

CAMERALESS PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE WORK OF  
JAMES WELLING AND WALEAD BESHTY

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## Introduction

The material specificities of photographic form have recently been under investigation with the analog cameraless works by James Welling and Walead Beshty. Both artists experiment with deconstructing the medium. Welling focuses primarily on light, color, and delay, Beshty primarily on space, time, perpetuity, and concrete self-referentiality. Together, they continue analog photography's long narrative by utilizing new methods for abstraction.

Cameraless methods offer authoritative control over the photographic process by relying less on mechanisms, and more on the artist's ability to manipulate the medium's physical properties. Welling and Beshty have specifically employed the photogram as their cameraless starting point, creating a wide array of work that uses a range of materials such as flowers, window screens, color filters, FedEx boxes, and glass. This thesis investigates how these methods have proven that analog cameraless photography is relevant in the digital age.

Contemporary cameraless methods derive from early twentieth-century abstract investigations conducted by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy. Created without the assistance of a camera, the photogram is a basic image made by placing an object directly on photosensitive emulsion and exposing it to light. The difference in contrast between the areas of the surface affected by the light and those obstructed by the object's shadow result in a solid silhouette of the object's contours. The illusionism of the photogram offers an authentic record of the object's size and shape, but no details of its surface or texture. By establishing an empirical contact between what is represented and representation, and becoming a unique record of that interaction, the photogram removes the presence of a mediating apparatus.

In a 1946 review of an Edward Weston exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Clement Greenberg wrote about photography's representations, and their relationship to

the past, by claiming the medium epitomizes the Renaissance idea of the image as a transparent window. "Because of its superior transparency and its youth, it has, to start with, a detached approach that in the other modern arts must be struggled for with great effort and under the compulsion to exclude irrelevant reminiscences of their pasts. Photography is the only art that can still afford to be naturalistic and that, in fact, achieves its maximum effect through naturalism."<sup>1</sup> Because the photogram excludes the transformations involved with reproduction, as it avoids the use of a negative, a lens, or a translation into binary code, it conceptually diminishes mediation between image and referent. Both Welling and Beshty have used this cameraless technique to overtly guide the contemporary discussion of photography to include its affinity for the present rather than the Barthesian idea that photographs point to the past.<sup>2</sup>

Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy may have used the same basic techniques as those used by Welling and Beshty, but the cultural surroundings that they knew was very much different. For example, the publication of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in 1938, which advocated for an exposure of the manipulative systems in technical media, among other issues, was released in the same year as Moholy-Nagy's book *The New Vision*; and World War II began the next year. Welling and Beshty expand on their investigations by employing analog techniques in a twenty-first century context that sees analog as having a specific realism it couldn't have had before the ubiquitous use of the personal computer (PC).

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston," in *Clement Greenberg, Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 2*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 61.

<sup>2</sup> "[T]he Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger at a certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5.

Analog photography, the technology that led to the advent of cinema, which was the medium that Benjamin argued as having the most affinity for manipulation, has become technologically subordinate to today's newer digital media. A material deconstruction of the analog's form today would champion the successes of modernism as it has finally attained a social identity that exhibits authenticity; it can now tell the truth. Nicolas Bourriaud made this point in his book *Altermodern*. "Today, black and white labels images as belonging to the past and the world of archives—at the same time, however, guaranteeing the authenticity of their content, by the single fact that their technique pre-dates Photoshop."<sup>3</sup> In short, James Welling and Walead Beshty are epochally differentiated from Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy.

One may try to classify Welling's and Beshty's work as "modern" or "formal," but they make images that resemble a new kind of modernism. Jakob Proctor acknowledged Beshty's concrete definition of photographic form by claiming that Beshty's work can "dismantle the modernist myth of the work of art as an autonomous, self-contained object whose meaning and value exist apart from its material."<sup>4</sup> And Welling actually characterizes his own work as, "something like redoing modernism, but with a sense of history."<sup>5</sup> This means he's acknowledging those who came before him that were notable artists who championed cameraless methods in the early twentieth century but made analog art for an analog society. At the time, Moholy-Nagy claimed photograms were, "the most successful recording thus far of light striking a projection screen—in this case, the sensitive layer of the photographic paper."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Proctor, *Walead Beshty: Pulleys, Cogwheels, Mirrors, and Windows* (Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2009), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Noam M. Elcott, "The Shadow of the World: James Welling's Cameraless and Abstract Photography," *Aperture* 190, (Spring 2008): 32.

<sup>6</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Bauhaus Design, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (New York: Dover, 2005), 85.

The Internet generation has witnessed photography evolve from a medium anxious about its own mediation, a state-of-the-art technology capable of seemingly endless reproduction, to a medium whose identity is constantly in flux. Analog has been overwhelmingly forced into obsolescence by digital technology, so one may ask why Welling and Beshty have dedicated themselves to anachronisms. Perhaps the answer lies within the work.

## Chapter 1. James Welling

James Welling's works seem to include almost any depiction, as long as it is paired with an abstract element. He reacts to representation similarly to the way a twentieth-century modernist would, but ironically his approach resembles that of a painter more than a photographer. As a college student, Welling had many creative outlets. He was born in 1951, and at the age of eighteen he attended Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he first was inspired by an impromptu concert by visiting artists John Cage and Merce Cunningham. He began studying dance, but soon realized he didn't have an affinity for it, so he moved on to painting and sculpture during his first year. Then, he began "rebellious against painting" because his painting teacher, Gandy Brodie, was too "conservative."<sup>7</sup> His relationship, or lack thereof, to photography during these years was described in an interview with Deven Golden for *BOMB Magazine*. "Occasionally I would borrow a camera to take pictures, but only to document the impermanent stuff that I was doing... when I did something with photographs it was to make a 'piece,' not a 'picture.'"<sup>8</sup>

In 1971, he left for CalArts to work on video and performance, and subsequently befriended Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, David Salle, Barbara Bloom, Suzanne Lacy, Paul McCarthy, Marcia Resnick, and Ben Lifson, and was a teacher's assistant for John Baldessari. Welling joined this already forming group of artists who were characterized by their attempts to expose the hidden elements of photography. Many of these artists were later featured in the 2009 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, based on Douglas Crimp's term, called the "Pictures Generation." It wasn't until just before leaving CalArts around 1976 that Welling discovered Paul Strand's "Mexico Portfolio" in the school's library and, as he described

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<sup>7</sup> James Welling, interview by Jeremy Sigler, "Pencil of Nature," *Modern Painters* vol. 21, no. 3 (April 2009): 56-9.

<sup>8</sup> James Welling, interview by Deven Golden, *BOMB* no. 87 (Spring 2004): 48.



it, he began to wonder whether modernist photography could be fused with conceptual practice. These first few crucial years in college studying traditional art forms must have instilled an affinity for material in Welling, because such a theme remains present, in one way or another, throughout his oeuvre.

Welling began working seriously in photography soon after earning his MFA from CalArts, with a series of hand photograms (see fig. 1). Welling said of his 1975 “Hands” series, “those hand pictures intimate, if I can be a little heavy-handed, my interest in manipulation... I had a lot of problems with photography that just wanted to record objects, straight... I was mostly interested in how I could change things with my hands.”<sup>9</sup> The puppeteer and the puppet are one and the same in the “Hands” series, which consists of black and white photograms made with the artist’s hands in the shape of common hand puppets. Stark white and black mix into a gray penumbra for a few millimeters where skin meets emulsion. These edges, because a human hand can never have two-dimensional flush contact with anything, become blurry, like the out-of-focus shadows from an overcast sky. Noam Elcott described Welling’s ventriloquism in his article for *Aperture Magazine*, “One cannot even imagine the would-be shadow puppets; instead, the white shadows he projects are images of production.”<sup>10</sup> The twentieth-century crisis is turned on its head by the “Hands” series, because instead of disposing of manipulation, this series exploits it.

Ironically mythologized as “self taught,” Welling’s work has played an important role in distinguishing artistic photography from commercial photography partly because he is familiar with those who came before him. When Jeremy Sigler described James Welling’s work from the late 1970s and early 80s, for which he used material like gelatin, phyllo dough, and aluminum

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<sup>9</sup> James Welling, interview by Lynne Tillman, *Flowers* (New York: David Zwirner, 2007), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Elcott, 30.

foil, in an interview for *Modern Painters* as “a nod to Bauhaus formalism, to Moholy-Nagy,” Welling replied by describing why such a claim requires reconsideration. He points out how comparing his work to just one era’s theoretical investigations doesn’t acknowledge the anachronistic projection of Renaissance exactitude. “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.”<sup>11</sup>

One example of how Welling differentiates his work from Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy’s is by expanding the definition of the photogram to find commonalities between traditional and cameraless methods, and by consistently making images that illustrate new ways of reacting against representation in photography. He does this by merging two seemingly unrelated approaches, those of representation and abstraction. For Welling, a negative’s transparent edges left from the camera’s opaque frame, as well as the white border created by an enlarger easel on a photographic print, are unsung photograms. He described this concept in an interview with Lynne Tillman. “Increasingly, I’m finding less and less of a difference between representational and so-called abstract pictures. There are always abstract elements in any photograph. For instance, the white border on a print is a photogram, the shadow blade of the easel.”<sup>12</sup> He then continued these thoughts with Golden. “Since 1998 I’ve become sensitized to the idea of the photogram as a shadow of the world coexisting with the optical image made by the camera lens.”<sup>13</sup> Such claims equate the direct contact of light on a negative or digital sensor with cameraless practices, which is a concept that perhaps can illuminate connections between Welling’s earlier depictive series and his recent abstractions.

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<sup>11</sup> Sigler, 56-9.

<sup>12</sup> Tillman, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Golden, 53.

“With the ‘New Abstractions’ I was working with photograms, and the black shapes in those pictures were directly related to the black edge of the negative in the ‘New Landscapes.’”<sup>14</sup>

The black edge Welling referred to is initiated by the location within the camera where its opaque material casts a shadow on the film’s emulsion. This shadow determines the transparent borders of the image’s frame that, when printed, are where light passes through to expose a photosensitive surface. Perfectly transparent areas result as black when printed. Welling includes these thick straight black lines prominently on all four sides of each of the “New Landscapes” because his expanded definition of the photogram considers them as resulting from the same fundamental process as the stark, black and white “New Abstractions.” These two series are linked by depictions of thick black marks manipulated by the artist’s hand. “Marsh Grass, South Cove, Old Saybrook, CT” (2001) (see fig. 2) is a mundane, closely cropped horizontal black and white depiction of overgrown reeds. Vertical lines condense into a thick web occupying the central area of the composition. Below are flattened-out reeds creating a rough well-trodden pathway, and above are thick treetops through which only a small portion of sky, in the upper left corner, remains unobstructed. This dense composition of natural overgrowth intersects the thick black borders created by the camera’s inherent photogram, confining nature inside a black box.

Equally as densely composed, the thin rectangular lines of the “New Abstractions,” which are metaphorically collapsed versions of the black borders created by a negative’s transparent frame, construct spatially ambivalent triangular and trapezoidal fields, and merge positive and negative space. The “New Abstractions” hide their final digital identity, moreover the inherent battle between human and mechanism, to exhibit artistry. “#1A,” (1998) (see fig. 3) for example, shows rectangular lines in approximately four different widths that range from thick

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<sup>14</sup> Golden, 53.

planks to thin twigs. This series was created by arbitrarily tossing handfuls of small shards of rectangular cardboard, which was seemingly rigid enough to not bend or fold so its edges would be in contact with the photosensitive paper. The result of the use of this material is clearly defined edges and harsh contrast. Most lines are long enough to spill outside the image's borders, and others come to an abrupt perpendicular end. Overall, the image seems like a broken web, a net through which an exterior can only peek—the view from underneath an entangled power line tower in the vein of Alexander Rodchenko's "Superstructural Abstraction" (1928) (see fig. 4). In essence, Welling is merging traditional indexes with cameraless printing methods for the "New Landscapes" and "New Abstractions" to guide viewers in a deconstructive discussion of the photographic process.

Employing photograms for representational photographs, not just abstractions, further acknowledges how the viewer's perception can affect the meaning of an image. Allowing this developmental transition helps "slow down" the reading of an image and keep it in the present. Welling's intent deals with the theme of transition by including depictions of transitory subjects, but also by engaging the viewer in a dialogue that will constantly unfold.

To prolong this delay, his images often point to something unpictured, which is an aspect of his work that Deven Golden referred to as being "from a peripheral stance."<sup>15</sup> This stance involves the referent, but the past event that Welling's work points to is the transformation that occurs during the capturing and viewing processes. In this way, his work never falls into the past because it is constantly unfolding, shaping, and reshaping.

It was in 1979 that Welling says he was "trying to break out of referent-based photography," and he singled out Barthes's theory specifically as a discussion point during his interview with Golden. He critiques the concept of photographs as records of the past, and

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<sup>15</sup> Golden, 50.

explains how viewing keeps them in the present by establishing the photographer as the subject in the image's figure/ground relationship. "Maybe that's what photography does: it underlines the photographer. That's the Barthesian 'this has been.' Well, 'this has been' for the photographer as well. The photographer is the hidden placeholder in the Barthesian equation. I'm not so crazy about the idea that photographs are always about the past. What is compelling about photography is that you have to work to decipher it."<sup>16</sup>

Welling tries to "slow down" or delay the reading of his images in the same way Wallace Stevens wanted to delay the reading of his poems.<sup>17</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor compared Stevens's use of delay to Paul Cézanne's brush stroke by writing, "elusive gates continually open transitions between the bunched strokes so that the eye passes consecutively, plane to plane, beyond its own intelligence, at every point coherently arriving where the eye would never have had mind to go on its own, catching its breath while the restlessly static object insists that the activity is entirely its prerogative. Stevens, whose own work often originated in the developments of French painting, himself presents this activity to the eye, but in transposition."<sup>18</sup> Welling accentuates delay by hiding certain steps of his creative process. For example, his "New Abstractions" consist of enlarged digital scans of black and white photograms, but no depictive detail in the composition discloses this step in the process—their digital identity. At first glance, (which is how we experience most images today) the "New Abstractions" appear as classically executed analog photograms. One would have to either reference their labels for clues, or be familiar with photography's history of printing techniques to visually differentiate between them,

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<sup>16</sup> Golden, 53.

<sup>17</sup> "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." Tillman, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Things Beyond Resemblance" in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 64-65.

to fully engage with the work. Welling also intentionally tried to delay the viewing of his “Flowers” series (2004-06). The arbitrary composition conceptually reflects a flower’s tendency to wilt quickly, evoking a sense of transition, and subverting the photographic system by introducing new ways to arrange photographic material. Flowers will always be in flux.

The “Flowers” use modernist abstract practice to depict nature with the same realism as William Henry Fox Talbot did in 1844 for his book *Pencil of Nature*, which aimed to reconnect humanity with the earth. Photography wasn’t a manipulative system for Talbot, rather he saw its depictions as self-evident, authentic, and truthful; and Welling refers to this theme conceptually with the “Flowers” by employing an analog technique that could achieve authenticity in a contemporary context.

The “Flowers” were made by placing plumbago blossoms (a native flower to California where Welling resides) on a negative and exposing it to light. By making a photogram on a negative whose sole purpose was to yield reproductions instead of making unique photograms on photosensitive paper, Welling created a conceptually paradoxical photogram-index that served as the work’s unique origin. The photogram-index was then enlarged and printed using an array of colored filters, yielding an image that resembles an inverted photogram. The advantage of this method is that it fills the areas where classic photograms are left unexposed with prismatic color. The white hands of his earlier work became filled with reds and blues. Inside became outside, creating a lack of figure/ground tension that relates to his previous “Light Sources” series (1992-98) (see fig. 5).

Welling described his creative process for this series in detail during his conversation with Tillman. “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.”<sup>19</sup>

Mechanical reproducibility meets tactility with this work, and perhaps it’s this ambivalence that Welling represents. Tillman posed the question, “Does it matter to you whether you’re making an abstraction or a representational image?” And his answer was his revelation about the ubiquity of the photogram, and that there are inherent abstractions in every photographic image. Tillman then acknowledged the “Flowers” series’ depictive duality by saying, “Thinking about the ‘Flowers,’ I realize there’s a fusion of representational and abstract elements, so they demonstrate, in a sense, your position.”<sup>20</sup>

Welling made reproducible color photograms for two iterations of “Flowers” in the early 2000s. In 2004, he started using color filters to create monochromatic silhouettes, then continued in 2006 with investigations that sprawled out light’s broad spectrum in to polychromatic hues. Welling was “coloring inside the lines” so to speak, because the photogram created by the plumbago blossoms’ shadows determined the colors’ borders. The 2004 “Flowers” series remained limited to solid, monochromatic hues only hinting at spectral elasticity, and anticipated his 2006 series, which took the color photogram to a more controlled and chromatically rich palette. For example, “031” (2004) (see fig. 6), a midsize red silhouette of sprawled blossoms is beautiful, but tame compared to “017” (2006) (see fig. 7), which chromatically ranges from dirty yellows and sky blues to chocolate browns and rich blacks. Watercolor-like hues spill and mix

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<sup>19</sup> Tillman, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Tillman, 2.

inside of these series of silhouettes of petals and stems, in an arbitrary, yet precise prismatic dance. Such an approach harks back to Welling's college studies of painterly abstraction with ambivalent spaces and amorphous shapes.

Such effects were achieved by using photograms at several points along the creative process, not just in printing, which conceptually subverts the photogram's classically efficient referential identity. He merges "photogram" with "photograph" by employing the photogram-index as an intermittent step between referent and print. Both "Flowers" series were made this way, as well as several of Welling's even more recent works.

The inclusion of color filters in the printing process set light's broad spectrum loose onto the areas of the paper where the photogram allowed, merging chaos with control. One could argue that Welling exhibited much more creative control for the "Flowers" by using the photogram-index than he did for the "New Abstractions," which employed the digital scan to add a level of mechanism rather than removing one. When compared to the classic photogram process, the inclusion of a photogram-index does add another level of mechanism, but Welling utilized this step as an opportunity for experimentation and didn't rely on an automated result. Such rich color is harshly contrasted against a stark, flat-white background to accentuate the photographic material Welling exploited for the "Flowers" being the physical elasticity of light. Noam Elcott described Welling's "Flowers" series as "a stunning vehicle with which to capture and represent his actual subject: light phenomena."<sup>21</sup> And he describes Welling's work as using "abstraction and cameraless photography to affirm the texture of discourse, the opacity of matter, the reality of mediation, and the vicissitudes of light—in sum, the specificities of the photographic medium, its properties, and its histories."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Elcott, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Elcott, 36.



Welling also exhibited precise control over light for a series whose depictions are much more understated than his later “Flowers” called the “Hexachrome” series (2006) (see fig. 8) that which was made using additive RGB to create natural color. This series consists of photographs of green leaves and plants in natural sunlight, shot through filters held in front of the lens. They seem to be made by normal means at first, but a closer look reveals color spectrums that aren’t in accordance with empiricism, and that they have a hidden identity.

Welling’s oeuvre spans representation and abstraction, figuration and imagination, with a specific focus on the ways photographic material can be rearranged. The “Flowers” weren’t his first investigations of the possibilities of color cameraless methods, but they were the first series for which he used the photogram to merge abstraction so overtly with figural depictions. This concept was further investigated for his “Torsos” series (2005-08) (see fig. 9) for which he made photograms of molded figures out of metal window screens. The results are more examples of how Welling can portray a directed creative process to produce new cameraless outcomes.

The titles of the “Flowers” expose Welling’s scientific intent of conducting a “blind experiment” with photography’s material.<sup>23</sup> The whole of twentieth-century modern photography and painting, and the investigative approach of both, are present in their titles, which are enumerated from “002” through “032.” Such methodically scientific titles seem to reference the numerical titles of the modern abstract painting tradition. They disclose how art history has influenced him, and he utilizes their banality to contrast the “Flowers” series’ enchanting depictions.

These are large, pleasingly depictive photographs that could be polemicized as decorative wall coverings, easy sells, in reaction to a time of stressed sales. One might claim that Welling was being opportunistic by making this series, that he was exploring a tangent by exploiting his

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<sup>23</sup> Tillman, 5.

own oeuvre's lack of a depictive format to have security whenever the market gets bad. For this reason, Welling's "Flowers" series is possibly his most controversial. But upon closer reading, when given the slowing down that Welling's work requires, a conceptual approach presents itself that turns the referent on its head. Welling defended the series when Tillman posed a loaded question to him about the motivations behind the "Flowers." She said, "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?" He replied with, "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."<sup>24</sup> It turns out that the "Flowers" aren't as superficial as they seem. They explicitly guide a deconstructive dialogue of the medium's process by overtly creating a depictive ambivalence between representation and abstraction that only Welling's complex cameraless system can yield.

Analog technology offers new truths due to the standardization of digital media, and Welling is using these truths to continue with the artwork that Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy began. His work maintains a conceptual thread while spanning the depictive gamut. Such an approach requires the viewer to slow down, to delay his or her reading, which is so uncommon to twenty-first century immediacy. His cameraless systems have continued to subvert photography's traditionally manipulative program.

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<sup>24</sup> Tillman, 2.

## Chapter 2. Walead Beshty

Walead Beshty's cameraless investigations expose photography's concrete aspects. He acts as an instrument in the creative process, which he sees as one that perpetually creates new forms. Beshty's art isn't on top of the surface; it's intertwined in the fibers of the material. He lets the work grow, so to speak, maturing naturally without the transcriptions left over by an artist's intent. This London-born artist's (born 1976) approach is at the highest level of scholarship, having earned his BA at Bard College in 1999, and an MFA from Yale in 2002. His work started out as representational, and gradually moved into abstraction and self-referentiality.

For example, in 2005, interested in how photography creates icons, Beshty photographed himself as Tom Wolfe and Frank Lloyd Wright to ask questions about the perpetually changing identity, and how the many roles one plays in life change as time passes. "The Critic" (2005) (see fig. 10) and "The Apprentice" (2005) (see fig. 11) were self-portraits representative of these transitory themes, taken in a satirical style with falsely painted open eyelids. Existentially, this series also reflected his own objectification as a result of the vicarious relationship he has with the public through his work.<sup>25</sup> Beshty described his apocryphal self-portraits as, "a campy way to address the portrait or an adolescent way to address the emptiness in a picture of somebody."<sup>26</sup> The "emptiness" Beshty refers to is a critique of the claim that photography exhibits transparency. The representational necessity of portraiture is subverted by these works, which separate depiction from identity. He's continued such themes of transparency with his more

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<sup>25</sup> "Those pictures are about being in that kind of position, being present and absent, which I think happens in all art. I mean, on an even more general level, you assume certain artists are certain types of people, you can't help it, you use the objects as stand-ins. In some way, I've tried to resist becoming a persona through the work, to resist the forces that turn artists into characters, fetishizes them, makes them products instead of the work being the center." Walead Beshty, interview by James Welling, *LA Material 3* (Los Angeles: North Drive Press, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Walead Beshty, interview by James Welling, 1.

recent portraiture series by shooting people who organize and construct his work behind the scenes like studio assistants, curators, and color printers.

Beshty implied a need for a new perspective on material deconstruction in photography, moreover a connotative separation from modern theory, when he wrote in his essay *Abstracting Photography*, “One is prompted to wonder how many times we can restage this anxious war between materiality and the image in the hopes that the outcome might change.”<sup>27</sup> Both George Baker and Arthur Ou have also written about similar topics. Baker, in his 2005 essay published in *October* called “Photography’s Expanded Field” wrote, “Perhaps, indeed, photography’s expanded field, unlike sculpture’s, might even have to be imagined as a group of expanded *fields*, multiple sets of oppositions and conjugations, rather than any singular operation.”<sup>28</sup> And Ou wrote, “Instead of positing and bounding photography in existing categories (such as art), perhaps it is more illuminating to consider photographs as something inherently different and always changing.”<sup>29</sup>

Beshty’s work is characteristic of recent theory, not because he’s following trends, but because he is one of the forerunners of these new theories, especially the idea that the definition of photography includes material outside of its traditional system. This expanded notion of photography is made evident by the fact that he can employ seemingly any material, even ones that are completely outside of the photographic medium, and maintain a cohesive vision.

Beshty’s ideas and theories stem from influences by Stephen Shore, Catherine Opie, Roni Horn, Mel Bochner, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Gregory Crewdson, and James Welling; yet he’ll attribute all of his accomplishments and his material investigations to a drunken conversation

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<sup>27</sup> Walead Beshty, “Abstracting Photography” in *Words Without Pictures*, ed. Alex Klein (New York: Aperture, 2009), 309.

<sup>28</sup> George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 120-40.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Ou, “Photography’s Destinations,” In *Words Without Pictures*, edited by Alex Klein (New York: Aperture, 2009), 16.

with László Moholy-Nagy's grandson. He's retold this anecdote for many interviews, including one in 2009 for *BOMB* with Eileen Quinlan. "I brought up a question...why had no one made a materialist photograph—one that dealt specifically with its condition as a material object—in the early 20th century? Dan said, 'Moholy-Nagy did it.'"<sup>30</sup> Beshty described how this conversation inspired him to start making photograms to Mikkel Carl, "it prompted me to actually make the work that my friend thought Moholy-Nagy made. I didn't know about people like Gottfried Jäger at that time. And I'm glad I only found out about those works later, since to me the photogram isn't about some absolutist idea, like a zero point or something. That seems like a false ontology to me. What constitutes photography is always very contingent; there's no such thing as a definition of a pure state. You can talk about it relationally though; about what it is at a certain point in time, how a set of forces defines it in a certain way. There are only provisional cases, so I made the crumpled paper photograms simply to find out what they would look like."<sup>31</sup>

Beshty's "Picture Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light" (2007) (see fig. 12) is a unique black and white photogram that is a sign only of its own creation. It was made by first crumpling a large sheet of photosensitive paper into a free-standing sculpture, folds and crumples left protruding and casting shadows on itself to create the photogram, then exposing it to light and processing it normally. Shades and contrasts fade in and out of focus, receding and approaching, like looking down from an airplane window on a rocky landscape. The physical destructive act of crumpling implies a polemic against photography's relentless link to paper and print media, and the photogram created by the paper's own shadows promotes self-referentiality.

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<sup>30</sup> Walead Beshty, interview by Eileen Quinlan, *BOMB Magazine* Online Only, posted Sept 2009, under "ART," <http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3348> (accessed July 29, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Walead Beshty, interview by Mikkel Carl, Copenhagen, [http://www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interviews\\_2010/interview\\_walead\\_beshty/](http://www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interviews_2010/interview_walead_beshty/) (accessed July 29, 2010).

Beshty's titles are often determined by the work's inherent material alone, such as the "multi-sided" folded pictures, which are rich, polychromatic counterparts to "Picture Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light." Perhaps there's an underlying declaration of analog's technological obsolescence in the fact that the titles for these works resemble something found on the shelves of a hobby store, as if he's employing its social status as just another concrete aspect.

One piece, "Six-Sided Picture C (CMMYYC: Irvine California, July 16th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C)" (2008) (see fig. 13) explicates the specific frequencies of light used towards its creation. Brightly colored magentas and forest greens create hard-edged, gem-like forms that shimmer in a translucent pile. Its monumental size, one hundred inches by fifty inches, is dazzling, and contrasts with its depictions, which resemble a close-up of an unorganized jewelry box. For this piece though, instead of just exposing the freestanding sculptural sheet of photo paper to light, Beshty placed differently sized six-sided polygons and colored filters on top of the paper while exposing it to light. This process is reminiscent of Welling's "Flowers," since Beshty has the ability to control the color filtration of the light exposing the paper, and is arbitrarily dialing in varying levels of cyan, magenta, and yellow. Eva Respini, Associate Curator at MoMA, described this series as "blind drawings" because of their improvisational and variable aspects.<sup>32</sup> New forms and light mixtures appear and interact in this series as a result of the photographic process, making all transcriptions of these mixtures the records of concrete ephemerality.

His titles often reflect photography's need for full investigative disclosure, but in the case of the "multi-sided pictures" series the use of the word "picture" carries a substantive

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<sup>32</sup> Eva Respini, "Walead Beshty in *New Photography 2009*," *Inside/Out* (November 18, 2009), [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2009/11/18/walead-beshty-in-new-photography-2009](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2009/11/18/walead-beshty-in-new-photography-2009) (accessed July 29, 2010).

connotation. For Beshty, pictures are images, two-dimensional representations without physical volume. He stated in the catalog for a recent exhibition at The Aperture Foundation, “The division between the ‘picture’ and the ‘material’ is unnecessarily and fundamentally specious. When photographs are treated as images, the result is that the material of the photograph is often ignored... Unlike the ‘picture’ that adheres to renaissance perspectival rules based on the construct of homogenous and infinite Cartesian space, these pictures are Anisotropic—they are irregular in every direction... The division between what is represented on the surface of the photograph, and the photographic material is rendered indiscrete.”<sup>33</sup> With this in mind, the inclusion of the word “picture” in the “multi-sided pictures” series can assist in exposing the complex and varied programs that yield photographic representations.

By making images that point inward, Beshty’s sculptural photograms utilize the material affinities of photography to promote self-reference, which is the central criterion for Jäger’s concept of “concrete photography.”<sup>34</sup> Beshty can be seen as today’s quintessential concrete photographer because he employs the material at hand without the utilization of outside tools. Socio-political advancements and the politics of aesthetics also guide the meaning of Beshty’s work. He specifically responds to the global community by offering new perspectives on some of modernism’s most prized theories, and because our global archipelago allows travel across distant borders with ease, into the future and back to the past, Beshty is using the material affinities of photography as tools to map these immaterial trajectories.<sup>35</sup> He’s acknowledging

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<sup>33</sup> Walead Beshty, “On the Conditions of Production of the Multi-Sided Pictures Works (2006-2009),” in *The Edge of Vision: Rise of Abstraction in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2009), 284.

<sup>34</sup> “In this way it [concrete photography] abandons its media character and gains object character. It is not a sign of something, but is itself something; it is not what is represented, but what is present; it endangers objects of itself and thus fulfills the central criterion of every concrete art: self-reference.” Gottfried Jäger, “Concrete Art—Concrete Photography,” in *Fotografie konkret—Konkrete Fotografie* (Vienna: Ritter Verlag, 2006), 24-29.

<sup>35</sup> Bourriaud, 12.

photography as a system that perpetually merges past, present, and future in a heterochronic ultimacy, which includes the capture process and distribution in the creation of new ways of combining space-time.

His use of these concepts came through in many works included in his solo show in 2008 at China Art Projects in Los Angeles called “Science Concrete.” There he exhibited two iterations of his “FedEx boxes” series (2008) (see fig. 14), one made of shredded photographic paper mixed with concrete and the other of partially shattered glass.

Those lined with “unbreakable” glass were comprised of varying sizes and shapes. The volumes of these packages, which are copyrighted measurements owned by FedEx unavailable for usage by competing shipping companies, add a privately owned aspect that accentuates the transitory socio-political situation that allows such travel across national and international borders. By shipping them as if they were quotidian parcels, the glass-lined boxes acquired scuffs on their cardboard exteriors and shatters on their glass interiors that when separated produced two separate aggregates of time and space. “Science Concrete” exhibited the two alongside one another as an allegory for transparency.

Ephemerality combats eternity in this work simply because its form isn’t permanent, which yields the possibility that the glass boxes could someday completely disintegrate. As the work travels and acquires more transcriptions, Beshty is leaving its continued authorship to chance and forcing any reproduction of it into falsehood. The work’s art is in its transitory quality, its records of fragmentation, and the way it fights against entropy by perpetually revitalizing itself.



These perfectly sized panes of glass hold a referent that is similar to the one that Barthes claimed for photography.<sup>36</sup> Broken glass becomes the direct transcription of a past event that was intrinsic to its current state and anticipates more destructive developments. When Mikkel Carl posed a question about such entropic hang-ups, and the work's apparent reliance on Lucy Lippard's concept of the dematerialization of the art object, Beshty defended the work by playing the role of the historian collecting clues. "I believe there's something a-temporal about the FedEx works; different moments in time are equalized on the surface of the box. There's an indexical kind of compression of past acts and occurrences, and when experiencing the object, there's no way to separate those moments: there's only the 'here and now' of viewing plus this compression of every 'here and now' before that."<sup>37</sup> His FedEx boxes make palpable the fact that the glass and cardboard are falling victim to the photographic process: always pointing backwards to offer new illuminations on the present and immanently subject to change. Thus the degradation of these materials symbolizes the eventual technological obsolescence of the medium. Ironically though, despite Beshty's efforts, the anti-entropic perpetual aspect of the work will assumingly end once it is purchased either by a gallery, an institution, or a private collector who will certainly do whatever he or she can to keep the work from disintegrating entirely.

At first these works seem tangential, since they contain no traditional photographic element, but if one equates the physical distances across which parcels travel to the array created by photographic reproduction and distribution, then FedEx boxes and photographs both become fragments of the same perpetually transforming global web of trajectories. These boxes therefore

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<sup>36</sup> Barthes, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Walead Beshty, interview by Mikkel Carl, Copenhagen, [http://www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interviews\\_2010/interview\\_walead\\_beshty/](http://www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interviews_2010/interview_walead_beshty/) (accessed July 29, 2010).

inform Beshty's traditional photographic work by building a broader definition of photography. Also a closer contextual reading of the progression of Beshty's oeuvre reveals a material investigation. So to hypothesize that the "FedEx" series, which so blatantly considers an expanded definition of photography, illuminates both Beshty's previous and subsequent work as such, and that the cameras made for replicating life aren't anymore magical than commercially copyrighted boxes, aren't such unimaginable concepts. Alex White wrote, "I wholeheartedly agree that it is time for a reevaluation. But in an era when it is standard for students to learn both black-and-white printing and Photoshop in high school, it is ridiculous to approach the camera as if it were some kind of mystifying magic box."<sup>38</sup>

Like Welling's work, Beshty's artwork shows clear signs of an agenda that conceptually employs the viewer as a method of keeping the work present. Two ways that Beshty uses this theme in his work are by intentionally submitting the physical integrity of his art to entropy for the "FedEx" series, and by including depictions of an ex-communist and ex-fascist building in the midst of an identity crisis for his "Travel Pictures" (2006) (see fig. 15). For Beshty's "Travel Pictures," which differ in focus from the FedEx boxes, he used a more traditional approach that merged representational depictions with cameraless abstractions. And like Welling's work, this transitory tension slows down the viewer's reading.

The most apparent transitory aspect of the "Travel Pictures" is the overwhelmingly defunct state of the depicted Iraqi embassy, which happens to be located in what was once East Berlin. Beshty chose this building because it was in limbo, so to speak, as it had no particular socio-political identity between 2001 and 2005 when he was visiting. He claims to have had reservations about how this site would appear in his pictures, so he waited until an opportunity

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<sup>38</sup> Alex White, "A Response" in *Words Without Pictures*, ed. Alex White (New York: Aperture, 2009), 22.

arose that he didn't intend, which was the accidental discolorations X-rays leave behind from airport security. Alexander Wolf described Beshty's "Travel Pictures" as, "using systems put in place by others...in creating his work. This procedure enables him to forgo his own intuition."<sup>39</sup>

The mixed identity of the building reflects today's globalized community, and Beshty brings this to our attention by presenting ruined images of the decrepit Iraqi embassy. He's explicating how antiquated photographic technology is deficient by today's standards against the side effects of outside physical forces, and that digital sensors would have no trouble crossing borders and would have no side effects from passing through an X-ray machine. Color negative film is the tool that would react best to today's transitioning air travel situation, especially across borders, because X-ray machines have come to denote security against terrorism. In this series, X-rays and travel are the cameraless elements. Depictive clues like streaks of pure spectral colors, cyan and yellow or overwhelming fields of red, lead to questions about the process by which the effect was achieved, thus employing the context for wall text or exhibition literature. The museum setting is like the Iraqi embassy as it serves as another kind of transitory space, and by using analog processes, which have made the transition into obsolescence, Beshty is forward thinking; he's not trying to revive a lost art; he's trying to reuse and recycle.

Yes, the works are huge floor-to-ceiling chromatically rich creations, but the presentation of the "Travel Pictures" is humble. The prints' edges curl inside the frame, which is aluminum, and a thick white print-registration-border divides the image and the bottom of the paper. The presentation is actually similar to the way large drawings or works on paper tend to be attached close to the top back corners of the work and will be left hanging, unattached at the bottom to accentuate the works' objecthood. Such a presentation draws the viewer's attention to materials

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander Wolf, "Walead Beshty: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 9 (December 2009/January 2010).

by linking drawing with photography via their affinities for paper, but in substitute for watercolor, ink, and charcoal, Beshty is fragmenting light, time, and other worldly physicalities.

The many faces of Beshty's oeuvre may be difficult to recognize on the surface, but their concepts revolve around the same investigation: the material specificities of photography. His investigations of its concrete aspects have yielded many different forms, some that depict transition and others which change in perpetuity. Beshty supports the current movement against the idea that photographs look to the past by making work that is self-referential. His vast range of materials redefine what was traditionally considered a photographic process, and in doing so, the transitional identity of his work parallels that of the photography medium.

## Conclusion

As arguably the most basic photographic technique, the photogram has historically offered a rebuke to photography's traditional description as manipulative. Because its history has been compiling for almost two hundred years, hitting its heyday in the turbulent years following the turn of the twentieth century, the photogram's presence is perhaps more understated today, but the revitalization of analog technology's authenticity has brought it once again to the forefront. Manipulation is a cloud-like stigma that now rests over digitization.

The work of James Welling and Walead Beshty signals an expansion of the notion of photography that exploits this revitalization of the cameraless technique. Revisiting the photogram, which was first artistically employed by modernists like Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, champions its authentic concrete aspects and subordinates the medium's false transparency. By providing an environment for transition and incorporating materials outside the traditional medium, both of these artists are taking advantage of analog technology's new truths: Welling by redefining the photogram to include representation, and Beshty by redefining the concept of photography to include web-like systems that are always changing.

Such an expansion revokes the "pencil" from both the artist's hand and the mechanism, and places it back in the hand of nature. The artistry of the empirical world comes through in Welling's and Beshty's work, which was a goal set by William Henry Fox Talbot, regardless of whether or not he could have conceived of the task ahead. But now that oppressive manipulation lies in the web, both of these artists are leaving behind their old cameras for more natural processes.



Figure 1. James Welling, "Hands, #3" (1975).



Figure 2. James Welling, "Marsh Grass, South Cove, Old Saybrook, CT" (2001).



Figure 3. James Welling, “#1A” (1998).





Figure 4. Alexander Rodchenko, “Superstructural Abstraction” (1928).

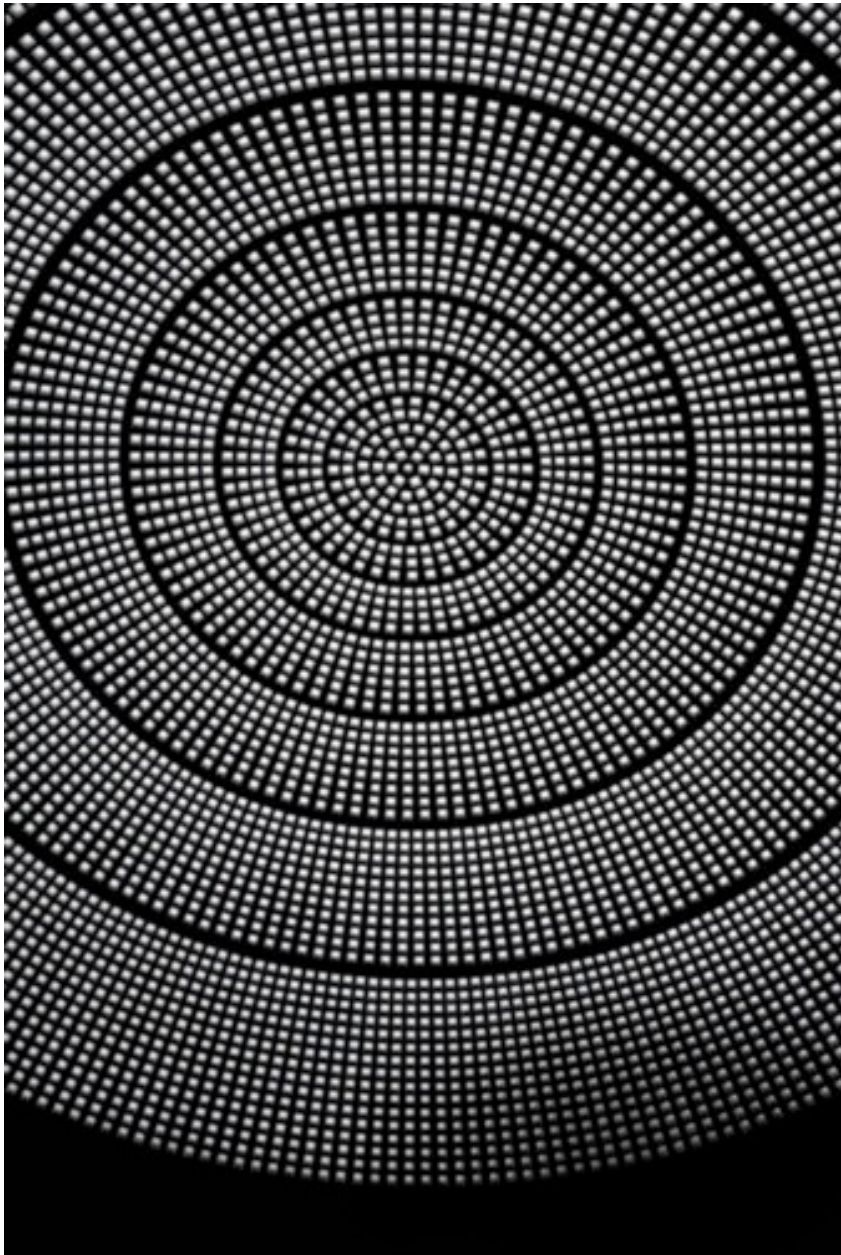


Figure 5. James Welling, "Ravenstein, 5" (1998).



Figure 6. James Welling, "031" (2004).



Figure 7. James Welling, "017" (2006).



Figure 8. James Welling, "H3" (2006).

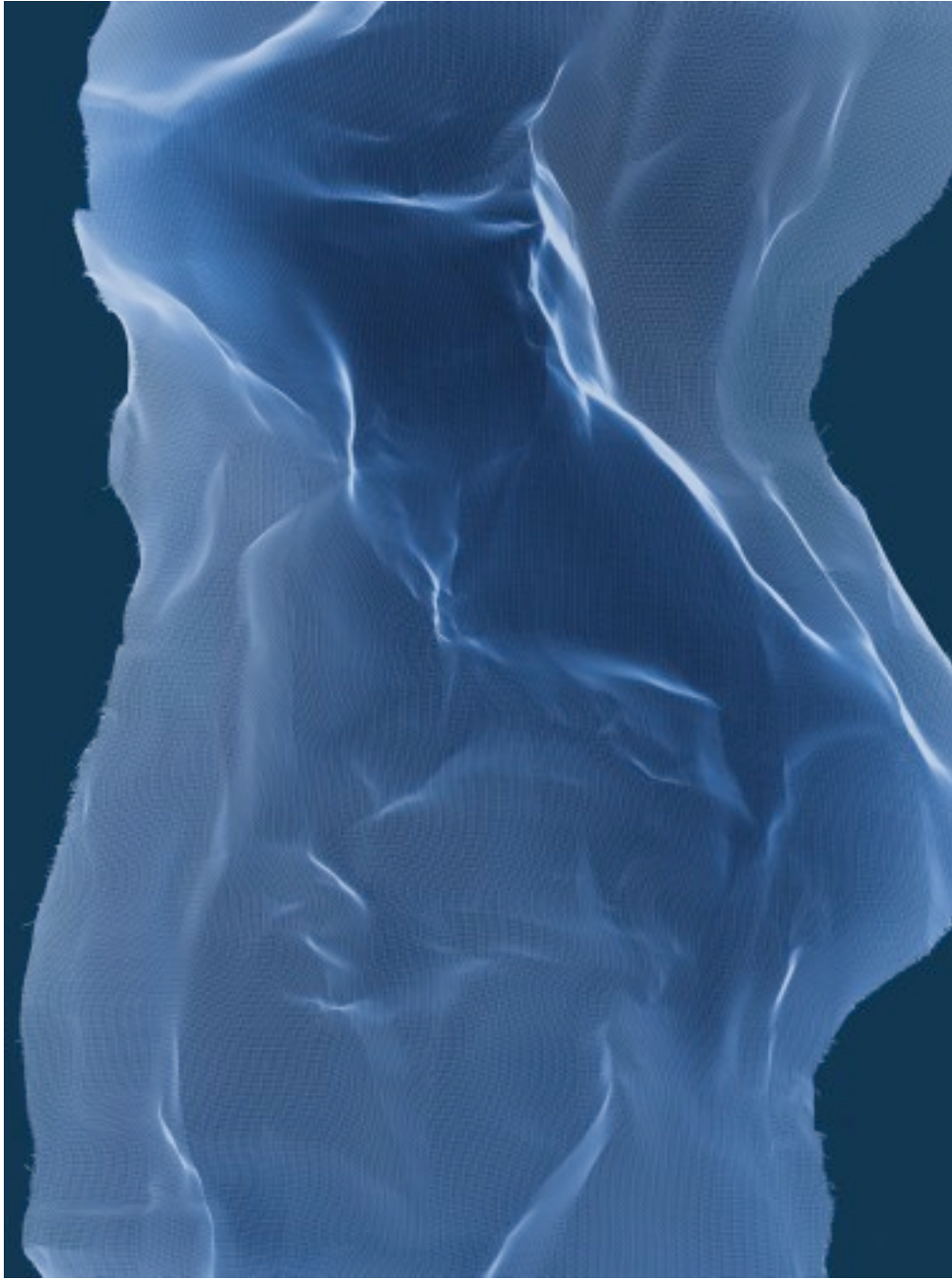


Figure 9. James Welling, "Torso 9-6" (2005-08).



Figure 10. Walead Beshty, “The Critic” (2005).



Figure 11. Walead Beshty, “The Apprentice” (2005).





Figure 12. Walead Beshty, “Picture Made by My Hand With the Assistance of Light” (2007).



Figure 13. Walead Beshty, “Six-Sided Picture C (CMMYYC: Irvine California, July 16th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C)” (2008).



Figure 14. Walead Beshty, “Fedex® Large Boxes, Priority Overnight, Los Angeles-New York” (2008).



Figure 15. Walead Beshty, "Travel Picture Violet" (2006).

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