

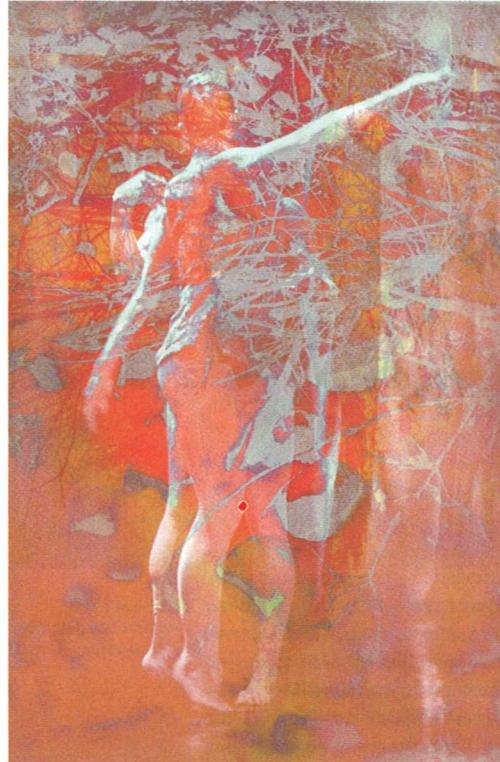
James Welling

DAVID ZWIRNER

The title of James Welling's show—"Choreograph"—suggests an affinity between the artist's principal medium, photography, and dance. If the former's etymology is meant to convey the act of drawing with light (the "pencil of nature," as William Henry Fox Talbot memorably put it in 1844), choreography, understood as the design of bodily movements, implies a sort of corporeal inscription of space. Welling's new works, presenting nearly life-size photographs of expressively posed dancers, staged within what appear to be multiple exposures of unnaturally colored wintry landscapes and the geometric surfaces of modern architecture, can be seen as a summation of the artist's career-long exploration of photography as a means to confound and expand stylistic distinctions (most notably between abstraction and representation) and discrete art forms and media. The complex imagery of these works incorporates a range of creative endeavors: Performance is arrested into representations of sculptural figures that dissolve into an allusive matrix of modernist and natural forms. Bodies and things coalesce into strange and syncopated configurations investing the images with a dance-like dynamism and even duration.

Such transmedial genre-bending is in many ways the central conceit of these wildly colored ink-jet prints. The first line of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, serving as an epigraph for the exhibition checklist, underscores the theme of transfiguration. Most of the works depict young dancers re-creating poses from canonical modern-dance pieces. Because the performers are typically captured at a moment of dramatic expressiveness and often appear as negative images, their bodies take on the semblance of classical marbles. This becoming-sculpture is perhaps most evident in *4910*, 2015, in which a female dancer's outstretched arm appears to merge with a web of brambles, invoking Bernini's sculpture of Daphne, the fated lover who is transformed into a tree in her flight from Apollo.

A corresponding transformational logic informs the pictures' high-keyed coloration, which Welling generated by assigning each of the three original black-and-white source photographs to separate red, green, and blue color channels in Photoshop, which he then manipulated. In



James Welling, *4910*,
2015, inkjet print,
63 × 42".

Welling's gift for creating art that appears to ingeniously acknowledge fundamental aspects of the photographic medium without making these acts of self-reflexivity the main event.

Unlike many of his Pictures-generation peers, who used photography to ostensibly deconstruct and demystify its rhetoric of transparency and in turn examine the fundamental contingency of meaning more generally, Welling approaches the semantic ambiguity engendered by his chosen medium more sympathetically. Less a debunker than a translator (or, as James Crump has recently argued, a ventriloquist), Welling has repeatedly found ways to use photography's vital lexicon to reinterpret—and literally remediate—certain contested artistic operations such as the painterly gesture, the associative power of landscape, and the sensuous investigation of color. Posing, these works seem to say, is not so much a sign of imposture as it is the necessary precondition for expression.

—Robert Slifkin

several of the works the artist added additional photographic imagery as well as his own angular lines to digitally dodge and burn passages so that various coloristic planes seem to emerge and recede within the fantastical space of the pictures. As Welling noted in a recent interview, the trichromatic layering of "RGB space" in color photography and offset printmaking corresponds to the way the human eye perceives colors. The salient mythic overtones of these works thematize their broader engagement with the conjunction of natural and cultural realms, evident not only in the depiction of dancers—human bodies that exist simultaneously as actual persons and expressive actors—but also in the images' basis in photography, a medium that Roland Barthes memorably described as mythic due to its avowed mechanical objectivity, which naturalized the culturally mediated relationship between the referent and its representation. In this regard, these works exemplify