

# A Slice of Light

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A man walks down a dark avenue in a strange city. It's getting late and the street is empty except for a clattering tram, the odd passerby. He's had dinner and he's alone, with nothing to do except wander and look around. In his hand is an old camera.

What he's looking for is light, which draws him to illuminated signs that penetrate the darkness. Most are in a language he can't read and doesn't speak. That's part of the attraction, really, the seduction of the unfamiliar, but in a familiar form. Every so often he takes a picture. He usually photographs when he's on the road, when the half-seen clutter of daily routine is replaced by the hyperdimensionality of unfamiliar places.

Suddenly he happens on a peculiar sight, one part commercial come-on, one part oversized toy. Fixed on the facade of a building, it's a stepped form molded in metal. From each of four curving tiers protrude a series of bent neon tubes. Better than a mere sign, it's a sculpture of a cake, a layered confection made large to beckon and entice. He takes a few shots. "I'd already been taking pictures," he says, "and I was in this state of looking for something."<sup>1</sup>

The man in the vignette, roaming the streets of Brussels, is the American photographer James Welling. He is best known for his enigmatic images of crumpled foil and sumptuous draped fabric, done in the early '80s. By repeatedly rearranging the foil and the fabric, he explored the possibilities of infinite variation using minimal components. The foil images were often read as the postmodernist answer to traditional

landscapes; for Welling they were a way to generate "intense visual experiences . . . a kind of visual pleasure—or visual terror." The velvet and silk pieces, which were often strewn with flakes of pastry dough, were tropes on still-life while also succeeding as compositions of muted, sensual beauty.

After making progressively more abstract images, using chunks of gelatin and then bathroom tiles, in the mid '80s Welling did a seeming about-face. He began making much more traditional-looking images, of the Romanesque Revival architecture of H.H. Richardson and American railroads in the Northeast and the towns that lined their tracks. Their evocation of the nineteenth century represents, for Welling, "our origin and utopia in terms of technological and cultural values"<sup>2</sup> as well as his own background—he grew up near Hartford, Connecticut—enabling him to make "complicated photographs that played with time."

For his exhibition last March at Jay Gorney Modern Art in New York, Welling changed direction once again. He showed a group of ten large-format pictures entitled "Light Sources," 1992–96. One of them was *Brussels*, 1996, the image of a neon-decorated layer-cake sign that advertises a bakery.

The state of "looking for something" that Welling identified while he was in Brussels is at the heart of the practice of photography. This holds true despite the critique of representation, visibility, and originality that has been so central to artmaking and art criticism for the last generation, and that has been important to Welling as well. How the act of looking

is deployed—its characteristic self-consciousness, reflexivity, and poetic complexity—is what sets apart the making of photographic art, as opposed to commercial photography, photojournalism, or any other type of photography. For "Light Sources," Welling pulled together the evidence of a type of looking he had done over a period of years.

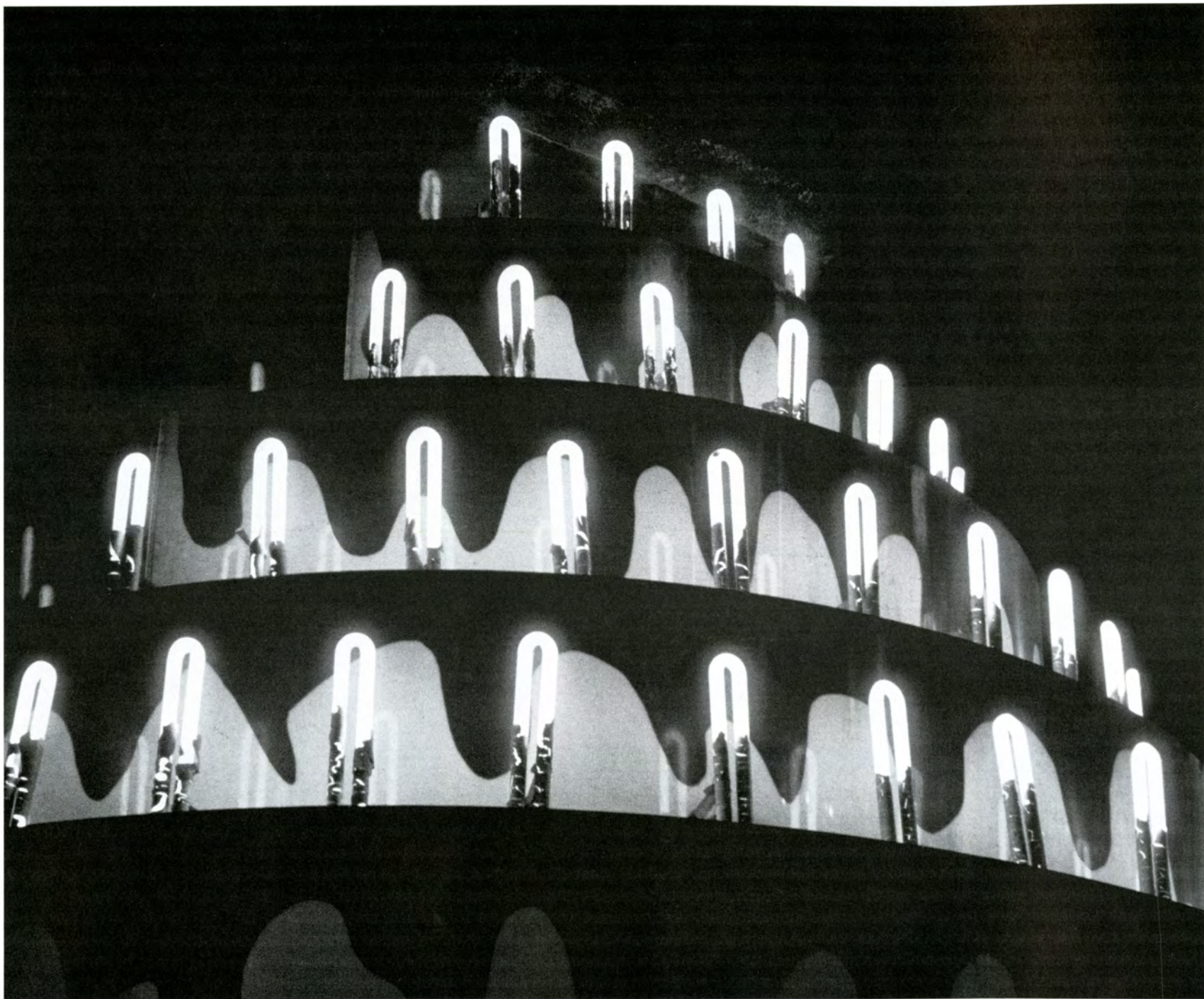
The idea—to make singular images of nonserial but similar subject matter, which eventually produced the project—had its genesis in the early '90s. In a lace-weaving factory in Calais, France, where Welling photographed in January 1993, he was struck by contrasts, of the luminous, delicate whiteness of the thread and the lace against the much larger expanses of grime and hulking, dark machinery, a battle in which darkness seems to have the upper hand over luminosity. In 1994 he photographed in and around another factory, a Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg, Germany, where light also seemed to be meagerly meted out.

The same year he realized he was tired of producing extended documentations. "I was trying to do something more lyrical as well as something that wasn't part of a series, where you could point to it and say, 'This is a factory or this is aluminum foil.'" He began to recognize certain unique but seemingly anomalous images that were a constant in his work, all of them having to do with light. "I noticed that I had this other kind of photograph that I would take without really knowing what it was."

Light and its permutations have been central to



JAMES WELLING'S  
*BRUSSELS*, 1996



This page: **James Welling**, *Brussels*, 1996, vegetable dye on rag paper (Iris print), image size 27 x 32 1/2", framed 38 1/4 x 61 1/2". Edition of six. From "Light Sources."  
Opposite page: **James Welling**, *Meriden*, 1992, vegetable dye on rag paper (Iris print), image size 32 1/2 x 27", framed 61 1/2 x 38 1/4". Edition of six. From "Light Sources."



This page, left to right:  
**James Welling, *Untitled*, 1980**, silver print, image size 4 1/2 x 3 3/4". **James Welling, *February 29, 1996, 1996***, vegetable dye on rag paper (Iris print), image size 32 x 27", framed 61 1/2 x 38 1/2". Edition of six. From "Light Sources." Opposite page, left to right: **James Welling, *Gay Head Lighthouse, 1996***, vegetable dye on rag paper (Iris print), image size 16 1/2 x 13 1/2", framed 25 1/2 x 21 1/2". Edition of six. From "Light Sources."  
**James Welling, *Ravenstein, 1994***, vegetable dye on rag paper (Iris print), unframed 32 1/2 x 27", framed 61 1/2 x 38 1/2". Edition of six. From "Light Sources."



much of Welling's best-known work, from the intricately modulated play of light and dark of the foil series of 1980–81 to the weak, struggling light in the Wolfsburg series. Even his earliest extended series, images of Los Angeles architecture during the day and at night from 1977, demonstrated that he was often as interested in the origin and effect of the lighting as he was in the buildings themselves. In the series that followed, "Diary of Elizabeth C. Dixon, 1840–41 (1822–72), Connecticut Landscapes," 1977–86, photographs of the elegant handwriting intermittently broken by a pressed fern or feather in the journal documenting a young woman's travels in Europe, as well as wintery Northeastern landscape shots, it was the workings of natural rather than artificial light that drew his attention.

Picturing graphic patterns of light is one of photography's most enduring clichés. Of course, light is essential to photography: without light to instigate the photochemical process, there is no photograph. But Welling had concentrated on light not simply as a necessary (as well as beautiful) motive force of photography, but as a kind of thing-in-itself. His images manage to convey the sensation and emotional weight of the light he has photographed, not simply its look or its source.

While living on the West Coast in the early to middle '70s, Welling attended the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Absorbing the lessons offered by the incipient photo-based Conceptualism of professors such as John Baldessari, for whom he was a

teaching assistant, he was also influenced by the work of artists such as Maria Nordman, who enlisted light not simply as her subject but as the material of her art. He also studied the way photographers as diverse as Paul Strand and László Moholy-Nagy thought about and used light. Beginning with the Los Angeles architecture photographs, Welling seems to reflect in particular Moholy's notions on the deployment, depth, and character of light. "We have gained a new feeling for the quality of chiaroscuro, shining white, transitions from black to grey imbued with fluid light, the precise magic of the finest texture," Moholy emphasized in 1925.<sup>3</sup> Fed by the work and words of varied artists, Welling's ideas about light are perhaps most fully developed in his "Light Source" exhibitions.

Welling makes his own black-and-white silver prints, and when he returned to Los Angeles he made an 8 x 10-inch print of *Brussels*, cropping and straightening the original image. ("I crop all the time," he says, in disregard of those who regard as sacrosanct the use of the entire negative. "I don't respect the rectangle much.") At that point he was deciding which images to print on the basis of which ones he remembered. Even before he made a contact sheet he knew he wanted to print the cake sign, because it was memorable but also because its subject was highly ambiguous. "It was indecipherable," he says. "I was looking for things I couldn't decipher quickly." He also knew he wanted to do large prints for his upcoming show, so in the summer of 1996 he gave the print he'd made, along with the negative, to a

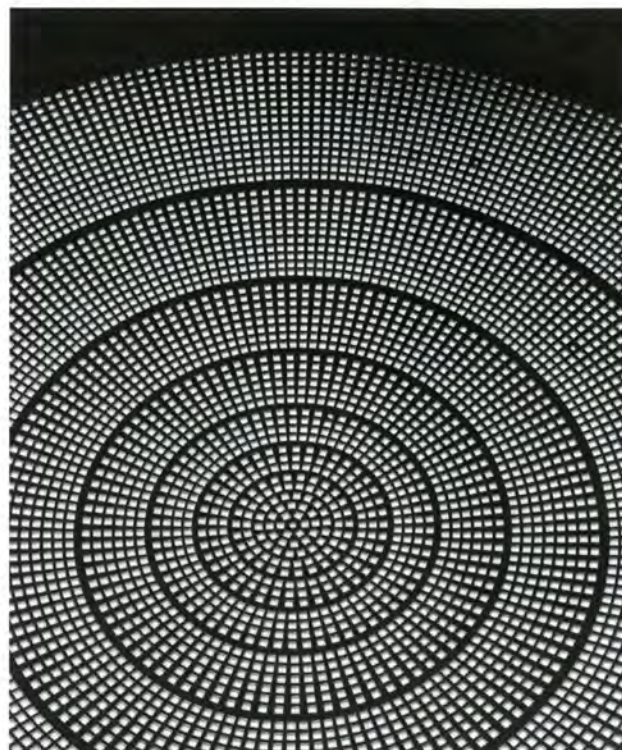
New York firm adept at making oversized prints.

But the best print that could be made by traditional means was not good enough. Photos taken at night are often difficult to print because the lack of light produces thin negatives, that is, negatives that have recorded too little detail. When the image is blown up to a large scale, those difficulties become magnified. The grays were muddy and seemed to run into each other even where there were clearly defined areas of shadow.

By this time, Welling had already had two exhibitions of black-and-white silver prints of various images related to the "Light Source" series at Regen Projects in Los Angeles and Galerie Nelson in Paris. He knew what he wanted the photos to look like for his show at Gorney the following March, and one thing he wanted was size. He decided to try Iris prints. The product of a four-color, ink-based process realized from digitized files, they can be printed in sizes up to 32 x 44 inches.

He took the 11 x 14-inch print he'd made to Muse X Imaging, a digital-processing company in Los Angeles. The company had his print electronically scanned, which captured the continuous tone of the photographic print in the much-less-subtle gradation of digitalized form. In a 14 x 17-inch test print, the soft curves of the painted icing on the cake were translated as the jagged edges of digital pixels, an effect that was only somewhat mitigated in the actual Iris print. Welling was told that the digital contouring would be hard to get rid of. But he eventually came





to appreciate the fact that the Iris print showed “this funny point where the digital becomes visible,” and the jagged edges were left in.

After digitally silhouetting a field at the top of the print, which is equivalent to “burning in”—or over-exposing—an area in the darkroom, and retouching some other points, the scan was ready for a final print. The Iris printer is essentially a large and sophisticated ink-jet printer of the sort accompanying a desktop computer. It shoots minuscule streams of cyan, magenta, yellow, and black ink from four separate nozzles at the printing paper, which is affixed to a large, horizontally mounted drum. The drum spins at a high speed of up to several hundred revolutions per minute; the streams of ink are subdivided into hundreds of thousands of microscopic droplets by a vibrating microcrystal inside each of the tiny nozzles, thus producing subtle shades and gradations that approximate the look of continuous-tone printing.

Still, Welling and the printers had a difficult time with the tonalities in his photos. Even though they're black and white, they had to be printed by a four-color process; otherwise, the black looked pale and washed-out, an effect that was exaggerated depending on the type of paper used. Twice when he had prints made, they came out too red. Muse X was finally able to modulate the inks to get a rich black and white, using other colors, whether red or blue, to produce the tones. Once Welling was sure of that, the final prints were done on Somerset, a rag paper used for watercolors.

But even before he started to use the Iris printing procedure that summer, Welling was experimenting with frames for the images. “Framing is extremely important to me,” he says. “In all my work there’s a consideration as to what it’s going to look like framed, what the frame is going to look like.” It wasn’t until December 1996 that the framer he works with, James Siena, created a prototype Welling liked, which he describes as a “stretched, exaggerated, panoramic frame.” In it, white spaces were left at the narrower side of the rectangular frame rather than on the wider side, a decision that Welling can’t explain but that he says felt “intuitively” right.

However right the frames, Welling was uncertain about the printing process almost up until the time of the Gorney show. “Even when I was shipping the work to New York I thought, this is a mistake. Not a mistake—but I didn’t know what the work would look like.” Only when he saw the framed pieces in the space did he realize how appropriate the printing process was for the images at this scale—and perhaps how compelling they looked as well, although that is not an observation that he’s made out loud.

The velvety, rich shades of black, white, and gray and the luscious matte surfaces of the prints give the work an almost tactile quality that enhances the varying intensities of light and dark in the images. In *Brussels*, the strange, bent neon bulbs glow with a weird intensity as they stand at attention, autonomous centurions of light. On the one hand, they are marked as individual forms; on the other, they are clearly part

of this mysterious architectural confection, whose identity is further destabilized by the play between the sensuality of the execution and the puzzlement aroused by the object itself.

Puzzlement is one common response to Welling’s art, which he has acknowledged. “I think my work appears inaccessible because my project is close to what has traditionally been defined as poetry,” he has said. “The world is a complex of coded activities which are often difficult to access.”<sup>1</sup> Under the guise of photographing diverse sources of illumination, Welling creates his own complex of coded objects and sensations.

Although *Brussels* is indeed an image of an illuminated cake sign, its nominal subject matter is only its most obvious attraction. Like much of Welling’s work, it taps into memories and emotions in the viewer—about darkness, strange places, and the wonder of that which attracts us for reasons unknown. It is a trope for the seductions of the quickly glimpsed, the half-remembered, the partially understood, qualities that Welling wants to hold up, examine, and admire without piercing the fragile surface of their fugitive grace. □

1. All quotes from the artist are taken from an interview with the author, August 8, 1997, unless otherwise noted.

2. Trevor Fairbrother, “James Welling,” *The Binational: American Art of the Late '80s* (exhibition catalogue, Cologne, DuMont Buchverlag, 1988), p. 220.

3. László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), p. 33.

4. Fairbrother, *Ibid.*, p. 220.