

JAMES WELLING “Wyeth”



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March 24 – July 22, 2012

Since growing up in northwestern Connecticut in the 1950s and 1960s, artist James Welling has consistently cited the profound influence Andrew Wyeth had on him as a young painter. However, since the 1970s, Welling’s focus has been on photography. His work centers on an exploration of the medium, resulting in work, which he produces in series, that are highly diverse in every respect—subject matter, scale, cameras, and processes. Recently the artist revisited his earliest artistic heroes, including Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, and Andrew Wyeth. While reviewing the work of Wyeth in particular, Welling noted a surprising and enduring influence of this early mentor on his body of work. Inspired to create a photographic series on Wyeth, beginning in 2010 Welling photographed the places Wyeth painted in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and Cushing, Maine. A selection from the ongoing series, “Wyeth,” is presented in conjunction with the special exhibition *Andrew Wyeth: Looking Beyond* at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

James Welling
Door, Olson House, 2010
Inkjet print
15 3/8 × 23 1/2 in.



James Welling
Two Trees, 2010
Inkjet print
15 3/8 × 23 1/2 in.



Patricia Hickson, the Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum, discusses “Wyeth” with artist James Welling.

You have cited Andrew Wyeth as an early inspiration. Where did you first encounter his work?

I saw my first Wyeth painting, *Northern Point* (1950), at the Wadsworth Atheneum in the early 1960s. In ninth grade, during the fall of 1966, I took a Saturday drawing class at the Wadsworth. After class I would go upstairs to look at paintings, and would always end in front of *Northern Point*.

What struck you about Wyeth then, as a young artist?

For Christmas 1966, my parents gave me the beautifully printed book *Andrew Wyeth: Dry Brush and Pencil Drawings*. I pored over the book for hours. What struck me about Wyeth, especially in the pages of this catalogue, was the way he’d move from a pencil study to a very spontaneous watercolor, to a very controlled watercolor, to handwritten notes, always circling around a few common, everyday subjects: pine trees, mussel shells, houses, cornfields, portraits. And coincidentally, many of these things were objects that also interested me, that I saw on a daily basis.

A few years earlier, in 1964, I had taken a year of private art classes with Julie Post in Simsbury, Connecticut. Julie really got me started working in watercolor, and from then until I went off to college in 1969, I wandered the hills of West Simsbury making hundreds of watercolors of the fields and mountains and farms behind our suburban house. I thought that I was working very much in a Wyeth vein.

When I look back at these paintings now, I see that I was interested in capturing transitory light effects, or specific cloud formations. These were things that Wyeth, in his deliberate, almost timeless way of working, didn’t seem to take much interest in. I think now that Wyeth was really after the structure of objects—outside time and any specific moment. However, when I was young, I just loved the precision with which he delineated the world. Wyeth taught me that it was okay to look very closely at things, to be intense, to be very focused.

You are extremely prolific, with numerous and varied works produced over the last forty years. These include black-and-white and color work, abstraction and representation, work inside and outside the studio, as well as straight photography and manipulated images. And you seem to move back and forth between extremes, regularly if not concurrently. What drives the subjects of your diverse series? Is there a thread that connects everything for you?

Perhaps the diversity of my photographic work goes back to my experience with watercolor. In watercolor, I always struggled with, and appreciated, the physical problems of the medium: water flooding the page, the brush not behaving, smudging the paint with my hand, scraping away at the paper. Watercolor is an extremely frustrating medium. But I could just rip the failed sheet from my pad and start again if it didn’t work. Or, if I didn’t like the painting I’d made on a sheet of heavy rag paper, I could put it in the bathtub and scrub the pigment away to create a new, clean surface to work on. I think this physical relationship with the medium, the literal and figurative fluidity of watercolor, carries over into how I work with photography as a malleable medium.

James Welling
Groundhog Day, 2010
Inkjet print
15 ⁵/₈ × 23 ¹/₂ in.



Over the years, you have worked in the landscape of the Northeast—“Diary/Landscape” (1977–86), “Railroad Photographs” (1987–94), the “H. H. Richardson Buildings” (1988–94), “Connecticut Landscape” (1998–), and “Glass House” (2006–09)—even after moving to Los Angeles in 1995. What ongoing allure does the Northeast have for you artistically?

I became aware of the idea of “place” in the early 1970s when I looked at artists like Hamish Fulton and Robert Smithson, who have very eloquently evoked “place” or “site” in sculpture. The place that I know best is the Northeast. When I moved to Los Angeles in 1995, I was working on a number of projects linked to the Northeast. I’ve kept working on them and have added a few more, like my photographs of Philip Johnson’s Glass House, and now my Wyeth project. Appropriately, when I travel to the East Coast from Los Angeles, I am even more sensitive to the geographic nuances, so photographing there becomes very exciting.

So, what brings you back to Wyeth now?

I was on a panel a few years ago with the photographer Joel Sternfeld. He spoke of how important Robert Frank’s photographs were for him when he was just starting out. I recognized that for me, there was no comparable figure in photography. The



artist who opened the visible world to me when I was fifteen years old was Wyeth. So I started looking at Wyeth’s work again in 2004, and was surprised to learn that he was still painting. In 2010, I realized that I could make photographs in the same landscapes in which Wyeth worked if I chose to. It was as simple as that: make photographs in Cushing, Maine, and Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Both the Farnsworth Art Museum and the Brandywine River Museum have been very supportive and helpful with the project. When I started, I seemed to be one of the few contemporary artists thinking about Wyeth. Whenever I’d mention Wyeth to my photographer and writer friends, they’d be surprised at the richness in the work. So, this project has become something of a rediscovery of Wyeth’s work, both for me and for my audience.

In your Wyeth photographs, the work falls into two categories—Wyeth’s sites and subjects, and his studio. I imagine that you were initially drawn to the sites as they related to the painting compositions, but had you always planned to photograph the artist’s studio? What inspired you to photograph it and what did you discover about Wyeth by doing so?

It never occurred to me that I would be able to photograph in Wyeth’s studio at Chadds Ford. When I discovered that the studio would be open to the public through the Brandywine River Museum, and that it would be possible to photograph there, I was thrilled. It was incredibly moving to see the room in which he actually painted. It’s a beautiful space with a lot of character, relatively small, well lit, and seemingly unchanged in the last fifty years. What amazed me was Wyeth’s collection of watercolor blocks—the pile of them must be at least four feet high, including many brands that were completely unfamiliar to me. Photographers hoard photographic paper, but I didn’t think that a painter would stockpile watercolor paper in the same way.

Seeing Wyeth’s “actual” studio, however, didn’t diminish the experience of photographing in the other rooms in which he worked. Beyond his formal studio at Chadds Ford, Wyeth worked in various houses—the Kuerner farmhouse, the Olson house, and the Italianate house now owned by the Sipalas. As I understand his practice as a painter, Wyeth’s studio was wherever he was painting at any given time. It was transitory. It existed in the back of his Jeep, in the houses I mentioned, and also his formal studio. So you’re right, the studio is very important. Perhaps the reason Wyeth worked in such a restricted geographic region is that all the places he worked constituted his studio.



Left:
James Welling
Hooks, 2010 (detail)
Inkjet print
15 ⁵/₈ × 23 in.

James Welling
Glass House, 2010
Inkjet print
15 ⁵/₈ × 23 ¹/₂ in.

On the surface, the series is a grand homage to Wyeth, but how do you see yourself embedded in these images?

I'm able to follow my obsession with Wyeth, and to discover the things I've borrowed from him. Yes, it is an homage, but that homage becomes a portal that opens onto my own work and my own interests.

Wyeth's oeuvre is so tightly focused compared to the great variety we see in your work. We are also discussing a painter who has inspired a photographer. How do you see that Wyeth has influenced your work?

The project on Wyeth allows me to see the specific pictorial devices I unconsciously borrowed from him. For a few years (1976–78), I made portraits that were clearly posed, with the subject looking out of the frame, thinking, preoccupied. This was similar to Wyeth's approach in his portraits. In 1981 I made abstract photographs of white pastry dough on dark velvet, and the abstract shapes bear an uncanny resemblance to Wyeth's paintings of melting snow. And light, as a sculptural form, also seems to be something I picked up from Wyeth. My interest in frames and framing edges, windows, and doorways finds a correspondence in some of Wyeth's framing devices. So I think I took a lot from Wyeth. Some things are very obvious and some are more subtle. And almost all were unknown to me before I began the project. Perhaps it is a way of acknowledging my deep debt to Wyeth.

James Welling was born in 1951 in Hartford, Connecticut. He received his BFA and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) in Valencia, and is currently Area Head of Photography in the Department of Art at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Welling has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. A major retrospective exhibition *James Welling Photographs, 1974–1999*, organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Baltimore Museum of Art. In 2013 the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, will present *James Welling Monograph*, a major survey of Welling's work from 1974–2012, accompanied by an Aperture publication. The artist's work is held in numerous museum collections, including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. Welling lives and works in Los Angeles, California.



Left:
James Welling
Dry Pigments, 2011
Inkjet print
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Right:
James Welling
Easel, 2011
Inkjet print
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Left:
James Welling
Winter Grass, 2011
Inkjet print
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.



Works in the Exhibition

All works are Epson 9800 prints on Museo Silver Rag.
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York.
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Two Trees, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Olson House, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Door, Olson House, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Revenant, 2010
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

End of Olsons, 2010
17 3/4 x 15 5/8 in.

Basket and Workbench, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Tenant Farmer, 2010
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Groundhog Day, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Hooks, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 in.

Kuerner's Hill, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Young Bull, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Orchard, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Winter Grass, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Glass House, 2010
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Sycamore, 2010
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Night Mare, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Loper, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Studio, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Studio Door, 2011
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Easel, 2011
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Dry Pigments, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.

Studio Mirror, 2011
23 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.

Strathmore Gemini, 2011
15 5/8 x 23 1/2 in.



Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art

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James Welling
End of Olsons, 2010
Inkjet print
17 ¾ × 15 ⅝ in.

Cover:
James Welling
Olson House, 2010
Inkjet print
15 ⅝ × 23 ½ in.