

Witnesses

Chris Welsby and James Welling

Educator Handout: Grades 7-12

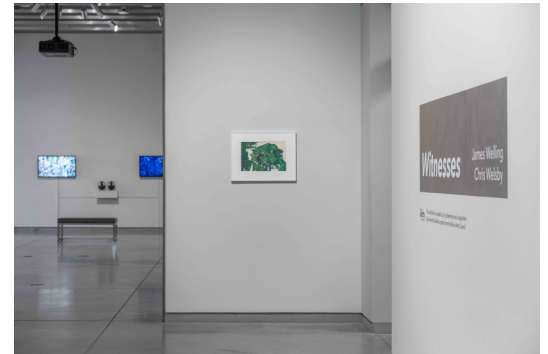
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Witnesses combines recent work by two artists, the photographer James Welling and the filmmaker Chris Welsby. Throughout the exhibition, images of the natural world and of human-made structures abandoned within it have been processed or changed in ways that alter a viewer's simple delight in what is being represented. Plant studies, landscapes, and views of weed-eaten structures are corrupted in these artworks by slight but consuming indications of each artist's method. Borrowing its title from a quote by the 18th-century German playwright Friedrich Schiller, the exhibition deals with the modern problem of a lost oneness with nature, and with the difficulties in trying to regain it.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

[James Welling](#) (b. 1951) is a photographer. Since the 1970s, his varied and exploratory practice has melded the challenges of conceptualism with a deep sensitivity for the medium and the history of photography. Associated in the 1980s with the [Pictures Generation](#), his work has been exhibited widely, including in a 2009 exhibition about that movement at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY) and, in 2000, in a career-spanning survey exhibition organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, OH). He was Professor in the Department of Art at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1995 to 2016, and currently teaches at Princeton University in the Visual Art Program. He lives in New York City.

[Chris Welsby](#) (b. 1948) is a filmmaker. For more than 50 years, he has been making films, videos, and moving image installations focused on themes of environment and ecology. His work has been shown widely, including in screenings at Light Cone (Paris, France), Doc Films (Chicago, IL), Anthology Film Archives (New York, NY), and the National Film Theatre (London, UK), as well as in exhibitions at the Tate Gallery (London, UK), the Serpentine Gallery (London, UK), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France), and the Musée du Louvre (Paris, France). He retired in 2012 from Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, where he had taught in the School for the Contemporary Arts since 1989. He lives on Gabriola Island, off the coast of British Columbia.



Installation view of the exhibition *Witnesses: James Welling / Chris Welsby*, curated by Troy Sherman. This show was on view at University Galleries of Illinois State University from March 1 through March 31, 2024. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

VOCABULARY

- **Cohesive:** when all parts of a whole work together harmoniously
- **Concept:** an abstract idea that often falls under a larger theme. For example, if an artist or exhibition utilizes the **theme** of the color green, **concepts** within the **theme** could be nature, life, growth, or prosperity.
- **Curate:** to select, prepare, and arrange images, objects, or artworks for display
- **Medium:** refers to the type of art (such as video, photography, or printmaking), as well as the materials an artwork is made from (such as ink, film, or a digital file)¹
- **Photolithography:** a printmaking process in which a photograph is printed onto stone, plastic, metal, or paper. The surface is then wetted with water and either oil paint or printmaking ink is applied to the wet surface. The oil-based medium sticks to areas where the photographic image was printed, while the water repels the oil from depositing around the image. The plate is then printed or transferred onto another surface.
- **Theme:** recurring ideas, mediums, or subject matter—such as nature, green plants, architecture, or digital media

¹Tate (n.d.). *Art Term: Medium*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/medium>.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

RESPOND - VA:Re8 - Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

Works by James Welling and Chris Welsby featured in [Witnesses](#) explore similar **themes** and **concepts** while utilizing different **mediums** and techniques. As a class, analyze the [exhibition](#) using the following prompts.

- Describe what you see in Welling's photographs and Welsby's videos.
- What similarities can you find between the two artists' work? How does their work differ from one another's?
- Notice the arrangement of works in the exhibition. How does their placement in relation to one another impact the way you "read" the works?
 - For example, one of Welsby's videos is featured by itself in a darkened gallery while others are interspersed with Welling's photographs in another gallery space.
- Based on your observations, what **themes** and **concepts** emerge within the exhibition?

CREATE - VA:Cr1.2 - Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Engage students in working with one or more classmates to either create or select a series of artworks aligned with a **theme** or **concept** of their choice. Provide students with the following prompts to consider when developing ideas and creating or **curating** works for their series.

- With your collaborating partner(s), select a **theme** or **concept** to focus on.
- Choose from a range of **mediums**, techniques, and **subject matter**.
 - What decisions will you make to ensure works in your series are **cohesive** with one another and with your chosen **theme** or **concept**? For example, works throughout *Witnesses* have similar **subject matter** and color palettes.
 - If **curating** works for your series, consider either selecting artworks that you and/or your collaborators have previously made or exploring the collections of museums—such as the [Art Institute of Chicago](#), [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), or the [National Gallery of Art](#). Look for connections between artworks created at different times and in different places.
- Consider creating or selecting works that utilize unconventional **mediums** and techniques. How do these methods communicate your chosen **theme** or **concept**?
 - For example, Chris Welsby will occasionally attach his camera to the branch of a tree or plant. By doing so, he captures a point of view from the plant and engages the wind and weather in the recording process. James Welling not only photographs and digitally edits his images, but also prints on top of them using a modified **photolitho-graphic** process.¹ His additional manipulation of the images emphasizes their constructed nature and highlights the distance between the viewer and the **subjects**.

¹For a photolithography demonstration by James Welling, see 57:00 - 1:02:00 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDwcgPJokIM>.

PRESENT - VA:Pr4 - Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Guide students through the process of **curating** an exhibition that highlights a selection of works from their series. Provide students with the following prompts.

- Select works that best convey your chosen **theme** or **concept** when combined with one another.
- Discuss possibilities for physical or [digital exhibition](#) spaces. Consider how the location relates to your chosen **theme** or **concept**.
- Decide how you would like to present your selected works—such as an installation, a book, video projection, physical or digital timeline, or a map.
- Consider how the arrangement, placement, and spacing of artworks will work together to convey meaning to viewers.
 - For example, Welling's works [Athens, 7:34 AM, June 20th. Acanthus \(Versions 1 & 2\)](#) are stacked closely together and away from other photographs. Not only does this choice prompt the viewer to look for similarities and differences between the two photographs, but it also showcases their connection to Welsby's [videos](#) on the adjacent wall.
- What are the display needs for your works? Do they need to be mounted, stretched, framed, wired, hung, placed on pedestals, or loaded to digital devices?

Educator resources are available on the [exhibition webpage](#).

You can find [University Galleries](#) on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Vimeo](#) and sign up to receive email updates through the [newsletter](#). Please contact galleries@illinoisstate.edu or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to this exhibition.

