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James Welling: 'Iconographia'
Expanding the Boundaries of Photography
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by Jody Zellen



Throughout his long career, James Welling has explored the different visual and chemical properties of photography. A long time ago, he framed what he saw with his camera, making black and white pictures of the buildings and landscapes that surrounded him. Later, he moved to the constructed image, creating photograms, as well as light studies that resembled Mark Rothko paintings. He eventually embraced digital photography, taking pictures of flowers, Philip Johnson's Glass House and modern dancers, then manipulated the hue and saturation of these images using the red, green and blue channels within Photoshop to enhance and highlight selected aspects of the images.

Welling is a visual explorer who continually finds new ways to de- and re-construct a photograph. It could be said he makes photographs that have many of the properties of paintings while somehow still retaining their photographic integrity. His latest works on view in the exhibition *Iconographia* are photographs called *Personae*, in addition to selected images from his *Cento* series. Many of these photographs are tightly cropped, decontextualized close-ups of ancient busts, sculptures and artifacts. Welling has selectively colorized the images, presenting them as they may have looked when they were first created, with highly saturated colors, toned hair and realistic eyes. Welling's process includes rolling a thin veil of oil paint on a dampened laser print to alter the surface and to desaturate the digitally enhanced colors. This results in works that are vignettted and depicted behind a transparent dark texture that parallels the gritty surface of the degraded marble. These pieces appear to be a muddled and diffused representation of the originals. Welling photographed some of the sculptures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while others are culled from online and printed sources.

With Welling, there is often the question of how, as well as why. How were these images made? What sequence of manipulations did Welling concoct to create the final photographs (he used toothpaste as an abrasive on some of them). Why color the lips and insert "real" eyes (even if they come from specific paintings) into ancient sculptures that are sometimes missing noses and shown in differing states of ruin? In *Portrait of Kore 674* (2021), Welling presents a cropped and colorized interpretation of the head of the marble statue [Kore 674] from the Athens Acropolis dated circa 500 BC. In Welling's depiction, she has pasty skin, red-orange hair and lips, green eyes (from a Manet painting), pink eyebrows, a golden yellow cap and is positioned in front of a blue-black background. Gone are the grace and simplicity of the "pure" marble sculpture in favor of this unsettling and uncanny transformation. Welling notes that for the individuals depicted in *Personae*, he sources the eyes, jewelry and clothing from old master paintings, but fashions the hair and make-up as he wishes.

Welling is an extremely prolific artist, this time filling the gallery with more than forty individually framed photographs (23 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches). Though in part, variations on a theme, it is interesting to compare and contrast Welling's evocative "portraits" and note the ways he transforms these stone sculptures, in many ways bringing them to "life." Some appear to gaze out at the viewer, lost in thought, an attribute that Welling actively encourages. He wanted to create "active personages with their own mental processes."

Interspersed with the "portraits" are images of ancient artifacts, body fragments, columns and free-standing sculptures that contextualize them and provide both a sense of scale and place. Called *Centos*, these pieces are poems made from collaged fragments. The works in *Iconographia* fit nicely in the continuum of Welling's explorations into how photography can be manipulated. They expand the boundaries of photography, becoming hybrids that fuse digital technologies with aspects of painting and printmaking.

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