James Welling’s work has been creeping up on me. When I first came to New York, in the early ’90s, starting out as a lowly preparator at Annina Nosei gallery, there was a lot of leftover in-your-face ’80s art vying for my attention: Mapplethorpe, Basquiat, Haring, Kruger, Halley, Salle, Sherman. Even then much of that work seemed pumped full of performance enhancers, strategically designed to eclipse everything else around it. Certainly to eclipse Welling, whose oddly impersonal train-track pictures of the time read like subtle postcards from another century, shot by vagabond ghosts and developed in prairie darkroom shacks back before the camera was even invented. Over the course of the past decade, Welling’s work has, show by show, methodically come to seem more in sync with its time and place. And I have come to understand its smoldering intensity, to respect its stubborn autonomy, even as I remain perpetually mystified as to exactly how he does it.

Jeremy Sigler: I discovered that we both worked at Annina Nosei Gallery as our first job in New York.

James Welling: That’s right. I was hired in 1979. Kim Gordon started right before I did. Kim did clerical things and I helped with installations and packing. After I started showing at Metro Pictures, just down the street, it got a little uncomfortable. The two galleries were in competition for some of the same artists. I was gently told that I might want to find another job.

JS: So much was happening around Annina’s then.

JW: She was the first to show Barbara Kruger’s image-text pieces, Troy Brauntuch, Jean-Michel Basquiat. She also showed Lynne Hirschmann and Mimmo Paladino. In the late ’70s, there was a very international scene in SoHo. Dan Graham was organizing clubs and shows with lots of European bands. My friend Paul McMahon took me to an amazing concert for Dutch TV: No Wave bands such as Ut, the Static, Theoretical Girls, the Raybeats, and performances by Remko Scha, Jill Kroesen, others I’ve forgotten. I remember the first time I heard Glenn Branca [founder of the Static and Theoretical Girls]. I was interested in making images that went directly to an emotional place without any intervening subject matter, and Branca’s music seemed to do exactly that.

JS: So you were involved in the experimental music scene?

JW: Sure. When I was at CalArts in the early ’70s, Morton Subotnik came out from the University of Pittsburgh, which at the time had a serious electronic music program. Subotnik joined people like James Tenney, who was already at CalArts. That kind of exposure prepared me for what was happening in New York.

Even before that, though, when I was 18, John
Cage and Merce Cunningham spent a week at Carnegie Mellon, where I was an undergrad, as artists-in-residence. In an impromptu concert one night, Cage found a chain in the dance studio and dragged it over piano strings—very inspiring to a kid from the suburbs. After seeing Cunningham perform, I started taking dance classes. I was the only male dancer in my class, and instantly they had me performing onstage. After a year I realized I wasn’t cut out to be a dancer. At the time, I was rebelling against painting. My first painting professor at Carnegie Mellon was Gandy Brodie, a charismatic second-generation Abstract Expressionist and a friend of Willem de Kooning who seemed to me very conservative. By the time I went to CalArts I was ready to give up painting.

JS: Can we go back even further into your past—into your childhood?

JW: My grandfather aspired to be an American Impressionist painter. He died before I was born, but his paintings and palette loomed large in my imagination as a kid. My father took up watercolors when I was about 5, and I vividly remember standing beside a rushing river while he painted. A few years later, I took his enamel watercolor palette and started using it myself. As a teenager, I was interested in the early sound-based paintings by Charles Burchfield. Burchfield interpreted moods and nature sounds—cicadas, frogs, wind—with certain shorthand markings, to actually create paintings of sound.

JS: Tell me about when you arrived in New York, in 1978. I’m always surprised that you were “discovered” so quickly, since your work at the time was so understated. Yet a lot of opportunity came your way right from the start.

JW: Well, I waited a few years before moving to New York. I entered a scene that was already forming, thanks to people like David Salle, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, Paul McMahon, and John Baldessari, whom I TA’d for at CalArts. Many of these people are being shown together at the Met this month in an exhibition called “The Pictures Generation.”

JS: Actually, I see a kind of earnestness in your work that contradicts many of the ideas that were characteristic of the “Pictures” generation—specifically, the conviction that photographs are somehow insincere artifacts.

JW: Well, I’m not sure my work is completely earnest. Like a lot of my peers, I value intelligence over earnestness. My work might be somewhat different from the “Pictures” generation artists, but I think we all grappled with the need to rethink the expressive possibilities of artmaking.

JS: Maybe it’s both earnest and intelligent.

JW: Yes, that makes me think of how Michel Foucault once described Gilles Deleuze as a ventriloquist. I like that thought. I’m interested in images that I can throw different voices onto.

JS: Let’s talk about when you started to use gelatin, phyllo dough, aluminum foil. I get this feeling of deadpan formalism hiding a mad scientist at work.

JW: At the time, in late 1979, I was working in New York as a short-order cook. Trying to break out of referent-based photography, I started using things around the restaurant to make geometric, abstract images.

JS: When I first saw those images, I had no idea what I was looking at. I figured they were a nod to Bauhausian formalism, to Moholy-Nagy.

JW: Well, I never had any formal training in photography, Bauhaus or otherwise. The aluminum foil photographs really came out of a different set of interests: Mallarme, gnosticism, fractal geometry...

JS: A wild assortment of contradictory influences tugging you in various directions. And then there’s your reference to Renaissance painting, at least the drapery, with its many small folds providing this suspense about the volumes hidden underneath.

JW: Actually, I’m very interested in the Renaissance notion of the picture as a transparent window. But one of my big issues is photography’s reliance on lens-based image systems. My abstract photographs and photograms remove the camera and the lens to question the idea of transparency in photography. Ironically, I started out being fascinated by the camera, but most of my recent work is cameraless.

JS: When I think of you working in your darkroom, I’m reminded of that famous scene in Antonioni’s Blow Up, where the main character enlarges his photograph to reveal the telling detail.

JW: Yes, for many years, I didn’t use an enlarger; I made contact prints. And the whole point of making a contact print is that they are so perfectly resolved that there is no ambiguity. I didn’t see Blow Up until much later, so I couldn’t call it an influence. I was, however, extremely interested in the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination and how the film frames were enlarged and reprocessed in the pages of Life magazine.

JS: I remember discovering that issue of Life in a drawer in my house growing up. I studied those film stills. They were pretty horrifying, and yet far more engaging than any photograph I’d ever looked at, at the time.

JW: I think this was the first time the general public was exposed to electronic image processing.

JS: Can we talk about your “Flowers” series? What is your procedure to make them?

JW: I compose flowers on an 8-x-10-inch sheet of Tri-X and then print the film with colored filters behind the negative.

JS: And in the “Torsos” series, do you use the same technique but with wire screen instead of flowers?

JW: Each Torsos is a piece of window screen, shaped and folded and placed onto photographic paper. The screen resembles a photographic negative in the way it breaks up light and in the way it can be printed upside down or backward. The Flowers do this too, of course, but to very different affect.

JS: Yes, instead of colorful flowers with sun rays bursting through, the Torsos have the hue of intense blue moonlight. They’re nocturnes.

JW: Night vision. The screens explore tactility—the sense of touch rather than sight. I think of them as bodies without intelligence or language—sensual bodies.
