The Wyeth Project
Arthur Ou meets JAMES WELLING

James Welling was born 1951 in Hartford, Connecticut, and is head of the photography department at UCLA in Los Angeles. In the 1980s, Welling established himself with work that engaged a panoply of subjects ranging from abstraction to landscape, maintaining throughout a particular interest in the Nineteenth Century. In 1998 he produced New Abstractions, a series of enlarged photograms, and at the same time also started an ongoing body of works, New Landscapes (subsequently re-titled Connecticut Landscape) where he returned to places that were important to him in his youth. For Fantom, Arthur Ou interviews Welling on his recent project, which is based on the life and the paintings of Andrew Wyeth. They converse about Welling’s past influences and interests, and the importance of locations in his projects.

ARTHUR OU: Can you begin by talking about how the Wyeth project started?
JAMES WELLING: I came to photography through an early interest in figurative painting. As I was a teenager I was very interested in the figurative painters Andrew Wyeth, Charles Burchfield and Edward Hopper; I hadn’t really thought much about Wyeth in over 30 years but a few years ago I began to look at his work again - especially his expressive watercolors. It is absolutely amazing what he could do with paint. Recently I finally realized that I wanted to make a project about Wyeth in the places he painted: Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Maine. After some initial research, I was able to get permission from the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine to photograph the Olson House where Wyeth painted for over twenty years and where he made his iconic painting, Christina’s World. Then this year I visited his studio in Pennsylvania. The building was very modest in scale and was a former schoolhouse that he had converted into a painting studio. He died two years ago, so the studio has since been cleaned out. I also photographed in and around Chadds Ford in the areas where Wyeth worked for over 70 years.

Was there also a connection to these places because you grew up in the Northeast?
Wyeth painted exclusively in Pennsylvania and Maine. I grew up in Connecticut, which was similar to both of these places. As a teenager, I also made watercolors; you can say that I had my own Andrew Wyeth world. The process of working extensively in a location or place might be an influence from Wyeth, and having the location as subject matter was something I was interested in from the very beginning. I think in this project I am trying to untangle the initial origins of interest in ‘place.’
In the project there seems to be a back and forth between looking at the subject matter in Wyeth's work to the actual rooms and interiors where the work was made. I mentioned Wyeth's more expressive side, but there is a solidity in his work in egg tempera that is built up from very small brushstrokes - extremely labor intensive. There is this incredible dimensionality to the paint and in the best paintings it takes on a sculptural quality.

When I look at this work I can't help but think about the notion of influence. There is a latent sense of affection in these photographs to the subjects they depict, and to Wyeth, who occupied these places for so many years. You said earlier that Wyeth was one of the very first artists that had a significant impact on you. Do you see this project as a return to the beginnings of your artistic practice?

In the beginning looking at Wyeth allowed me to perceive the world in a different way. I think in a larger sense, this is what visual art does, especially at a young age. It gives you an enlarged sense of what's possible, in seeing and in making. I think we all can remember moments when you discover a new way of seeing, and that is what Wyeth was for me when I was 15. A few years later, when I was in my early 20's, I discovered other forms of art, particularly photography, and the photographers Walker Evans and László Moholy-Nagy became very important to me. But underneath all was the underpinning that Wyeth had provided.

These two groups of artists (Wyeth, Hopper and Burchfield, and Walker Evans and Moholy-Nagy) seem to be an apt analogy to your practice. They point directly to the intersection of your interests in painting and photography.

Recently, the painter Charline von Heyl gave a talk at the Hammer Museum and, instead of providing a chronological artist talk, she talked about the other artists and cultural artifacts that provided her with inspiration. All of my life I have had changing passions for different artists, it's the secret life that keeps going everyday. I am continually looking at different things, discovering things, returning to things - artists that I have put down a few years ago, I return to again. Looking at other people's work is an important part of my practice. When I was younger this looking was entirely through books because I wasn't able
to see the actual physical work. Now I see much more work - student work, shows at the Hammer, LACMA, etc., but in the beginning it was simply looking at books, being able to open up a book by Moholy-Nagy and one by Andrew Wyeth - colliding the work by different artists. This formative collision of artists' work is similar to what goes on in my mind. I don't think I am unique in this, a lot of artists look to other people's work for diversion or inspiration.

Many of your projects throughout the years have dealt directly with landscape, from the series Agricultural Works to some of the images from Connecticut Landscape. There are of course projects working within the studio and experiments in the darkroom. Could you describe the relationship between these differing approaches?

I think that much of the darkroom work is related to the basic desire to make paintings, and that the work with darkroom materials more as painterly activities. However, underlying all of these interests is a foundational idea of landscape. A few years later, after the initial interest in Wyeth, I became interested in Tony Smith, the sculptor. For me his sculptures become focal points for the landscape. This idea became the rationale for my Glasshouse project where the Glasshouse becomes a prism or a lens through which to view the landscape. This brings to mind a poem by Wallace Stevens, which looks at a jar in the landscape and how the jar changes the space around it. The jar can become the tree, the rock, the nominal subject in the landscape, as in Wyeth's work.

Does the jar become the self? A stand-in for the observer?
Not only for the observer but for the observed. I think the jar is always in an active relationship with making meaning. The poem is called, Anecdote of the Jar.

I placed a jar in Tennessee, / And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness / Surmount that hill.
The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground / And tall and of a part in ev.
It took dominion everywhere. / The jar was gray and bare. / It did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The idea of the jar taking dominion, taking control over the landscape seems to be the important idea for me.

In thinking about your H.H. Richardson project and many of the images from the Wyeth project, is there also this interest in the vernacular architecture that is particular to the Northeast?

What is interesting about the term 'vernacular' is that it is a term from linguistics - it is what local people speak, variations on the common language. When I drive around Los Angeles I feel that the buildings are talking to me - from the things that people create in their window displays to the exterior of the buildings (which of course they often cannot control because they are living in a rental apartment) - there is a distinct vernacular flavor to a particular place. Visiting a new city, I can feel the cacophony of linguistic utterances in the form of architecture. That is one of the things that has always interested me in looking at and photographing architecture, because it relates to linguistics and it relates to aspirations that people have and how the culture unconsciously thinks of itself. This is a fantastic vocabulary that you can see in the landscape in the very broad sense. But architecture - the so-called built environment - is very important in giving the landscape voice. Unless you go to wilderness, which I generally don't do, all landscapes are built by people. They have a tenor or a tone. There is that famous anecdote about a musician listening to the sound of New York from the observation deck of the Empire State Building and declaring it 'E' Sharp. Every landscape has a distinct tone.