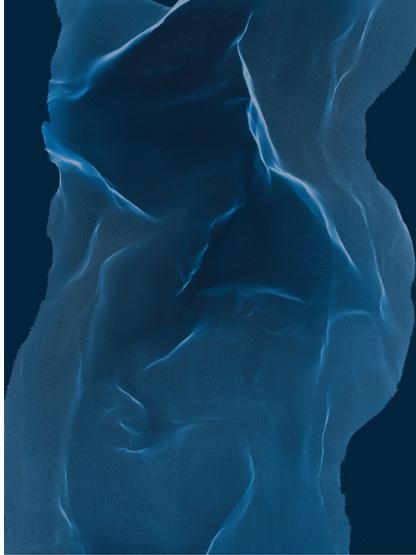


JAMES WELLING: *Works 1980 - 2008*

April 5 - May 1, 2008



In 1980, when I started thinking about making abstract photographs, I wanted to make work that did not look like “street photography.” I was interested in doing something “oppositional.”

I began by shooting aluminum foil, kelp, pastry dough, and salt. (I was a short order cook at the time.) The aluminum foils (*Untitled*, 1980-1981) were the most exciting to me, and I spent the next 18 months working on them. Overexposing the prints made them look less like aluminum foil, which left more room for multiple associations. Most people interpreted the images as landscapes or as pictures of starry skies.

A year later, I began to photograph drapery (*Untitled*, 1981). I have always been interested in the 19th century, and the drapery reminded me of 19th-century interiors. I don't remember why I used shards of pastry dough in the folds of the fabric, but I liked the fact that the resulting images looked like broken glass or torn sheets of writing paper. These drapery images connoted ruin and entropy and, like the aluminum foils, they left much for the viewer to interpret. With the later drapery images (*High Contrast*, 1981-1982),

I used black cloth and high-contrast film and printed them in the colors I associated with the nascent digital technology that was developing at the time. The drapery disappeared and the viewer was left looking at swirling clusters of dough.

After the draperies, I made photographs of ink-infused gelatin that was sculpted and arranged on seamless backdrop paper (*Gelatin Photographs*, 1984). Gelatin forms the colloidal support for all photographic processes, and it took on the appearance of coal or black glass when I darkened it. Again, high-contrast film gave the work a very stark feeling.

In 1987, I returned to photographing drapery with *Roman Numerals* (1987-1988) — elegiac images of rust colored fabric. My father became sick that year, and I'm sure that this work reflects my feelings about his imminent death.

Over the next ten years, I worked on different documentary subjects: railroads, 19th-century architecture, factories, and agriculture. Then in 1998, I returned to abstraction with *New Abstractions*. These were photograms — camera-less photographs — which were made by randomly scattering strips of paper onto photographic film. The architectonic and spatially ambiguous images that resulted led me to other camera-less photographs — *Degrades* (1986-2006), *Screens* (2004), *Flowers* (2004-2007).

In 2005, I began *Torsos* (2005-2008). With *Screens* (2004) I had already worked with large pieces of window screen, which I had photographed in formless, all-over compositions. I now wanted to treat this material less as a surface and more as a shape or silhouette. I cut and bent the screens into forms resembling human torsos and then used them to make photograms.

After making the *Torsos*, I realized that they were reminiscent of the aluminum foil, drapery, and gelatin series. Like those earlier works, these new abstract photos have a sensuality and tactility that could be associated with sculpture. My photographs have almost always been described in purely visual or photographic terms, but perhaps the *Torsos* (and the other work in the show) straddle both photography and sculpture.

— James Welling