



# *Witnesses*

James Welling  
Chris Welsby

# Witnesses: James Welling / Chris Welsby

Curated by Troy Sherman

The tragic dimension to our belief that modern humans lie at a remove from the natural world is produced by our accompanying notion that certain people in the past lived closer to nature than we do now, and that this was better for them. This modern sense of loss with respect to nature was codified in 1795 by Friedrich Schiller, who, in his essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," observed some differences between the ancient Greeks' poetic sensibility about nature and that of his own contemporaries. The Greeks, said Schiller, had no need for the sort of depictions of nature in its figurative grandeur that pique modern minds; this was because the Greeks distinguished little between their own and the natural world. "They felt naturally," wrote Schiller, while "we feel the natural." Artists and "poets," he went on, "are everywhere the *guardians* of nature." But where, as in modern life, they "can no longer completely be this, and where they have already experienced within themselves the destructive influence of arbitrary and artificial forms, they will appear as nature's *witnesses*."<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition borrows its title, *Witnesses*, from Schiller. It presents recent work by two artists, the photographer James Welling and the filmmaker Chris Welsby. In these works, images of the natural world and of manmade structures abandoned within it have been processed or manipulated in ways that disturb a viewer's simple delight in what is being represented. By emphasizing certain means of picturing the natural world so as to complicate the ends of such depictions, the photos and videos in this exhibition deal—in different but mutually clarifying ways—with the modern problem of a lost oneness with nature, and with the difficulties inherent in trying to regain it.

Welling and Welsby began their respective careers in the early 1970s, the one in California, the other in London. Welling was trained at the California Institute of the Arts at a time when many young artists were beginning to metabolize the lessons of conceptual art from the previous decade and to integrate them with other, less wholly cerebral approaches to artmaking. Welsby, a member of the influential London Film-Makers' Cooperative throughout the 1970s, developed as a young artist in the milieu of Structural/Materialist Film, an avant-garde movement that emphasized the reliance of any moving image's meaning upon the physical stuff with which it was made and presented. For each artist, then, a sensitivity for the productive tension between a pure artistic idea and the necessity of transmitting and transmuting it through some medium has been, for decades, predominant in his work. *Witnesses* shows that the different ways these artists emphasize the processes of depiction in their work can be considered at once to effect and to countervail a lost authenticity in humans' relationship with nature, which Schiller claimed is characteristic of modern life.

Botanical studies, landscapes, and views of weed-eaten structures are corrupted in these artworks by slight but consuming indications of each artist's method. In Welling's case, hand painting pairs with digital effects to flatten his photos' grounds while enlivening their figures. This intermedia scumbling (the oil-painting technique of applying paint atop paint to create texture) results in images whose subjects appear cut from their surroundings into almost stereoscopic relief, yet whose actual surfaces are palpable. Tension between the sculptural vividness of Welling's depictions and the non-illusionism of his photographs as objects suspends the things they show—trees, leaves, virid Greek ruins—somewhere between literal presence and pictorial fiction. Welling himself has said that he is as "interested in having [his] work recreate the sensuous immediacy of what the imagery may refer to as recreating the sensuous experience of standing in front of a photograph."<sup>2</sup> Remnants of

1. Friedrich Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," in *Friedrich Schiller: Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 195-196.

2. Robert Slifkin, Thomas Ruff, and James Welling, "Editions of You: Questions for Thomas Ruff and James Welling," in *Dark Matter: Thomas Ruff/James Welling* (Ghent: Snoeck, 2023), 81.



3. Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," 195.

temples from a culture that "had not lost the nature in humanity"<sup>3</sup> (Schiller), overtaken by the unreal creep of the artist's green paints, stand in metaphorically for the distance which Welling's remark points to between a viewer of a photograph and a photographed object—witnessing is a derelict form of the essence of a witnessed thing.

Welsby's videos, likewise, are defined by the complex relationship which his subjects have with the medium of their recording and display. Contextualized alongside Welling's photos, his camera's mimicry of natural phenomena (gusts, rustles, retinas, rust) takes on a plaintive aspect in this regard. The videos solidify their own apartness from what they depict by attempting, seemingly, to become their own subjects. Low frame-rates, selective over- and underexposure, and a liberal deployment of the autofocus function produce moving images that—despite the simplicity of their conception—are visually teeming, almost unwieldy, abstract in unexpected ways. In *Oxygen*, blurred and lagging leaves scrape across the screen like brushes on a canvas of light; all but the choicest fleeting movements are mutated by the camera's incapacity to register this scene in its worldly fullness. In *Nightfall*, the cameraman's ceaseless flickering of a flashlight on the forest floor forces his device to adjust its vision again and again, the scene morphing and settling for a split second each time. A glimpse of unfallen nature, it seems, emerges in the moments when his camera is focusing.

Welsby and Welling have been brought together in *Witnesses* because they represent two aspects of the artistic situation with respect to nature. (Schiller might have termed the work of the one artist "naive," that of the other "sentimental": "The poet, I say, either *is* nature or he will *seek* it. The former makes for the naive poet, the latter for the sentimental poet."<sup>4</sup>) Welsby's videos, in their aleatoric simplicity, attempt to offer visions of nature untrammelled and on its own terms, but the persistent intensifications of image introduced by his medium prevent us from sensing anything other than a cyborg realness in these twigs and raindrops. Welling's photos, on the other hand, are characterized by a strong literary quality, the metaphorical precision of which is confused by the uncontrolled tangibility of his pictures' painted surfaces. In each case, either a desire to return to nature or a desire to transcend it poetically is interrupted by its opposite. Witnessing the natural world is shown to be a contradictory process that happens at this intersection of return and transcendence.

4. Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," 200.

## Exhibition Checklist

March 1 through March 31, 2024

### Welling

*Eleusis. Telesterion (Hall of Initiation)*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2020.

*Athens. Olive Grove. Temple of Olympian Zeus*, Oil on laser print, 19" x 13", 2021.

*Athens. Temple of Olympian Zeus. Retaining Wall*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2020.

*Athens. 7:34 AM, June 20th. Acanthus*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2021.

*Athens. 7:34 AM, June 20th. Acanthus*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2021.

*Athens. National Garden. Aleppo Pine*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2020.

*Athens. Propylaia. Southwest pteron looking toward the Saronic Gulf*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2021.

*Athens. Sacred Way to Eleusis*, Oil on laser print, 13" x 19", 2021.

### Welsby

*Momentum*, HD video with audio, 37:00 minutes, 2015.

*A Sinking Feeling*, HD video with audio, 7:00 minutes, 2023.

*The View of Entrance Island*, HD video with audio, 17:00 minutes, 2015.

*Oxygen*, HD video with audio, 12:18 minutes, 2021.

*Mercury*, HD video with audio, 23:00 minutes, 2016.

*Desert Spring*, HD video with audio, 10:00 minutes, 2017.

*Nightfall*, HD video with audio, 8:30 minutes, 2023.

**James Welling** (b. 1951) is a photographer. Since the 1970s, his varied and exploratory practice has melded the challenges of conceptual art 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) and, in 2000, in a career-spanning survey exhibition organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio). 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), Doc Films (Chicago), Anthology Film Archives (New York) and the National Film Theatre (London), as well as in exhibitions at the Tate Gallery (London), the Serpentine Gallery (London), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), and the Musée du Louvre (Paris). 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.

All works courtesy of each respective artist.

Cover detail: *Mercury*, HD video with audio still, 2016.

Image of *Mercury* © Chris Welsby and courtesy of the artist.

Image of *Aleppo Pine* © James Welling and courtesy of the artist.

