she seemed so alive! I concocted a photographic emulsion of gelatine, sensitizer and dye and made 240 prints from the same negative

of her face. Because of the vagaries of the printing process I had created, Julia's face changed from happy to sad, thoughtful to active, female to male. I did a small show of the Julias in New York, but it was not installed to adequately showcase her expressions. A year later I hung more Julia prints in Paris in a nice sequence that began to uncover her emotions. I'm hoping to find a venue where I can exhibit the complete 240 images in one room.

After finishing *Julia Mamaea* I began a second project on antiquity, *Cento*. In poetry a "cento" is a collage poem made from fragments of other poems. Many poets from Roman to contemporary writers have used the form. For my "cento" I photographed objects from antiquity that I found in museums and in situ in Greece, Italy and Germany to fashion a poetic approximation of the ancient world. A better way to put it is that I want to



above & right: from *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods* 2018-19
© James Welling

reanimate antiquity. To do this I invented a hybrid colour process that borrows from photolithography and is equal parts oil painting and photography.

Each *Cento* print is imaged on a special lithographic plate using a colour laser printer. I wet the plate and roll a semi-transparent layer of blueish black oil paint over the surface of the print. At this point the plate could be printed on a press but I decided to let the plate stand as my final image. Because I'm using a lithographic plate as my substrate, the oil paint adheres just to the image area, leaving the whites clear. It turns out I'm a very poor lithographer and my plates contain streaks and water marks on the surface. Over time I've come to realize that these imperfections enliven the images.

AM Do you draw inspiration from the way

Abstract Expressionist artists worked creating vibrant and challenging images full of ambiguity and layered meanings?

Strange that you should ask. I just finished a biography of Willem De Kooning. I knew De Kooning's work a bit - I often look at a beautiful 1940's black and white De Kooning painting in the Princeton Art Museum (I teach photography at Princeton) - but what really stood out from the biography was his absolute mastery of paint as a *material*. I read the biography as I was learning how to handle oil paint for *Cento*, a paint I was not familiar with, and I used some of De Kooning's paint recipes in series.

AM A photograph is an unstable representation of its subject and its meaning and



interpretation changes with time and cultural contexts. I think this is something you have been very aware of in your practice. Can you comment?

JW Photographs are marked twice, once by the historical process that makes the photograph - albumen, gelatine silver, c-print, inkjet - and secondly by a cultural time stamp, fashion, history, technology at large. Extreme sensitivity to these two currents is something I picked up from cutting up magazines in the 1970's.

AM *You use colour to create vibrant multilayered images, Flowers for instance. Why is colour important to you?*

JW When I bought my first computer, I began to think about color in a new way. Photoshop in the late 1990's enabled photographers like myself to move away from ideas of color shackled, as it were, by physics, by Newton's color prism. You might say color was liberated when digital printing emerged.

Flowers began in 2006 in an analogue color darkroom with photograms and colored filters. In 2011 I began making *Flowers* digitally and the colors I chose would have been impossible in an analogue print.

But to return to your question, why is color important to me? Working digitally I discovered that color in photography and in all reproductive media is an illusion! Photographic color, both analogue and digital, is produced in channels, red, green, blue for additive color systems or cyan, magenta, yellow for subtractive color systems. Color channels are monochrome images projected virtually through colored filters. A few years ago I remember hearing a well-known photographer muse that black and white photography would soon disappear and all that we'd have would be color images. This, I thought, shows a profound lack of understanding of color and how color is constituted in photography.

AM *You taught a generation of photographers at UCLA. What do you get from teaching?*

JW Almost everything I just said about color

came to from teaching a color class at UCLA where I was for twenty-one years. UCLA is a state school and the range of art students who came to us was simply amazing. When I started teaching at UCLA in 1995, I was 44 years old, and I'd never taught. I learned so much from my UCLA students simply because they were game for anything I brought to them. What is a photograph? How does it function? What can it say? How does it say it? How do you see it? How do you see? What do you see? All sorts of questions that the undergraduate, graduate students and I proposed to each other and worked through. I was fortunate to have dozens of incredible students that I could learn from.

AM *What do you enjoy doing besides photography?*

JW Recently I was talking to a colleague who teaches in the Classics Department at Princeton University. I told her how excited I was reading the *Iliad* and she suggested that I try reading it in Greek. Take a class, that sort of thing. I misinterpreted her to mean, get a dictionary and read Homer yourself. I'm doing right now, reading the *Iliad*, word by painful word using two dictionaries and, when I get stuck, a bilingual edition of the book. Even though it's slow going, the words explode on the page. I'm fascinated by the syntax. It's completely out of order for modern English and the text is powerful because of this. Here is my rough translation of the beginning of the first sentence of the *Iliad*:

*Wrath, sing goddess of Achilles
from Mt Pepion, deadly, take notice,
immense Achaean warrior, pain, sing
for many times, strong souls that Hades
prematurely sent down, warriors, given
to the dogs and birds of prey...*

AM *Your translation is full of simple yet powerful imagery - full of possibilities and challenges. I wonder about the many ways it could be interpreted visually, either through fine arts photography or hybrid process that you use. It has been a fascinating talking to you. Thank you for your generosity in sharing your thoughts and approaches to your wonderful works.*

