

JAMES WELLING

Hapax Legomena

Hapax Legomena means words without a context. Hollis Frampton titled a group of seven disparate films that he made in the early 1970s, *Hapax Legomena*. For ten years I wanted to make a body of work that would function this way: Each work would be radically different from its neighbor.

CIGARETTE ADS

In 1972, my first year of graduate school at Cal Arts, I hired a friend to re-photograph a group of pictures: Seiji Ozawa, a photograph of myself at age 5, and a stone school in Connecticut. These were my first image appropriations, but they sat dormant as an idea for a couple of months. In September 1973 I moved into a loft in Venice, CA, that I shared with David Salle. David and I were very interested in images in magazines, generally. David took a slide of me, probably in December 1973, arranging cigarette ads (Winston, Marlborough, Salem, and Camel ads) on a wall in our loft. Also on this wall were other pictures: an image from Jacques Cousteau's book "The Silent World," a picture of Gertrude Stein, and an image I can't identify, probably a Lartigue picture.

When I put together my thesis show in April 1974 I thought of these works as collages. "Image appropriation" was not yet a term. David and I thought that what we were doing was a radical act, a 70s version of Duchamp's readymade. Taking an image out of a book or a magazine and putting it on the wall seemed so right at the time. I'm not sure David ever actually did this as a work; of course, in his paintings he juxtaposes images and even today, if you look at his studio, he uses piles of images. I suppose I was a bit more frugal. When I look at my sources, I took a lot from the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, as well as *Playboy* which, surprisingly, I don't remember buying. They must have been David's copies. I remember one of the ordering logics of the thesis show was to buy a handful of 8x10" frames and fit the work into them. Even then the "frame" was important. I was too broke to afford anything other than "document frames." But nevertheless, the preexisting frame seemed right for the preexisting photo.

I collected cigarette ads in part responding to a phrase uttered in Hollis Frampton's film, "Surface Tension," where a man talks about "the color in American cigarette ads." (The voice is Kasper Konig). I was in awe of Frampton at this stage of my life. I rented all the films I could get my hands on, even taking the 16 millimeter projector back to my loft so I could watch the films alone. About the cigarette ads, one of the things that I liked was "real size" things going on: hands or cigarette packs that were same-size, or alternately, in some cigarette

ads, particularly in Salem ads, you'd have just heads sticking out of the water. For me, this was a wry comment on conceptual art, art made with the head.

GREENLAND, 1975

In July 1974, David Salle moved downstairs and my girlfriend, Lisa Koper, moved in with me. Lisa had a large collection of *National Geographic* magazines and I began to raid her stash of back issues to make a series of works using landscape images. This picture of Greenland is from that period. The only work to really make it out of the 70s is one of these National Geographic pictures that I used in *Light Sources*. In "Arctic Sun," I re-photographed this image that I collected in 1975 for a show in 1995.

Other image appropriations or "borrowings," almost all black and white from 1974-75, prefigure some of the types of images that I would later make as photographs. Or at least, retrospectively, I now like to think they prefigured what I would (or still will) take pictures of.

SUN

In the summer of 1975 I began using a Polaroid camera. *Sun*, 1975 was made from the balcony of my studio during a period of intense forest fires around Los Angeles; the air was so smoky that the sky turned a brownish orange for a few days.

FRONT, BACK, MIDDLE and WINDOW FLASH

On July 2, 1976, I set up my Polaroid camera and photographed a 2x4 that I used as a wedge to lock my studio door. I took this picture and a photograph of the top of the lock, which became the photograph *Lock* that Michael Fried wrote about in 2000. I can't remember what camera I used to take this picture. Most of my color Polaroids from 1976 were made with a Polaroid Automatic Land Camera 450, the camera that I made "Window Flash" and "Studio Door" with. *Window Flash* was made right after I acquired the camera. It was still working as it was designed and I used two flash bulbs to take this view out my window (I made a whole series of work photographing out of this window in 1975 with a point-and-shoot Kodak 110 camera). By the time I made *Studio Door* I had managed to wreck the shutter so I was stuck with a Polaroid camera with a fixed aperture and a milk bottle cap for the shutter. I put the camera on a very small tripod and made pictures using exposures from one second to one minute. Most of these Polaroids documented my studio, a large loft space in Venice, CA. This Polaroid was made a little bit after the *National Geographic* image appropriation.

UNTITLED, 1980

I made watercolors in high school and I never stopped making paintings. There was a very slow period when I went to Cal Arts, but once I graduated and before I committed myself to photography, I used watercolor as a way of trying out different pictorial ideas. In 1979, I had moved to New York by then, I made a number of small, mostly 8x10 or less, paintings and drawings. With the paintings, I used watercolor, gouache, and ink. In this painting, I covered the sheet of watercolor paper with Higgins brown ink and scratched at the paper to make an image. Scratching back to create white is a watercolor technique that I was familiar with and had used as a teenager. This technique on this paper produced images that looked like Expressionist woodcuts, something that wasn't far from my mind as in 1980; there was a big Expressionist show at the Guggenheim.

BLUE

I made this watercolor while making the Aluminum Foil photographs. I was entranced by the small, intense landscapes of the foils. This painting was done with very dry pigment on a brush. I like painting vortices. I think I've always been interested in vortices, either a hole or the sun punching through sky or trees.

CRAQUELURE, 1980

In 1980 I began to scorch 4x5 inch prints with a flat iron. As the photograph began to smoke, I covered it with brown ink. Heating the print loosened the gelatin surface of the print sufficiently to accept the ink into the gelatin. Otherwise the liquid would bead up on the surface of the photograph. The temperature took the brown ink toward a reddish color. With some of these images, I rubbed the back of the print twice across the rounded edge of my desk, producing a craquelure surface. The picture here depicts a heavily textured curtain from my parents' house (taken down from the window and draped over an arm chair) on which sits a brass bell. The bell seems to be ringing and the folds of the drape are the sound produced.

TWO POLAROIDS

In the winter of 1979 over the Christmas holidays I bought two packages of Polaroid film to use with my father's SX70. I thought this all out in advance: in my changing bag, I would carefully remove all of the individual pieces of film into a 4x5" film box. Then, still in the darkness of the changing bag, I would load pieces of SX70 into my 4x5 film holders. I exposed the film of these monogrammed handkerchiefs and then, in the changing bag, loaded it back into

the Polaroid cassette, put this in the camera, and fired the camera with my hand over the lens so as not to expose the film a second time. This very roundabout method of making a Polaroid in my 4x5 pleased me greatly and I would have continued if it weren't so laborious. One of the drawbacks that I quickly realized is that the film is reversed, that is, it is backwards. The SX70 uses a prism in the image path to flip the image around. Without the prism, my images were laterally flipped.

UNTITLED, 1981-1982

In 1981 I worked for three months (May to July) photographing a piece of drapery velvet dusted with dried phyllo dough. In September I returned to photographing the same subject, this time using a flat black piece of fabric. As the black folds tended to disappear, the dough revealed the fabric's contours. I made sequential images of the construction as I moved the dough and cloth.

In either December or January 1981-82 I rented a color darkroom and started to print these negatives on Kodak Type-C color paper. For my 1982 exhibition at Metro Pictures I selected four images and asked my friend Roger Cutforth to print them as 8x10 inch Cibachromes. This yellow-orange 11x14 is the only print from this preliminary printing session I have left. (In 1990 I printed a set of three of these images in red, in an edition of three, for a show at Christine Burgin).

MY FIRST DEGRADÉ: ZEPNI

I made watercolor studies for of colored backgrounds in 1984. I was interested in colored backgrounds because they were extensively used in the six o'clock news in the early 80s. I told my friend Carroll Dunham about my interest in such matters and Dunham, who knew something about graphic design, said, "Oh, yeah, they call those 'graduated backgrounds'." Thus, Degradé is a portmanteau word I derived from "graduated background." In May '85 I spent a month in a residency at Lightworks in Syracuse, NY. I worked contact printing and organizing all my older negatives by day, and at night I made the first paintings that would occupy me for the next two years. At the end of my month I decided to take a stab at some color photographs. I printed a couple 4x5s of farm machinery and in the last couple of hours I made some orange and red Degradés on 8x10 Kodak glossy paper. A color darkroom in 1985 was not a pleasant place to be. You processed the paper yourself in a rotary drum processor, pouring small amounts of chemicals into the whirling drum in total darkness. I think I made seven prints this way. *Zepni* was one of them. In 1990, when I was putting together my catalogue for the Kunsthalle Bern, instead of reproducing works that would be in the show, I reproduced these early degradés

on pages 49 to 53 of *James Welling: Photographs 1977-90*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1990. Zepni is reproduced on page 50.

LOCK, 1999

Lock depicts a canal lock in Farmington, Connecticut. (I like the idea that it's the same title as *Lock*, 1976, of my door lock). In order to make *Lock* I made three separate black and white negatives using Kodak tricolor separation filters, red, green and blue. In 2004 I tried to print these three negatives in a color enlarger with red, green and blue exposures. Printing with red, green and blue light is an uncommon, but perfectly acceptable, way to make prints on chromogenic paper. It is, however, extremely difficult and my experiments went awry. One of the channels, or colors, was printed upside-down. I liked the results nevertheless.

GREEN DRAPES 1, 2, 3

For many years I have been fascinated by drapery and by the color green. For me, the drapes represent what I call the "physical manifold." I got this term from a friend of mine, Pierre Adler, who was studying Heidegger at the New School. For me, the idea of the manifold is space in the space-time continuum. When I lived in California, I became intensely aware of the color green. I wanted to make a sculpture of green bunting. Somehow making a drapery sculpture out of green cloth morphed, 20 years later, into these green drapery pictures. I bought a piece of chartreuse fabric, took it out to my back yard, arranged it, and made a handful of exposures in bright sunlight with my 8x10 camera.

COLOR TEST, 2004

In May 2004, I made a group of photograms of plants. I decided that I would print the photograms in one of Isaac Newton's seven primary colors, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and indigo. Newton liked the idea of seven primaries, to correspond with the seven notes of the newly created musical scale. I wasn't clear about the difference between indigo and purple so I went to the art supply store and bought some indigo and purple gouache. I took them to the darkroom and grabbed the first photographic print I could find, a very washed out contact print of a water glass. I made my color tests and let them dry. It turns out, indigo is the color of Levi's jeans.

HYDRANGEA

As I was making *Flowers*, 2004, I photographed hydrangea plants with my 8x10 view camera. I printed a few of the negatives on Kodak metallic Endura paper and cut them up into eccentric shapes. When I made *Flowers*, 2004 I would

always end up with eccentrically shaped test strips that my printer, Lisa Ohlweiler, would create. I wanted to make photographs that had similar curious shapes. I ganged four of these up on a sheet of paper. I made about six groupings of which this is one.

HOLLY, 2007

With *Flowers*, 2006 I used colored filters placed above the negative and out of focus to create color in the image. With *Holly*, 2007 I asked my printer Lisa Ohlweiler to make shapes out of dry mount tissue (which has a modeled translucent texture) and to put those on top of the filters. This created a modeled texture in the colors, almost as if I was working with watercolor and drying the wet color with paper towels.

FARNSWORTH HOUSE WITH SCRATCHES AND TRICOLOR and ALBERS

In April 2006, when I was last in Chicago doing a show with Donald Young, I visited and photographed the Farnsworth House. I used a small digital camera, and I returned a month later with my 4x5 to record the house in greater detail. I shot conventional color photographs as well as tricolor pictures, where I exposed the same piece of film to red, green, and blue filters. With *Lock*, I exposed separate pieces of black and white film; in 2005, I realized that I could make multiple exposures on the same piece of color negative film and thereby eliminate the problem of registration that bedeviled me in *Lock*.

As there wasn't much wind, not much was moving at the Farnsworth House, so the tricolor effect is very subtle. You can see it in the foliage in the right --- small orange and blue leaves in motion. While printing this negative, I became interested in seeing what would happen if I scratched and sanded it to reveal the different layers of dye in the negative.

Once I began to photograph modern architecture, I received a commission to photograph Case Study House 21. I used tricolor filters, and as was the case in the Farnsworth House, there was very little motion to produce the color fringing that I liked. The filters simply produced strangely colored photographs. I like this picture because it is so washed out with that little punctuation mark, Albers' Homage to the Square.

PAINTED-ON GLASS HOUSES

As long as I've had an Epson printer, I've been experimenting with different things to do with it. When I started printing my photographs of the Glass House I had just completed a body of work using an opalescent chromogenic paper, Kodak Metallic Endura, which has a very beautiful surface. I wondered if there might be a way to coat my inkjet prints with an opalescent varnish to replicate Kodak Metallic.

My first attempts were failures but as time went along I began to appreciate the streaks and drips on the surface of the prints. I abandoned "coating" the inkjets and I started to paint into the images. The pictures in the show are all chromogenic work prints that have acrylic and watercolor additions. I sorted through the hundreds of pictures of the Glass House in both digital and film formats to arrive at the twenty I printed large with my Epson 9800 printer. The process involved making many small test inkjets and chromogenic prints, and it's from this group of rejected but still magical images that these images derive.

FLUID DYNAMICS

Every summer for the last five years, I worked making abstract photographs: *Flowers*, *Holly*, and colored version of my *New Abstractions*. In 2009, I wondered what would happen if I made photograms (cameraless pictures) with no negative or subject apart from water on the surface of the paper. A few years ago, I made a few photograms where I wet the paper, and I tried to replicate the results this summer. I quickly moved beyond what I had previously done. I discovered that by wetting the paper in the dark, and then exposing it to the color enlarger, I was not creating images with water but rather with the blue dye that all chromogenic papers have to counteract the orange base of color negative film. This blue dye, soluble in water, is what creates the images in *Fluid Dynamics*. The blue of these works is a color that I created in the enlarger; it is not the color of the dye itself.