Mac Giolla Léith, Caoimhín. “Welling’s Wyeth.” Afterall (Spring 2013) pp. 20 – 32 [ill.]

Afterall

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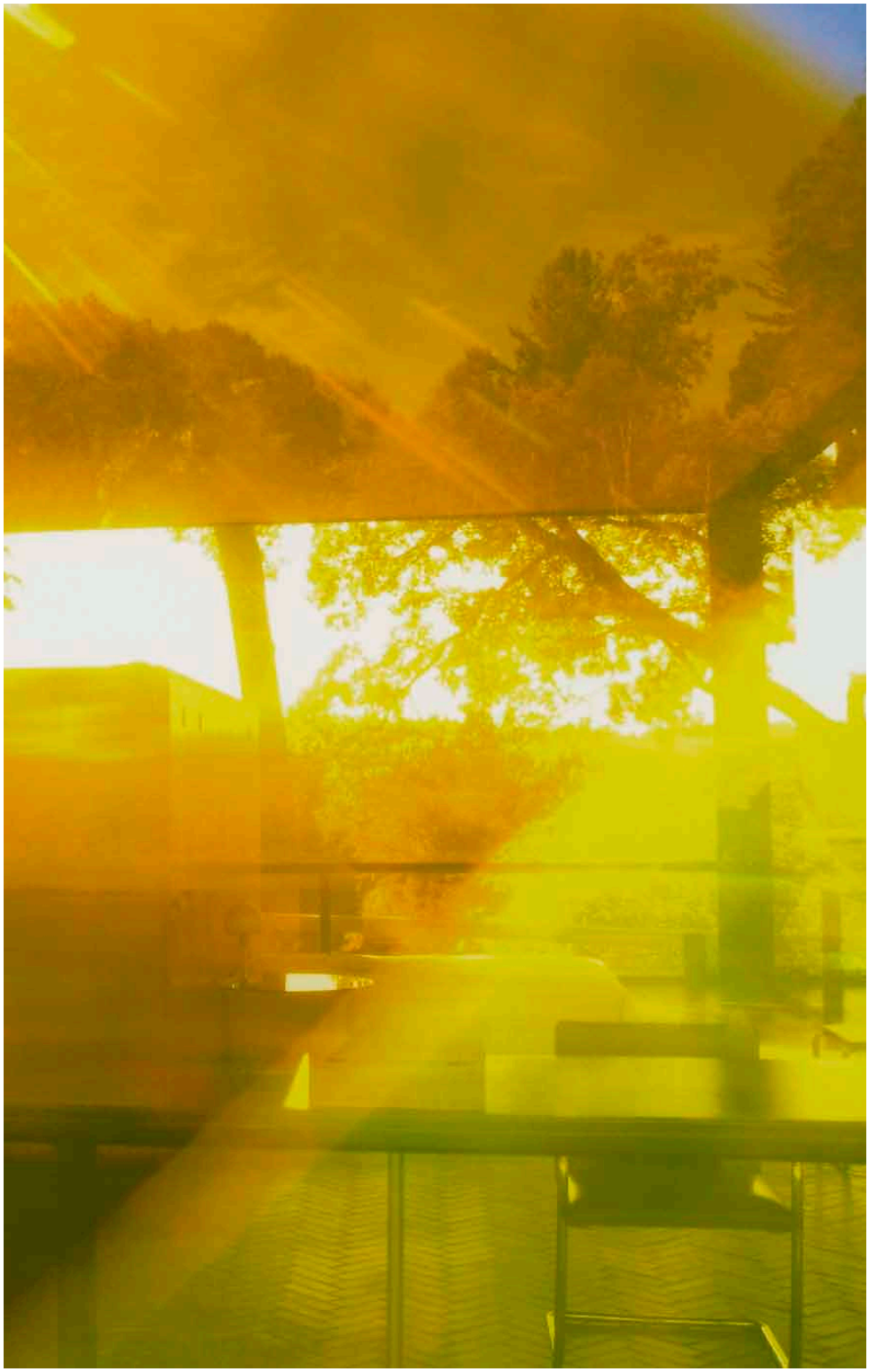

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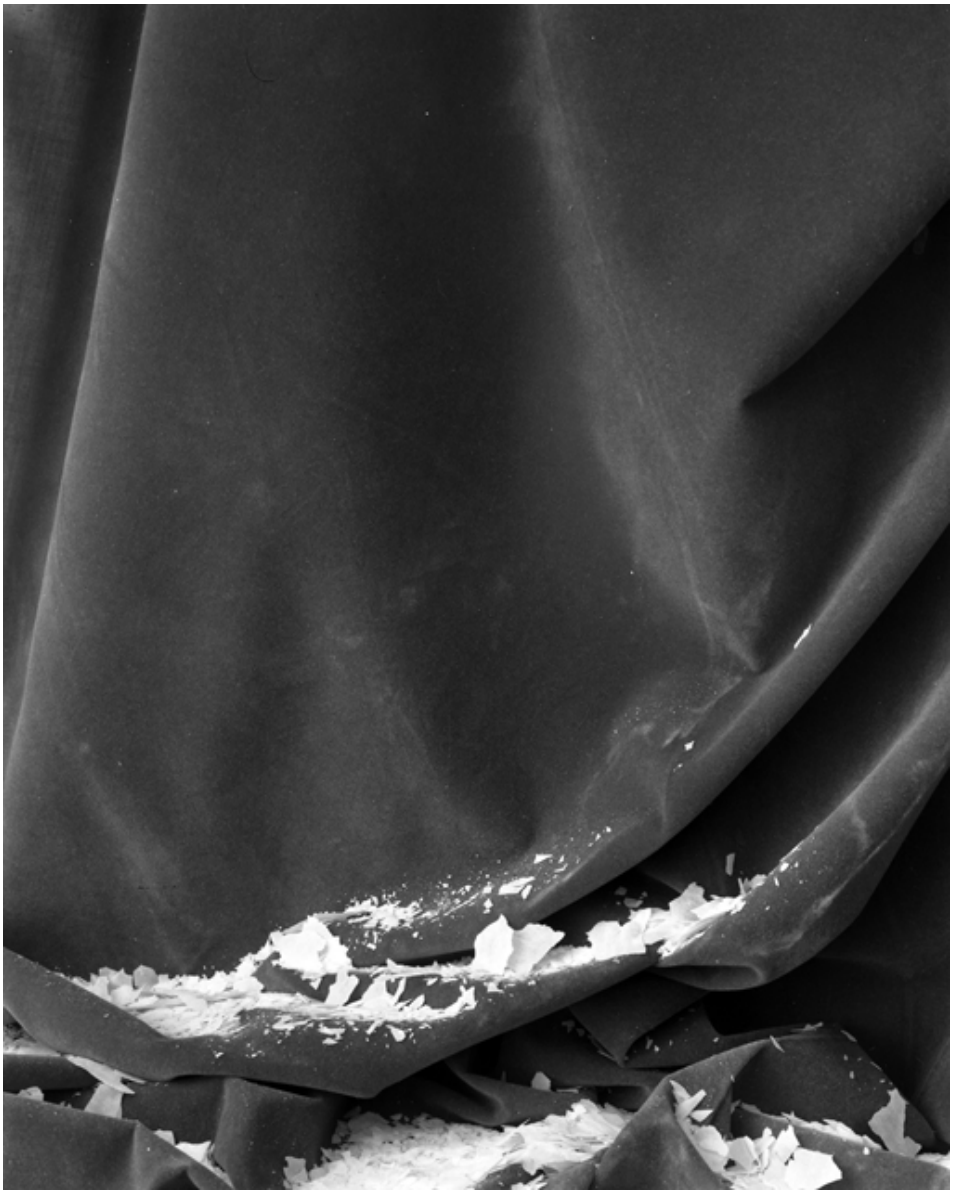


James Welling
The Waterfall, 1981,
gelatin silver contact
print, 24 x 19cm

Previous spread:
James Welling
4580, 2007,
inkjet print,
101.6 × 134.3cm,
from the series
Glass House. All
images courtesy
the artist, Maureen
Paley, London
and David Zwirner,
New York

Welling's *Wyeth*

– Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

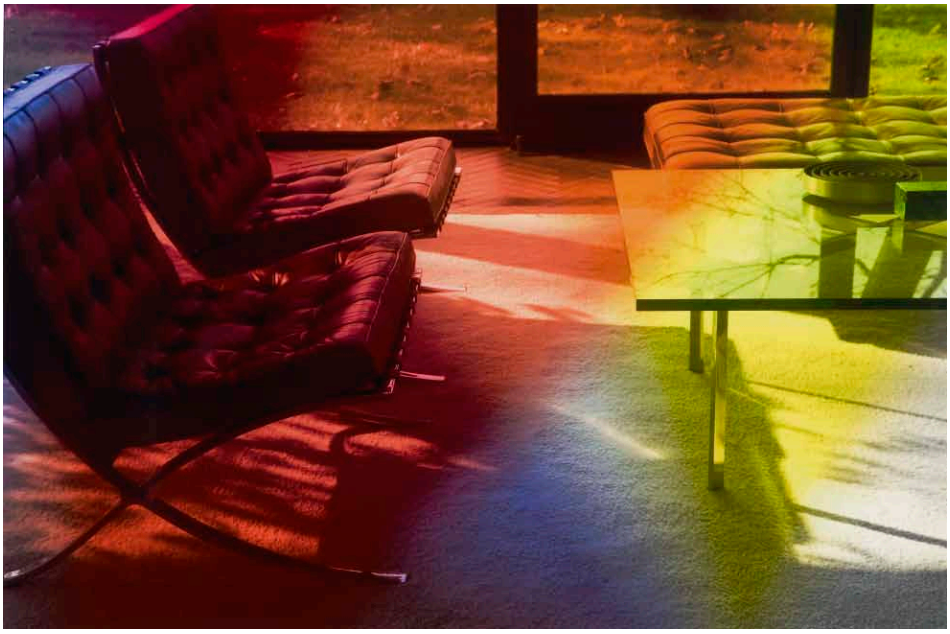
Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith reviews the early assessment of James Welling as part of the Pictures Generation, arguing that his work over the past thirty years shows a fascination with a variety of modes of representation as much as with representation itself.

'I gave up painting like Andrew Wyeth in the first month of undergraduate art school'. James Welling's deceptively offhand remark appears in parentheses in an interview with Lyle Rexer from 2010, as he recalls how, as a student in the 1970s, he 'came to photography through the eye of Minimalism and post-Minimalism'.[1] The previous year Rexer had published *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*, a coat-trailing account of the long history of photography. In the book Rexer attempts to redress the marginalisation of diverse strains of photographic abstraction in the canonical version of that history, which is epitomised by the writings of John Szarkowski and was enshrined at the institution where Szarkowski held sway from the early 1960s to the early 90s, New York's Museum of Modern Art. Welling is one of a brisk succession of figures, from Henry Fox Talbot on, whose work is marshalled to illustrate Rexer's revisionist narrative, and four of his photographs are reproduced in the book. Two of these are early gelatin-silver prints from well-known series: the first a 1981 photograph of scattered shards of white pastry dough nestling in dark folds of velvet drapery, and the second an image of an irregular pattern of geometrically shaped black tiles against a white ground, from 1985. The other two images are from the past decade: one of Welling's colour photograms of flowers, dated 2005, and one of his *Degradés* (1986—2006), a series of cameraless exposures, titled *I12N* and dated 2002. Though typically modest in scale, *I12N* all but dares one to describe it without recourse to a roll call of post-War US abstract painters, featuring as it does a glowing rectangle of modulating orange hues separated by a thin white 'zip' from the smaller rectangle of saturated black beneath it. It is a choice illustration for Rexer's tendentious retelling of the story of photography, which for him culminates in a present moment, when, it is claimed, 'classic definitions of photography's documentary dimension' are being rejected in favour of 'other conceptually inflected possibilities, somewhere between painting and performance art, that include the manipulation of process and printing'.[2] Welling is thus positioned as a significant precursor to a spectrum of current art, ranging from Walead Beshty to Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who are included in his book, not to mention a host of others, from Eileen Quinlan to Wade Guyton, who are not.

Like many critics before him Rexer finds what he needs in Welling's heterogeneous oeuvre and contrives to ignore or discount that which is unamenable to his predilections:

Because of his early association with Metro Pictures Gallery and projects in which he came close to parodying straight documentary photographs, James Welling is often associated with a group of photographers, including Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who rejected the myth of photographic transparency and the inherence of any 'meaning' in a photographic subject. Yet Welling's work cannot be read as mere cultural criticism, or simply a critique of representation.[3]

1 Lyle Rexer and James Welling, 'How to Skin a Cat: A Conversation on Photography', in Shane Lavalette and Michael Bühler-Rose (ed.), *Lay Flat 02: Meta*, New York: Lay Flat, 2010, pp.20—21.
2 L. Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*, New York: Aperture, 2009. The quotation is from the book's flyleaf.
3 *Ibid.*, p.145.



The qualifiers 'mere' and 'simply' are of course crucial here. As it happens, they reflect a concern also expressed by the artist himself regarding the unhelpfully reductive or 'absolutist' nature of earlier readings of his work, in particular that presented in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's classic essay of 1982, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', about the Pictures Generation.[4] Grouping Welling together with three of his peers — Vikky Alexander, Barbara Kruger and Prince — Solomon-Godeau's essay offers an account of the pastry-dough photographs that, in hindsight, seems almost perverse in its subordination of that which actually appears in these images to that which does not. Most commentators, including Rexer, have been happy to accept Welling's own emphasis on the initial inscrutability of 'the *manifest* subject' of his early drapery and aluminium foil photographs. Rosalind Krauss, for example, noted the pictures' propensity for 'holding the referent at bay, creating as much delay as possible between seeing the image and understanding what it was *of*'.[5]

Over the years Welling has consistently stressed the importance of this oscillation between ostensibly incompatible modes of construing a given image. In a recent conversation about his photographs of Philip Johnson's Glass House (2006—09), for instance, he notes that '"doubleness" is something that has long interested me', illustrating this with reference to 'the aluminium foil photographs of the 1980s [in which] you have straightforward representations of foil and very metaphoric images'.[6] But Solomon-Godeau's patience with the deferred reconciliation between abstract and documentary readings of the pastry-dough photographs is limited by the fact that her attention is already elsewhere. These pictures of 'shards and particles of some white substance (pastry dough, as it happens, but this hardly matters)' against a swathe of drapery might have

4 See 'James Welling Talks to Jan Tumlir', *Artforum*, vol.42, no.8, April 2004, p.216. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *Afterimage*, vol.10, no.1—2, Summer 1982; reprinted in A. Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp.86—102.

5 Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Photography and Abstraction', in *A Debate on Abstraction: Photography and Abstraction* (exh. cat.), New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 1989, p.66; quoted in Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling', in *James Welling: Abstract* (exh. cat.), Brussels and Toronto: Palais des Beaux-Arts and Art Gallery of York University, 2002, p.12.

6 'A Conversation with Sylvia Lavin, Los Angeles, February 28, 2010', *James Welling: Glass House* (exh. cat.), Bologna: Damiani, p.27.

Above and left: James Welling, *0865*, 2009, inkjet print, 83.8 × 126cm, and *0775*, 2006, inkjet print, 83.8 × 126cm, both from the series *Glass House*

proved less baffling to certain viewers, she argues, if those velvet folds were to have provided a backdrop for the display of some luxury commodity, such as 'a Cartier bracelet' — and such thwarted expectations are precisely the point.[7] For Solomon-Godeau 'the absence of the object' (i.e. the ostensibly 'missing' luxury item, rather than the pastry dough actually pictured) is 'synonymous with the absence of a subject', and is primarily 'a way of playing off what we expect the photograph to be setting up: a stable meaning, a "naturalised content"'.[8] Though understandable in light of the close bonds and shared concerns evident among the Pictures artists at the time, this insistence on the conspicuous absence of the luxury object now seems tantamount to advising the viewer faced with a photograph by Welling to think also (if not instead) of one by Kruger or Prince. Solomon-Godeau acknowledges Welling as the only one of the artists she discusses 'who makes, rather than takes (literally)', his photographs. Yet any links with the tradition of High Modernist art photography suggested by 'the exquisite, lapidary quality of his pictures', their 'apparent abstractness' and 'sharply focused perfection' are dismissed as misleading.[9] The sensuous beauty of much of Welling's work is accounted for as an ironic undermining of the codes of that very tradition, a mere by-product of Welling's personal contribution to his generation's communal enterprise — i.e. the critique of representation, broadly conceived. If this assessment seems increasingly difficult to square with Welling's professed indebtedness to the legacy of Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz, he is hardly the only Pictures artist whose early critical reception may be due some refinement.[10]

It might seem unfair to call to task an essay written in immediate and insightful response to a crucial moment in recent art history for insufficiently attending to significant differences among the work of those artists who would later come to define it. Such oversight, however, allowed for a corrective response in which these differences may have been overemphasised, thereby facilitating the recuperation of a

7 A. Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *op. cit.*, p.100.
8 Welling also, it should be noted, made photographs of unadorned drapery at this time.
9 A. Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *op. cit.*, p.97.
10 For Welling on Strand and Stieglitz, see 'James Welling Talks to Jan Tumlir', *op. cit.* p.216. A notable example of such reconsideration is Jeff Wall's reading of Sherrie Levine's appropriations of mid-century 'masters' of photography in terms of identification rather than criticality. See J. Wall, 'Frames of Reference', *Artforum*, vol.42, no.1, September 2003, pp.188—92.

critically postmodern Welling for a reading more consistent with an enduring Modernism.[11] For Michael Fried, for instance, Welling supplies a retrospective point of departure for an extension into the domain of photography of his persistent argument against the kind of 'theatrical' 'objecthood' negatively exemplified for him by classic Minimalist sculpture. By way of contrast he deems Welling's early Polaroid image *Lock* (1976), featuring a simple two-by-four-inch plank used to prop the door of his studio closed, commendable in its insistence on the specific features rather than generic nature of the object depicted. Despite Fried's suspicions about the Minimalist derivation of this choice of motif, the attention paid to the manifest traces of the object's unique history suggest that while Welling may indeed have 'come to photography through the eye of Minimalism' (Welling's phrase), he managed fairly quickly to 'come out on the other side' (Fried's words) into the world of 'real' as opposed to generic objects.[12] *Lock* is thus an exemplary instance of what Fried has come to see as 'good — as opposed to bad — objecthood', a category apparently unique to the medium of photography.[13] In the course of his commentary on *Lock*, Fried notes approvingly that 'the dark tonality of the image, which perhaps owes something to the example of Paul Strand ... compels the viewer to look extremely closely'.[14] Which brings us, in however roundabout a fashion, back to Andrew Wyeth, and to the interior of another studio, or set of studios.

For all the 'close looking' practised by the artist and solicited in turn from the viewer, Welling has never been averse to the transport of metaphor, to letting the mind wander and to picturing what is not there.

Despite the apparently casual invocation of Wyeth in his interview with Rexer, Welling had evidently been thinking for some time about the then-recently deceased regionalist painter, whom he cites as a formative influence, along with Charles Burchfield and Edward Hopper, during his adolescent years in West Simsbury, Connecticut. Welling's acknowledgement of his debt to Wyeth involves a telling distinction between his mature appreciation of the painter and a lesson learnt years earlier: '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.'[15] In 2010 Welling began a series of colour photographs of various subjects Wyeth had painted during his long career, as well as of the places where he had painted them. The latter include the Olson House in Cushing, Maine and the Kuerner Farm in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania; in both locations Wyeth produced hundreds of pictures over many decades. The resultant series of photographs was subsequently shown in tandem with a Wyeth exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, Connecticut, where he first encountered Wyeth's paintings in his teens.

In addition to the various images of the interiors, exteriors and environs of buildings where Wyeth lived and worked, Welling photographed the sites depicted in many of his pictures. In some instances he photographed the exact location, down to the precise tree, painted by Wyeth up to seventy years before. In others he chose to photograph a subject that reminded him of a motif favoured by the painter. There are also, however, images unmotivated by any specific precedent in Wyeth's oeuvre. One intriguing and, it seems, unanticipated outcome of this haunting of Wyeth's habitat was the revelation of specific pictorial devices Welling had unconsciously borrowed over the years. He notes, for example, that 'light, as a sculptural form', may be something he derived from Wyeth, and that his own abiding interest in 'frames and framing edges, windows and doorways finds a correspondence in some

11 See R. Deutsche, 'Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling', *op. cit.*, for objections on such grounds to readings of Welling's work by Walter Benn Michaels as well as Michael Fried.
12 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, p.304.
13 *Ibid.*
14 *Ibid.*, p.303.
15 J. Welling, *Wyeth* (exh. brochure), Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, unpaginated.

James Welling, *Barn 34, South Glastonbury, CT*, 2002, inkjet print, 63.5 × 73cm

of Wyeth's framing devices'.[16] He even goes so far as to remark on the 'uncanny resemblance' between the pastry-dough photographs and Wyeth's 'paintings of melting snow'.[17] This observation seems less surprising when we recall the evocative titles Welling gave to some of these early images, which include *The Waterfall*, *Wreckage* and *Island* (all 1981).

Remarks such as these may also serve to remind us that for all the 'close looking' practised by the artist and solicited in turn from the viewer, Welling has never been averse to the transport of metaphor, to letting the mind wander and to picturing what is not there, though not quite in the manner encouraged by Solomon-Godeau's reading of the pastry-dough photographs. Solomon-Godeau describes the aluminium-foil photographs that immediately preceded this series as 'photographs that were as close to being pictures about nothing as could possibly be contrived', arguing that their import was to highlight the fact that 'the photographic image simultaneously elicits and frustrates meaning, reveals and veils'.[19] Thirty years later Welling's *Wyeth* photographs may seem to have strayed a long way from such concerns. 'Can it be that James Welling, the Borges of contemporary photography and member of the so-called Pictures Generation is (gasp!) a *pictorialist*?', Rexer asks, with barely disguised glee, in a review of the Wadsworth Atheneum show.[20] Yet appearances can, as always, be deceptive,

16 *Ibid.*
17 *Ibid.*
18 For an elaboration on this point, see R. Deutsche, 'Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling', *op. cit.*, p.13.
19 A. Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *op. cit.*, p.100.
20 L. Rexer, 'James Welling: Wyeth', *Photograph*, July/August 2012, p.32.

James Welling, *Town Dock, Guilford, CT*, 2004, inkjet print, 63.5 × 73cm

and there is certainly more at stake in the Wyeth photographs than the generation of exquisite pictures. Welling is as concerned here as ever with speculations concerning that which lies beyond the photographic frame as that which might be contained within it. In the modest but fascinating book published on the occasion of a presentation of the Wyeth photographs in Tokyo, the majority of the images reproduced are accompanied by a brief gloss of two or three sentences each.[21] These texts, which are by turns informative, diaristic and ruminative, include the occasional flight of fancy into the realms of visual rhyme and iconic indeterminacy.

A grouping of four photographs of ceiling hooks, one of which is also reproduced on the book's back cover, prompts the following commentary:

Hooks, *2010. On the third floor of the Kuerner farmhouse, steel hooks jut out of the ceiling. They were used to dry laundry and to age sausages. The ominous hook shapes resemble letterforms, or runners on an old-fashioned sled.*[22]

The final image in the book, a photograph of a closed block of watercolour paper lying on a studio table, is provided with the description:

16 *Ibid.*
17 *Ibid.*
18 For an elaboration on this point, see R. Deutsche, 'Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling', *op. cit.*, p.13.
19 A. Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *op. cit.*, p.100.
20 L. Rexer, 'James Welling: Wyeth', *Photograph*, July/August 2012, p.32.
21 *Wyeth: James Welling* (exh. cat.), Tokyo: Wako Works of Art, unpaginated.
22 *Ibid.*

James Welling,
Lock, 1976,
8.3 × 5.7cm

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James Welling,
Revenant, 2010,
archival inkjet
print on rag paper,
106.7 × 71.1cm

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Strathmore Gemini, *2011. A table in the studio was covered with rolls of Fabriano paper and a worn block of Strathmore watercolour paper. Inside the block, I found a faint pencil drawing for an unfinished watercolour, a web of nebulous lines delineating a tree, or perhaps a witch's broomstick.*[23]

Welling is far too sophisticated an artist for these asides to be simply taken as the idle musings they purport to be. His Wyeth project as a whole is at once an act of homage to a surprising mentor and a continuation by characteristic indirection of his investigations of that same cluster of familiar issues that have dogged photography for decades: the relationship between photography and memory, the question of indexicality, the problem of the referent and so forth. This holds true even in the case of the most superficially serene but ultimately dizzying of the Wyeth pictures, titled *Revenant* (2010).

This is a photograph of the corner of a room in the Olson House, whose abutting walls respectively feature a closed sash window and a panelled door that is slightly ajar. All colour has been artificially leached from the image, leaving the viewer at pains to discern in the dazzling whiteness anything but the most rudimentary details of the room's architecture. While this photograph does indeed 'compel the viewer to look extremely closely', it also invites us to consider something that is not there and was never *really* there. As the accompanying catalogue text informs us, the photograph has its origins in an image painted by Wyeth more than sixty years earlier, once again reflecting Welling's fascination with various kinds of 'doubleness' and dual articulation:

Revenant, *2010. In 1949 Wyeth saw his reflection in a dusty mirror in the Olson House, and this became the basis for* The Revenant *(1949). I printed my photograph backwards to approximate the mirror image.*[24]

This image is thus a deliberately contrived restaging of an anterior image in another medium from which the dominant motif, the already ghostly figure of the white-clad painter, has vanished. Welling's 'revenant', unlike Wyeth's, fails to make an appearance in a photograph in which the 'holding at bay' of its manifest subject also reflects its latent subject, the subject of manifestation itself.

The earliest works by Welling addressed by Solomon-Godeau are the series of close-up photographs of a found text, *The Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840—41) / Connecticut Landscapes* (1977—86). In keeping with debates then current around questions of 'appropriation', she views this act of photographing writing as 'itself an operation of pastiche, or, as art-world parlance has it, the representation of representation'.[25] The fact that Welling paired each of these images of a diary written at the dawning of the age of photography with a more ostensibly 'straightforward' photograph of his own Connecticut landscapes, goes unmentioned. Welling's recent return to the depiction of the northeastern US landscape, this time around through the 'medium' of Andrew Wyeth, is consistent with his favouring of the term 'ventriloquism' over 'appropriation' in statements such as the following: 'when I discovered photography, I realised it was the perfect ventriloquist's medium. I could throw my voice into different sorts of pictures. I could speak in many different formal languages.'[26] The ventriloquist is an intriguing figure for Welling to invoke at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Whereas the gastromancer of ancient times was believed to be able to commune with the dead and to see into the future, the modern-day ventriloquist is a creator of illusions that are not really deceptive, by means that are no longer mysterious. Yet the most accomplished of ventriloquists can still be compelling as he speaks from the gut in the voices of others.

23 *Ibid.*
24 *Ibid.*
25 A. Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', *op. cit.*, p.100.
26 'James Welling Talks to Jan Tumlir', *op cit.*, p.217.

James Welling,
B35 April, 1980,
gelatin silver print,
12 × 10cm, from the
series *Aluminum Foil*.
All images unless
noted otherwise
courtesy the artist,
Maureen Paley,
London and David
Zwirner, New York