In spite of his six-foot-plus height, you might easily overlook James Welling in a crowded room. With his shaggy gray hair and tortoiseshell glasses, he looks every bit the UCLA tenured professor that he is. Indeed, Welling in person is a gentle, fairly unassuming guy with an easy demeanor. Yet he has played a seminal role over the last two decades in redefining the way we look at art.

Welling is among a handful of artists who have brought photography from the outer edges, where it lived as a kind of happy stepchild, to the center of the contemporary dialogue. A pair of museum retrospectives recently highlighted Welling’s contribution: James Welling: Photographs, 1974–1999 originated at the Weener Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, in 2000 and traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and in 2002 the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, Belgium, hosted a sweeping, 160-work retrospective.

Remarkably, Welling consistently produces 180-degree changes throughout his oeuvre. His images range from impromptu studio shots of drapery to tabletop landscapes of aluminum foil, from pure geometric abstractions to straight-on images of trains. Just as radically, while most photographers work in a single format, Welling has moved assuredly through formats and processes—from Polaroid to 6x7, from black-and-white 35mm to color photographs. Throughout, his work exhibits a formal precision and clarity that is nothing short of breathtaking.

A full-time Southern California resident, Welling grew up in New York and comes back often to visit family and friends. It was during one of these trips that he graciously found a few moments to sit down and answer some questions. He’s represented here by Gorney Bravin + Lee Gallery, where he recently exhibited photographs from his Los Angeles series, and they were kind enough to turn over their back room to us for this interview.
JAMES WELLING: It’s a rainy Wednesday in New York.

DEVEN GOLDBERG: And I’m going to start with a little background. You’ve talked about leaving Carnegie Mellon, where you had grown sick of painting and sculpture, and heading out to California Institute of the Arts in 1971. And yet even at CalArts you never studied—

JW: Photography.

DG: What were you studying in art school?

JW: I took a drawing class with Gandy Brodie, who was a visiting professor my first year. Gandy was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, an amazing teacher who’d studied with Hans Hofmann, worked for Martha Graham and knew Pollock. The next year I worked with two younger post-Minimalists, John Stevenson and Robert Tharing. I started doing impermanent sculptures and painting gray monochromes.

DG: And then CalArts?

JW: I began to do video there. I had a Honda.

DG: Portraits?

JW: Yes. And some performances. I became friends with Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, David Salle, Barbara Bloom, Susan Lacy. Paul McCarthy was there too. John Baldessari was my mentor. Occasionally I would borrow a camera to take pictures, but only to document the impermanent stuff that I was doing.

DG: We’re about the same age, and I clearly remember that photography was not considered a fine art in the early ’70s. It was respected but ghettoized. The only time you’d see photography in art venues was in documentation for performances and installations, and sometimes it was just printed contact sheets of a performance. You actually became part of the shift of photography entering the mainstream of fine arts. Were you aware of this? I mean, everyone you were hanging out with was definitely in the art world.

JW: I knew some photographers at CalArts, like Mani Ratnem and Ben Lifson, but when I did something with photographs it was to make a “piece,” not a “picture.” As I was leaving CalArts, I discovered Paul Strand’s Mexico Portfolio in the library. That changed my life. So I began to understand what modernist photography could be fused with conceptual practice. That was my big insight around ’76 or ’77.

DG: That seems to be what you’re still doing. You are regarded as being very exacting and precise in your process, which belies your conceptual beginnings. But the traditional photographers, like the FOI Group, who historically inform your work would choose a film format as if it were a manifesto and continue to work in that vein. You, however, choose a different process and format for every body of work—a conceptual take on formal photography. You’re investigating both the image and the process that describes the image. But which comes first? Do you settle on the subject and then find the format, or do you select the format and look for the subject, or is there a process where you find them together?

JW: I think it starts with subject matter. I’m already working with some camera format from a previous body of work and either that format works or it doesn’t work for the new series. For economic and technical reasons, when I began to take photography seriously I started shooting 4x5. Paradoxically, the large format seemed easier to work with than 35mm. But to answer your question with a specific example, when I began shooting railroads in 1982, 4x5 wasn’t appropriate because I needed more flexibility. I needed to walk and shoot quickly. So I used a Pentax 6x7. With the Light Source pictures, I used the Pentax but printed the images as inkjet. So there are a number of variables I work with. I see the subject through the shape of the camera format, and then I consider the process that manifests it: gelatin silver print, iris print, Cibachrome, dye transfer.

DG: You say it’s matter-of-fact, but few photographers work that way. It seems that you stick to your early conceptual roots; you’re an artist who makes his work with photography. Your photographs are documents as much as they are photographs, in that they’re recording an event as much as an image—for instance, the early work when you were shooting setups, like Waterfall, with its velvet drapery and phytolux. There is almost a remove there; the photography is secondary to the act itself.

JW: When I arranged the drapery and then photographed it, I was documenting a private performance. But you can extend that idea and say that’s the case for all photographs. A photograph records both the thing in front of the camera and the conditions of its making. That’s why certain Cartier-Bresson or Atget images have their special character. A photograph is also a document of the state of mind of the photographer. And if you were to extend the idea of the set-up photograph beyond just physically setting up the picture, I would argue that the photographer wills the picture into being.

DG: So your work is a documentation of your behavior, and the photographs become about what you’re looking at. By extension, then, there’s nothing for viewers to ascribe a narrative to other than their own reaction to what they’re looking at, which is what you were looking at. There’s no other player, no other subject: it’s just the picture, the viewer, and the viewer. I’m wondering how conscious you are of setting that up and what you are looking to push. People think of your work as very formal and cool, but I’ve been getting other feelings from looking at it.

JW: Charlotte Rampling gave an interview in which she talks about how she has no idea what she’s doing with her face or her body when she’s acting. That’s a sense that she’s completely outside herself. I often feel that way when I make a photograph. I prefer photographing emotional things. Maybe they don’t appear emotional at first glance...

DG: ...Or on the other hand, I do like to control things, and that’s probably the formal aspect that you mention.

JW: Let’s talk about “at first glance.” Your most recent photographs, the urban landscapes taken in Los Angeles, have an uncanny effect: there’s an image that one sees immediately, and then there’s a second image one picks up afterward. For instance, I first see a flat stone fence, and then I suddenly realize that I’m looking at a bicycle behind the fence. What strikes me as odd about a lot of your work is that the focal point seems akin to your peripheral vision: it’s in the margins that impact you without your full realization. There’s something strangely distanced about foregrounding that information, but it also brings something out almost from underneath consciousness, because it’s peripheral, and yet you’ve brought it to the center. You’re saying, “This is something I’m noticing without realizing I’m noticing it.”

JW: I want to record things in the photo-
graph that unfold over time. The ideal work for me is a photograph that takes the viewer through several stages of understanding in untying it. Experience is layered, so the goal is a layered photograph that could work on a couple of levels of meaning, not simultaneously but sequentially. You think about it, you walk away from the picture, you come back to it. Things that are interesting to consider visually reveal themselves over time. I have a photograph called Slice, which is a nice wordplay on the subject. I photographed a grid over an elevator light, which is technically called a slice. But it’s also baffling to make visual sense of. The picture you mentioned earlier, Bike, has a slice in front of it too: it’s a honeycomb wall that allows you to see through it. It’s like the structure of the photographic negative itself, where molecules of silver cast shadows on paper to form an image.

DG: Your work has a very deadpan quality. It often seems to be about absolutely nothing, very unsuggestive or innocuous. Some of the railroad situations look as if they could have been taken by a railway enthusiast. It’s only after a little while that I begin to see. At first, I’m not sure what I’m being presented with. And then, as I look at it, there’s this seeping activity in my consciousness, and that’s when it develops its other aspects. I want to talk about this word Slice, because you perhaps unintentionally set up a maze by changing format, subject, process... With many photographers, one may feel comfortable looking at their work because they have preset parameters. You, on the other hand, are a changeup pitcher. Someone would have to be very, very tuned into your work to recognize right off the bat that a new body of work is from you.

JW: Nicholas Logsdail told me that the worst thing one collector can say when looking at another’s collection is “What’s that?” Everyone has a recognizable style, a signature. It’s difficult when an artist changes his or her work a lot.

DG: And you’ve thrown the whole process into it, not just the subject matter.

JW: What I like about photography, the thing that fascinates me, is that I can move from one body of work to another.

DG: It’s not anything you see, but you know that something’s about to happen.

JW: I wanted to capture the texture of Foreboding. I would take a photograph of a big van and see it embodying the fear that Ashcroft and company has instilled in us. The process was just putting the camera in my car; I’d see something; I’d stop and take a photograph. There was no plan whatsoever, just an 8x10 camera and a 12-inch lens.

DG: It’s interesting, because I can think of almost no political art that is successful. There’s something about attempting to make an overt political statement that makes the work dependent on linear narrative and that destroys what makes the work art. You came at it as you come at everything else, which is from a peripheral stance. You have the thought, you leave it at that, and then you go out and look at the world. I think again of those 35mm contact sheets—they become a record of, not a performance, but an existence. Which goes back to some of the earlier historical photographers that you’re interested in, like Walker Evans, who didn’t separate themselves from their environment; they were simply part of what they were documenting. When we look at their work, we feel that they have somehow embedded the essence of their era in the way they look at the world. But it struck me as odd, the more I thought about it, that your work was doing that on this very quiet level.

JW: There are a lot of currents in the Los Angeles photographs. I felt that I was having a dialogue with the New Topographics photographers—Stephane Shore, Joe Deal, Cathy O’ epithelial—well as portraying that anxiety.

DG: One thing that strikes me about your work is that it’s almost always all ground and no figure. About 15 years ago Thomas McEvilley gave a long lecture in Chicago where he was talking about how the times have a big effect on the figure/ground relationship: chaotic times produced weak figure/ground relationships; strong, clear political times caused there to be very sharp figure/ground relationships. He went from cave paintings up to Schnäbel; it was an amazing lecture. It struck me as having a real truth to it. Now here’s your work, where the figure/ground relationship is almost nil, and yet at the same time it’s always about you, the photographer, being the figure—you’re the focal point and then by extension so is the viewer of the work.

JW: Right. In my abstract photographs there’s virtually no figure. They’re all ground.
DG: The abstract work highlights this approach, but these days you are doing representational and abstract work simultaneously. Are you thinking about setting them in opposition? Or is it just that you have two ongoing bodies of work and you mix them together?

JW: Lately I have been working on both types of work concurrently. I’ve discovered that one doesn’t have to erase the other. In the past I did a few years of abstract work and then switch over to documentary stuff. In 1998 I began two simultaneous projects, one abstract—New Abstractions—and one representational, New Landscapes. With the New Landscapes I began showing the black border of the negative as part of the image, something I’d never done before. I began to realize that the edge of the negative represents the shadow of the camera, the opaqueness of matter. It casts a shadow on the negative, so it’s a photograph as well. With the New Abstractions I was working with photographs, and the black shapes in those pictures were directly related to the black edge of the negative in the New Landscapes. Since 1998 I’ve become sensitized to the idea of the photograph as a shadow of the world existing with the optical image made by the camera lens.

DG: The work is about the viewer—you’re the first viewer, and the subsequent viewers are the people in the gallery. I think of the viewer as an actor in your case because the work is so mute that it requires the viewer to also be a participant. You were the first participant in the creation of the work, and the viewer is the second. It’s so clearly a projection; there’s a reflective quality. And it seems to me that the photographs from the Los Angeles series act as a mirror; while, say, the photographs from the 1993 Degrade series are more like a two-way mirror. It’s a double reflection—you see yourself, but you see through it at the same time. This idea of the reflective, flat quality of the photograph—it’s almost as if you’re taking photographs from two sides of the same mirror and they come out differently, but they are emotionally similar.

JW: That’s a good way of characterizing them. I’m so involved in their making that it’s hard for me to be exterior in that sense. I mean, it’s the viewer’s job to sort out those distinctions.

DG: I agree. I am just curious because you’ve clearly thought so much about how you make your work and where you’re going with it.

DG: Yeah, but I don’t know where I’m going with it next. I work intuitively. I don’t know every move in advance.

DG: Well, you start out doing it, but then you realize what you’re doing. My interest is in how concept and process, the physical act and the conceptual act, come together. Art is a thought process, a nonlinear way of thinking about things. And when you write it down, as this interview is going to be written down, it begins linear. It’s difficult to experience in text because in your photograph there’s no place to come into it and there’s no place to leave it. It’s wherever. That’s why it has that strange, overwhelming peripheral quality, even the abstract work. There’s this inner vision. You’ve made this tightrope walk between what it was you were thinking about at the time and how you’re going to express that without creating a literal narrative. I think that’s a very heightened aspect of this way of thinking.

JW: That you think what I’m doing is unusual indicates just how radically the concept of photography has changed in the last 80 years. Everyone is familiar with the New Objectivity of the 1920s, but between that moment and today is an incredibly rich vein of work that is pretty much discredited and forgotten about. Subjective Photography of the 1950s is a repressed memory today. It’s hard to grapple with a lot of that work—it’s messy, and some of it wasn’t very good. But the history of photography didn’t begin with Ed Ruscha or the Bechers.

DG: It feels like you’ve dispensed with the outer subject; you’re not looking for people to photograph in order to document the experience of our time, you’re documenting your experience of the time. It’s not a diary, it’s more of an abstracted journal of what you’re existing in, a journey through the process rather than something set up beforehand. That’s one of the more intriguing things about the work and one of the harder things to put your finger on when you’re looking at it.

JW: With the Los Angeles pictures I felt like I didn’t need to be anywhere in particular to make a work that expresses this sense of foreboding, I’ll find something while walking down the street and that will be it. So to some extent I have gotten rid of the subject out in front of the camera. And that goes back to some of my earliest work, where I got rid of the figure and it’s just all ground.