JAMES WELLING IN CONVERSATION WITH LYNNE TILLMAN

LYNNE TILLMAN: Can you say, Jim, why you became an artist?

JAMES WELLING: That's a difficult question. I've never been asked.

LT: Was there something in your past that drew you to it?

JW: I liked to draw in elementary school, and my grandfather was a Sunday painter. We had his paintings in the house, but he died before I was born. I was very close to my grandmother, his wife, and she would tell me stories about him. My uncle is an artist, and my father, when I was about five years old, took up watercolors. One of my earliest memories is standing with him by a river as he painted.

LT: Then there was art around you, thinking and talking about it, too.

JW: Yes. My father worked for a printing company. He was a salesman. His company did a lot of catalogues for museums and galleries. The first darkroom and the first camera I ever saw were in the printing plant.

LT: There are many reasons why you would have become interested in photography, in making art.

JW: I think one of the reasons it took me so long to get to photography is that, when I went into that first darkroom at my Dad's plant, I saw a process camera that had HELL written on the front of it. I remember feeling terrified at seeing the word "hell" spelled out. Later I learned that Hell was the name of a Swiss company that made the camera.

LT: That's very funny. But what did you mean when you said that was "one of the reasons it took me so long to get to photography"?

JW: When I was at Cal Arts, I did some photo pieces and made videos. After graduation, I didn't have access to video equipment, and I struggled with what to do. At Cal Arts, no one was interested in craft. You'd have someone else print your photos. And when it finally occurred to me that I could make my own photographs, that I could set up a darkroom and make prints, it was tremendously liberating.

LT: What is it, do you think, you're looking for when you make a picture?

JW: One of the things I want is to make what I see, to give it a physical form. I also want to, I don't know if "manipulate" is the right word, but I want to control it, to organize and massage what I see and put it on a piece of paper.

LT: In a sense, to change what you see around you.

JW: To change it in response to what I'm seeing, not necessarily to improve it, but to make it my own.

LT: The range in your work is very broad. If you have a signature style, I think, it's to defy one. Do you want to reject the notion of a signature?

JW: Perhaps, from the outside, it looks like I work in different styles, that I'm rejecting a signature style, but I think the longer I make photographs, the more it seems to me implicit in the materials of photography that you can do very different things
with it. I myself am incapable of settling on just one way of working with the medium.

LT: Do you think it's because you're a restless person?

JW: I don't know. Maybe I am a restless person. I never formally studied photography, so perhaps that helps me to work more freely. When I start something, I want to jump a few chapters forward. I'm able to see that if you can do this, then, of course, that would necessarily follow. If I'd been trained technically, I might never have skipped those steps. There's also the fact that I always have multiple projects going on at the same time, and this is probably another reason why people have the impression that I don't have a signature style. And I keep finding new things to do with photography.

LT: Thinking about the Flowers, I realize there's a fusion of representational and abstract elements, so they demonstrate, in a sense, your position. At first glance, the images appear easy to read, let's say, unlike the aluminum foil pieces (Untitled, 1980–81), but then the flowers become more abstract and aren't as recognizable.

JW: So these images become more abstract because they become more like other things that are not necessarily flowers?

LT: That's right. I began to see ink blots, figures, and the more I looked, the less stable they were as images. Does the speed of reading an image matter to you a lot?

JW: A long time ago, I read something by Wallace Stevens, where he wrote that he wanted to delay the reading, or the intelligence, of the poem as long as possible. This was an important idea for me when I started taking photographs. I do want to slow down that kind of recognition. I wanted to do something that would "un-peel" the image, because I've never thought of a photograph as just a straightforward or simple record of what you see.

LT: Or something that could announce its meaning instantly.

JW: Yes.

LT: I wonder what your reaction is when people look at the Flowers and say, "That's beautiful." How do you feel about that, the question of beauty?

JW: I know people often use the word "beautiful" to describe my work, but I think that sort of stops you from thinking more deeply about the pictures themselves or what I'm doing with these particular images. The Flowers are beautiful in a bright, luminous sort of way that is very different from other series of mine, like the aluminum foil pieces. Those are much darker. They're right pictures, very different from Flowers.

LT: And things you can't really decipher.

JW: Right.
LT: The Flowers and some of your other more abstract images don't make me think about the past or death. Instead, they argue for the present-ness of a photograph. It seems to me that's a way you work to counter certain fixed or conventional ideas about photography. I wondered if that is part of your project.

JW: That's a really great observation. It's a truism that photography records the past, but I don't think about Flowers in this way. As you say, they're in the present, and this is something that is very different from most of my other work which does look backward.

LT: The Flowers don't, I think. Some of your images do look back, do appear to record time passing and make us conscious of time, as in the Railroad Photographs (1987–94), or the Architectural Photographs/Buildings by H. H. Richardson (1988–94). For one thing, those photographs focus on unmovable objects. But flowers move, the wind might blow them. Looking at them, I don't think about the passing of time.

JW: Yet flowers are so transitory.

LT: Yes, but the way in which you have manipulated them, they turn into other things right before your eyes, so they feel present, happening and mutating as you look at them. You're working with an illusion, creating one.

JW: I think this present-ness probably happens more when you're in the process of deciphering and seeing something that is, as you said, changing before your eyes. You see it as leaves, then it becomes a kind of mass of darks and lights, and other forms start to emerge.

LT: There's a lot of emotion in many of your pictures, for example, in both Calais Lace Factories (1993) and Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840–41)/Connecticut Landscapes (1977–86). They nearly ache with what's missing, what's gone. Do you work to achieve those feelings?

JW: I want those feelings in the pictures, so I take them in a specific way, but that idea is not with me every time I take one.

LT: What about the New Landscapes series you began in 1997? In those, you go back to places in Connecticut, your hometown, so to speak.

JW: Yes, I have been photographing certain places I knew when I was young, probably trying to construct pictures that bring back that time for me. So those feelings are there because I wanted them there. For me, my own feelings enter and locate emotional depth in some, most, or all of those images, in various ways. Someone interested in a more impersonal photograph would eliminate the emotion; it just wouldn't be there. I have always been drawn to having some emotional depth in my photographs.
LT: The Calais Lace Factories are formally magnificent, in the way they create planes, volume, shadows, and use light. I'm thinking especially about "Quality Control," with the woman standing in the background. She's the vanishing point.

JW: She's watching for flaws.

LT: Again, formally, it's a spectacular composition. It also brings a solemnity to this solitary worker, her place inside a large, impersonal industrial space.

JW: She's staring at the machine dreamily. I'm sure she's not dreaming, she's very purposefully doing her job, but there's also a kind of reverence involved in the way she is looking at the lace as it passes in front of her.

LT: Maybe as a novelist, I look for or see stories everywhere. Your more representational images, I think, encourage narrative readings. They definitely play with a sense of memory and loss. How do you think about narrative in relationship to your work?

JW: I think it's different from written narrative. I'm interested in more circular, repetitive structures.

LT: How do you mean repetitive?

JW: As you were mentioning, in the Diary series, the New Landscapes, and the Calais Lace Factories, I wanted to hit particular emotional notes, and I like to return to those notes. I don't think I need a structure to get there. I hope I can make a photograph which produces that feeling without relying on a linear train of thought. Narrative is more like stringing together notes in the form of a sequence of photographs. But if I hit those notes too frequently, it might become boring. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I like to work in different styles and modalities. I can't keep doing the same thing all the time.

LT: It becomes too repetitive, too insistent?

JW: Maybe for the viewer. I have no problem myself in hitting those notes every day.

LT: I was thinking about the Agricultural Works (2001–04), in which you move between different modalities within it. Some images are lyrical and some more documentary, in effect.

JW: Right, I was photographing farms, machinery, fields, and flowers. Agricultural Works, by the way, directly preceded Flowers. I was out there, looking at the fields and crops, and also at the mechanics of agriculture, which harkens back to the Railroad Photographs and Calais Lace Factories. But in the Agricultural Works, I was also involved in something else, which was...

LT: ...the natural, nature?

JW: Yes, the unfolding of the natural. In the lace factory, what fascinated me was the actual manufacturing of lace. Even though I didn't photograph the looms close-up, there was a sense of the hum and whir of the lace being made. It was always flowing out of the loom. In agriculture, you can see everything change on a daily basis. I would go back to the same fields and see growth, harvest, renewal. It's strange, but in a way, the Calais Lace Factories and the Agricultural Works are very closely related. Both show the imperceptible production of things, in textiles and in farming.
LT: Both are hands-on work, making lace and farming, but they are also hands-off, when the machine does its work. I think that's true about your own work. One of your first bodies of work was a series of photograms called Hands (1975). Sometimes you use your hands to move objects around, sometimes you don't.

JW: I've often thought of that, that those hand pictures intimate, if I can be a little heavy-handed, my interest in manipulation. Later, when I was doing the aluminum foil pieces, especially, I thought, "I'm manipulating things." When I was much younger, I had a lot of problems with photography that just wanted to record objects, straight. I'm more tolerant now, but when I was just starting out, I was mostly interested in how I could change things with my hands.

LT: That dialectic still has, to make a bad pun, a hand in your work. It's part of that restlessness, shifting your focus from one kind of modality to another.

JW: With Flowers, I'm arranging them, but I'm doing it in the dark. In that sense, it was a blind experiment, which was just so intriguing. It made me think that, since I can't see what I'm doing, there's a randomness, which is important — setting up a situation in which you're going to be manipulating your subject, but then surprising effects evolve. In the New Abstractions (1998–2000), I threw strips of paper down onto a surface and photographed the result — very similar to how I made Flowers.

LT: I'm glad you used the word "experiment." You're an artist first, of course, but I sometimes think that you're like a scientist, too, having an intense interest in experimenting with what your medium can do — your continuing interest in and investigation of photograms, for instance. They are basic to photography and recall early photography and its history. Photograms are stark, very stripped down. Many artists now often add more and more elements to construct a very complicated image. I'm curious if using the photogram is another aspect of your rebelliousness toward some of the conventional or even contemporary concepts about photography.

JW: Photography today seems to be completely content-driven. The meaning and value of the work lies in identifying the subject. It's as if the photograph is not even a representation. It's not that I don't care about content, but content is not the only way a photograph has meaning.

LT: Is there anything you really think is too awful, or that you dislike being done in photography so much, that you would never do?

JW: I learned a long time ago that any idea is a good idea, as long as you keep plugging away at it. So, no, I don't think there's anything I wouldn't do.
LT: In your work, you explore many different ways to create an image. Are you as intrigued by how we see, in the eye's mechanics and perception, as you are, say, by how light works to make an image? Is that part of your thought process?

JW: In the last five years, I've made mostly color photographs, and in some very subtle ways, my relationship to color has changed. I observe color more intensely. I see more color in the world, because I've become attuned to looking for it in photographic prints. I find that the longer I look at something now, the more colors I see in an object or in a situation.

LT: In Flowers, colors overlap and seep into other colors and produce various amorphous shapes. You appear to be working with a blur, which I don't associate with your work. Do you think that's true?

JW: Yes, these flowers have enabled me to work with blurry, fuzzy shapes. I don't usually use blur. Generally, I like things to be very clearly delineated. The negative I start out with for each flower, though there are out-of-focus areas, is in fairly sharp overall focus. Then I'm able to introduce, as you say, a kind of blurriness by using color filters.

LT: How did you actually make the Flowers? You started with a black and white negative...?

JW: I took a few handfuls of plumbago blossoms from the yard, arranged them on pieces of 8 x 10 film in the darkroom, and made the exposures with my black and white enlarger. After I processed the negatives and weeded out the uninteresting ones, I went into the color darkroom and worked with my printer, Lisa Ohlweiler, to come up with a way to introduce multiple colors into the prints. Eventually I had the idea of placing tiny colored gels, all different shapes, behind the negative. We printed the photographs on a strange chromogenic paper called Kodak Endura Metallic that has a beautiful opalescent surface.

LT: How do you decide which are the uninteresting ones?

JW: Some are too static, or too flat. I look for more dynamic compositions, more movement.

LT: This is a kind of composition question. I was wondering what the effect has been on the way you think about your work, after living with a filmmaker, Jane Weinstock, for over ten years?

JW: I think she's helped me to see more clearly or to "dramatize" things that were already in my work, but which I wasn't really aware of. Ironically, the big thing she's made clear to me is my love of the ambiguous.

LT: You were also involved in the making of her feature, Easy. How did that affect you?

JW: I was very impressed by the way Jane worked with her actors. She would try scenes a number of different ways on the set, and again in the editing room. I've always experimented with the materials of photography, but after working on the film, I realized I could go even further. When I started doing the first Flowers series in 2004, I printed them in solid colors. In 2005, I created another series of Flowers in two colors by masking the negative and then printing the image twice. Last year, I kept thinking about multicolored flowers, but wasn't sure how to generate them. It took about a month of making tests before I hit on the idea of using colored gels behind the negative. Then, even while I was making the last prints in the series, I kept coming up with more complicated gels. I doubt that I would have taken the Flowers so far, or been so persistent, before the film.

Lyne Tulman is a novelist, short story writer, and critic who lives in Manhattan. Her latest novel is American Geniuses, A Comedy.