

James Welling ***Metamorphosis***

1 April–8 May 2021

5–6/F, H Queen's, 80 Queen's Road Central
Hong Kong



James Welling, *4776*, 2015
© James Welling
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

David Zwirner is pleased to present work by the American photographer James Welling, on view across two floors of the gallery's Hong Kong location. The exhibition will mark the first solo presentation of the artist's work in Greater China and will provide an overview of Welling's forty-year career in photography, with key series from the 1980s to the present that highlight his ongoing exploration of abstraction, figuration, color, and process.

Welling's first major body of work, *Aluminum Foil* (1980–1981), is made up of black-and-white close-ups of crumpled aluminum foil. This early work signaled a break with traditional ideas of the medium by shifting attention to constructing images for the camera rather than finding them in the world. The *Aluminum Foils* initially read as abstractions, but upon further viewing other readings emerge: starry skies, rippling water, summer foliage, geological strata. This tightrope act in which the work hovers between abstraction and representation became one of the hallmarks of Welling's practice.

Thirty years after *Aluminum Foil*, Welling began *Chemical* (2010–), his ongoing series of chemigrams (photographs made in room light with photographic chemicals on black-and-white photo paper). Using different tools to spread liquid and powdered developer across photosensitive material, Welling creates abstractions resembling miniature action paintings. As with the *Aluminum Foils*, the viewer is presented with an abstraction that lends itself to figurative readings—abstraction on the edge of representation.

Welling began using color in 2004 for *Flowers*, a series of photograms (cameraless photographs) that he created until 2017. The first *Flowers* were made in a color darkroom by layering brightly colored gels above a black-and-white negative of a flower to produce irregular fields of vibrant color. In 2014, Welling started working with flower imagery on the computer using the red, green, and blue color channels of Photoshop. The work became increasingly psychedelic and several examples of *Flowers* in the show are among his most intense and vibrant.

As Welling worked on *Flowers*, he developed a parallel project, *Glass House* (2006–2010), photographs of the architect Philip Johnson's Connecticut home built in 1949. Again, Welling turned to the color filters from the early *Flowers*, this time holding them up in front of the camera lens. *Glass House* evolved over four years of visits and encompasses multiple views of The Glass House and the surrounding landscape in all seasons.

In *Choreograph* (2014–2020), Welling applied the intense colors of the recent *Flowers* to superimpose images of landscape, architecture, and modern dance. (Welling studied dance briefly in his early 20s.) For the dance images, he photographed rehearsals and performances of a dozen dance companies, including the LA Dance Project and the Lucinda Childs Dance Company. By compositing these images, Welling produces what could be called "digital collages" where layers of figuration obscure and compete with each other. *Bodies*, begun in 2018, uses a similar layering technique but emphasizes the body over landscape and architecture. However, in these photographs, we no longer see a modern dancer but rather a god or a mortal from antiquity.

Welling continues to picture Greek and Roman sculptures for his most recent series *Cento*, begun in 2019. After photographing sculptures and objects in dozens of museums around the world, the *Cento* photographs use a process the artist invented in which he applies oil paint to photographic prints. A cento is a poem made up of lines from other poems. In titling his series *Cento*, Welling draws these fragments from antiquity into a new pictorial whole.

James Welling was born in 1951 in Hartford, Connecticut. He studied at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh before receiving his BFA and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. The artist has been represented by David Zwirner since 2005, and *Metamorphosis* marks his ninth solo presentation with the gallery.

Welling's work has been the subject of a number of significant survey exhibitions. Most recently, in 2017, the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent and the Kunstforum Wien in Vienna co-organized *Metamorphosis*, a traveling solo show encompassing the artist's work from over four decades. A major survey, *Monograph*, was organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum in Ohio and accompanied by a catalogue published by Aperture in 2013. The exhibition traveled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. 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. Welling's work was also featured in *documenta IX* in 1992.

In 2020, *Choreograph*, a solo exhibition of Welling's work, was on view at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. *Things Beyond Resemblance: James Welling Photographs* was hosted in 2015 by the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and presented fifty works from the artist's Wyeth project. The museum also commissioned the artist to create eight site-specific installations, *Gradients*, which explore the intersection of photography and sculpture. In 2012, *The Mind on Fire* at the 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.

Additional solo exhibitions have been held at the Art Institute of Chicago (2014); Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2013); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut (2012); Minneapolis Institute of Art, 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, Lucerne, Switzerland (1998). In 1990, the artist's first museum exhibition was presented by Kunsthalle Bern.

In 2014, Welling was a recipient of the 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, California. From 1995 to 2016, Welling was Professor in the Department of Art at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and since 2012 he has been a Lecturer with the rank of Professor in Visual Arts and the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University.

The artist's work is held in major museum collections internationally, including the Centre Georges 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; The 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 Photographic Art Museum; Vancouver Art Gallery; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. He lives and works in New York.

For all press inquiries, contact

Julia Lukacher +1 212 727 2070 jlukacher@davidzwirner.com

Tong Hu +852 9769 4819 tong@davidzwirner.com

Victoria Kung +852 9668 1092 victoriak@suttoncomms.com