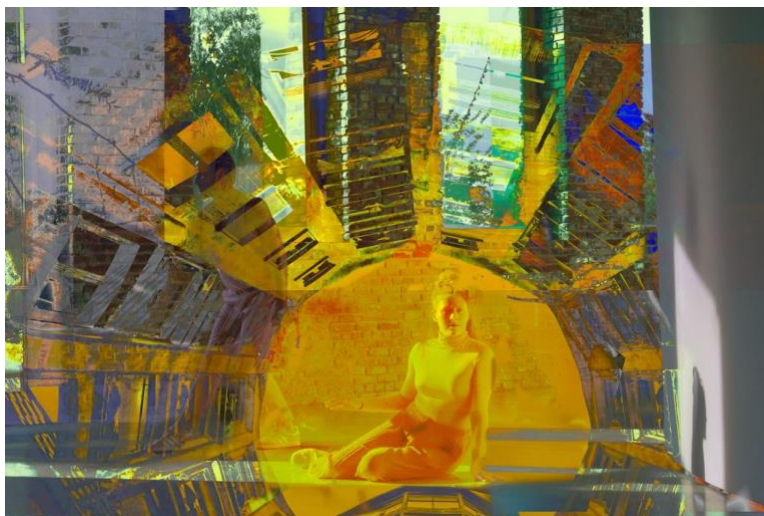




*James Welling in conversation
with Dr. Kostas Prapoglou*

(May 2021)



James Welling, 0128, 2018. From Choreograph Inkjet print. 42 x 63 in. 1067 x 1600 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

James Welling is an American artist, photographer and educator living in New York City. He studied at Carnegie-Mellon University (1969-71) and University of Pittsburgh (1970-1), where he took modern dance classes. He received a BFA and an MFA at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California (1971-4), where he studied with John Baldessari, Wolfgang Stoerchle and Jack Goldstein.

Since 2012, he is a Visiting Professor of Photography, Visual Arts Programme, at Princeton University, New Jersey. Previous posts include the position of Professor at the Department of Art, University of California, Los Angeles (1995-2016), Visiting Faculty, Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, Bard College, Annendale-on-Hudson, New York (1995), and Visiting Lecturer, Visual Arts Programme, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Welling has held over 130 solo shows and he has presented his work in over 430 group shows in galleries, museums and institutions around the world such as Marian Goodman Gallery Paris and New York; David Zwirner, New York; Camden Arts Centre, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid;

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Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Photographers' Gallery, London; and Documenta IX, Kassel. He has received numerous awards among of which are: 2014 Infinity Award, International Center of Photography, New York (2014); Pilara Foundation Distinguished Visiting Photography Fellow (2009), and International Association of Art Critics Award of Excellence to James Welling/First Place/Best Show in a Commercial Gallery Nationally for James Welling, Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Kostas Prapoglou: At the beginning of your career, you experimented with painting, video, sculpture, dance and performance, before focusing on photography in the mid-1970s. What made you choose photography as the main medium of your practice?

James Welling: When I look at the range of media I worked in before photography, I see the influence of my art and dance teachers from high school through college: Julie Post, Cynthia Koseski, Estelle Coniff, my high school teachers: Gandy Brodie, Connie Fox, John Stevenson, Robert Tharsing, my instructors at Carnegie-Mellon University: Jeanne Beaman and Truda Kaschmanm, my dance teachers, and, finally, Wolfgang Stoerchle, Jack Goldstein and John Baldessari at Cal Arts. Each teacher encouraged and challenged me in different ways and now as I reflect back, I see how they opened up the world for me.

I never studied photography. I came to the camera on my own. After I graduated from Cal Arts, I had a difficult year in search of a medium. I filled notebooks with ideas, drawings and plans for work. These notebooks recorded my signifieds, all my ideas without any form or way to realize them. With photography I found a signifier I could use and a way to move forward.

What was it that drew me to photography? Unlike the dematerialized art I'd been looking at and making, in 1976, photography was a very codified practice. There were rules and protocols. It is a medium with a history and that was appealing after what I saw as the form-lessness of conceptualism. I was an autochthonic photographer with no photographic parents, and I approached the medium with a mix of naiveté and arrogance. I was naïve about how photography worked and arrogant enough to think that I could easily bend it to my ideas. But it took about five years to find a voice with the materials photography offered. (In Search of..., 1981)



James Welling, *0818*, 2006. From *Glass House* Inkjet print.
33.66 x 50.5 inches. 855 x 1283 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

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KP: To what extent do you feel that photography encapsulates aspects of dance and performance? Do you often feel that your images follow your own choreography, or do you follow the instinctual choreography of space and the chosen subject matter?

JW: A number of ideas came together in *Choreograph*. I knew I wanted to do something with dance. Even though I was a mediocre modern dancer in college, the few dances I performed are vivid memories. In 2014, I jumpstarted *Choreograph* by photographing a group of art students miming photographs of classic 20th century dances. Once I had this set of images, I searched my digital cards for other photographs I could use with dance. By chance on the same camera card, I found images that I had shot of a building designed by Marcel Breuer in Florida and an abstract Tony Smith sculpture in Hartford. On a spur of the moment, I combined the photos of the Breuer and the Smith with one of the dancers, to make my first *Choreograph*. (9485, 2014) I put the images in the three-color channels of Photoshop and this produced a wildly psychedelic picture.

Once I worked out this layered structure –dance, architecture, landscape– I photographed two dozen professional dance companies in New York and Los Angeles. I shot one, the extraordinary LA Dance Project, so often that the company manager joked that I could fill in if someone was injured. She didn't know how right she was! Periodically, I have nightmares where I have to take my rusty body on stage and dance with the company! (LA Dance Project: 3693, 2017, 4600, 2015, 4073, 2017)

As I assembled each *Choreograph*, I never had any idea how the photograph would turn out. Each image required dozens of adjustment layers to alter and complicate the color. After working on a picture for a week, the final image would come as a surprise that I would either keep or trash. All this is to say that I came very close to using the unexpected and the random in *Choreograph*. (7477, 2017, 0128, 2018)

Someone once observed that my use of chance recalled the chance procedures choreographer Merce Cunningham employed to create his dances. I agree, but with a caveat: none of my *Choreograph* photographs were in fact random assemblages; all of the elements were, in the end, authorized even if I didn't know what the image would look like at the outset. This concurs with how I imagine Cunningham must have worked. He used chance operations to create new movement configurations that he either incorporated or rejected.



James Welling, 3693, 2017. From *Choreograph* Inkjet print.
42 x 63 in. 1067 x 1600 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

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James Welling, 4073, 2017. From Choreograph Inkjet print.
42 x 63 in. 1067 x 1600 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

KP: What drew your attention to architecture? Do you see it as a vital component of the general landscape, or do you perceive these two as separate and independent elements that interact?

JW: Architecture was my first photographic motif and I still photograph it. In 1976, I made Los Angeles Architecture and Portraits using a ‘view camera’, a camera designed for photographing architecture, among other subjects. (LA-C 7, 1976) Over the past 45 years, I’ve made ‘architectural’ photographs a significant part of different projects —Buildings by H. H. Richardson, Glass House, (0818, 2006) Railroad Photographs, Wyeth and Light Sources, as well as my recent images of antiquity.

KP: What is the role of time, memory and emotion in your practice?

JW: In 1949, when the world was in a bad place after the Second World War, the photographer Paul Strand was questioned at a conference, “What do we do now?” His answer was, “Go the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” In 2018, without knowing I was answering Strand’s call, I started photographing Greek and Roman objects and sculptures at the Met. These initial photographs evolved into Cento, a large project that will be exhibited at Le Grand Hornu in Belgium in May. Cento visualizes all the things you mention –time, memory and emotion– with antiquity as my lens.

A cento is a poem made up of quotations from other poems. When you examine antiquity, you encounter a plethora of fragments, a gigantic graveyard really, full of architecture, toys, body parts, plants, sea creatures, pottery, armor, writings. I’m working with this set of fragmentary objects and places to make a new poem that reanimates antiquity.

After I exhibited a few of the Centos in 2019, I received an irate email from a famous photographer who spent years photographing ancient sites in the Mediterranean. “How can you do this?” he fulminated. “You don’t know anything about these places”. His outrage was a serious wakeup call, and I began to read Greek history and culture. But Cento won’t be successful if my photographs capture only erudition or extensive trips to the Mediterranean.

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The Centos are a digital print on plastic with oil paint applied to the surface. As such, each Cento print is a unique strike, or impression, full of imperfections, watery streaks and strange colors. This gives the work the particular vivacity I'm after.



James Welling, *4600*, 2015. From *Choreograph* Inkjet print.
42 x 63 in. 1067 x 1600 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

KP: You have experimented with numerous materials throughout your career. Are you currently exploring new materials and methods? Do technological advancements inspire you?

JW: When I began photographing in 1976, I knew the medium would only give me so much to work with. Every time I create an image, I balance what the camera renders with how I see the final work. I put my finger on the scale, as it were, and tip the balance toward the photograph I want to make and away from the one the camera produces.

Today, we all use 'advanced technology' –digital cameras, computers and software, inkjet printers. But when I think about the medium, photography advances independent of technology. My Cento prints are cobbled together from research on 19th century photo processes and from a desire to make a handmade color photograph. Even though I used a digital camera and a laser printer for Cento, these tools are tangential to the conceptual energy expended to bring the project to light. Ideas, not hardware, create the future.



James Welling, *Kore, Parian Marble*. About 500 B.C. Found in 1888, southwest of the Parthenon, 2021.
From Cento. Electrostatic print with oil pigment on polyester. 11 1/2 x 17 1/4 inches.
29.2 x 43.8 cm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

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James Welling, *7477*, 2017. From *Choreograph* Inkjet print. 42 x 63 in.
1067 x 1600 mm. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery



James Welling, *Athens. National Garden. Aleppo Pine*, 2020. From *Cento*. Electrostatic print with
oil pigment on polyester. 11 1/2 x 17 1/4 inches. 29.2 x 43.8 cm. Courtesy Marian of Goodman Gallery

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