

Phil Chang's unfixed photographic prints disappear in the light required to view them. Here he speaks with photographer James Welling about genre, the performative dimension of his work, and algorithmic realism.

James Welling: **Will you talk about how you view genre? The idea of genre came to mind when I saw your series *Cache, Active* (2010–12). When understood together, the subjects you work with—portraits, still lifes, abstractions, appropriated images, landscapes, and shots of your studio—strike me as embarking on an analysis of the idea of genre in photography. Am I wrong?**

Phil Chang

Cache, Active

Conversation with James Welling

Phil Chang: You're absolutely correct. Your work has been formative for me in coming to terms with how genre operates. The way in which you both rely on and expand aspects of genre in your practice has been invaluable. On another level, I've been interested in the various organizing systems that have been historically imposed upon photography. Genre was one of these systems, and it functions to order the trillions of photographic images that exist. It has a lasting and codifying effect on the medium in how it produces a tight correspondence between the subject and object of the photograph. If someone thinks that you make landscape photographs, then it's not difficult for that person to conclude that the subject matter is landscape or relates to physical space. What I enjoy about making photographs in the context of art is being able to complicate what is typically a tight correspondence between a photograph's subject and object.

For *Cache, Active*, I chose to include diverse genres in order to ensure that a viewer wouldn't become too closely fixated on the disappearance of a *particular* image since the light needed to view each one causes them to transform to a reddish-brown monochrome. If I were to present only portraits that transformed to a monochrome then the connection to mortality and death would be too strong. If I were to present only abstract photograms that transformed to monochromes I thought there would be too much of an insistence on themes relating to modernism and opacity. A range of genres became a way to preempt what I viewed as pre-existing conditions related to the history of photography and to what I anticipated as potential responses from viewers.

JW: Could you talk about your sense of photographic materiality?

PC: In addition to using photography as a depictive medium, I actively try to find ways to explore its material conditions. The idea of duration resides not only in shutter speed, for example, but also in the longevity of the materials I use. This aspect of duration has allowed me to be able to raise questions about the presentation of photographs in the exhibition context.

JW: All photographs involve and/or perform activity, both in "taking" and in materializing or printing. With *Cache, Active* you are, in a sense, performing the "taking" side twice at the same time, namely in making digital internegatives for the contact prints on the outdated paper. In this work, printing a new negative becomes part of taking the image. Performance in your works is not a simple translation of intention.



This page and previous: *Woman, Looking*, 2011. Unfixed gelatin-silver print, at different stages of exposure



PC: The photographs on view are themselves “performative” because they are unstable. They transform, over time, from a discernible image to a monochrome due to the photographic paper being unfixed and expired. The light necessary to view the work also makes the image disappear. In my play with photographic permanence I’m seeking a twofold outcome. On the one hand, I am interested in proposing an alternative to the incessant online archiving and caching of images by producing works that require the viewer to be physically present at the exhibition. On the other hand, I want to call into question the response of the viewer/ beholder, to emphasize that, though it’s inevitable that one feels something in response to the works’ inevitable change, this feeling is irrelevant to the works’ meaning—or, for that matter, one’s initial impulse to feel altogether. My understanding of the latter goal is greatly indebted to the work of literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels, who has asserted that focusing on a work’s affective responses alone comes at the cost of its meaning.

JW: I was interested in a claim made in a recent review of your show in Los Angeles that your investigations of the properties of photography are in some way a response to our image-saturated digital moment, when images are networked and ubiquitous.

PC: I think the present moment offers incredible opportunity for artists. One cannot work today without addressing the fact that images are prevalent, relentless, and networked.

I’m interested in what I have taken to calling “algorithmic realism.” The term refers to the Web-based process in which search relevance, indexing, and page ranking shape an understanding of the world. This is a form of realism that concerns itself less with standard depiction or pictorial conventions and instead relies on a function of visibility (that of the Web and digital content) and the notion of a linked social reality (that of the actual networks between entities that ensures relevance) in order to represent the world. Photography historically has been a mechanism to structure the world—its indexical function was a way to assert factual claims. Realism in this way pictures the world. I would argue that today the algorithm accomplishes this with greater immediacy and efficiency. It isn’t that the algorithm is more truthful than photography; it is just more dominant. Its form of realism, however, pictures the world but also allows “users” to actively intervene and participate in it.

The relentlessness and accessibility of the imagery that gets indexed is one of the reasons I decided to present an exhibition of photographs that were unstable and that eventually all become the same thing—a reddish-brown monochrome. However, I feel that if we were to focus only on image saturation then we would be enacting a major oversight—not of my work, but of what this condition says about the incessant flow of capital and the acts of circulation and consumption that structure image production today. In fact, it’s precisely the fact that the images all become the same thing that connects the work more closely to one review’s insistence on how equivalence here can be, in the word of the reviewer, “liberatory.” In this way, issues of economics, interchangeability, and the collapse of heterogeneity into sameness become more relevant ways to understand my investigations.

Phil Chang is an artist based in Los Angeles; he has had solo exhibitions at LAXART and Pepin Moore, both in Los Angeles. He is currently visiting faculty in the Department of Art at UCLA and a lecturer at Otis College of Art and Design.

James Welling’s retrospective exhibition recently opened at the Cincinnati Art Museum and will travel to the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, later this year.

✕ The exhibition is accompanied by the Aperture publication *James Welling: Monograph*.

This page: *Prints Taped to Wall, Studio, 2011*. Unfixed gelatin-silver print, at different stages of exposure



Opposite: *Three Sheets of Thin Paper, 2010*. Unfixed gelatin-silver print



This page and opposite: *Sea #1, 2011*. Unfixed gelatin-silver print, at different stages of exposure. All photographs courtesy the artist and Pepin Moore, Los Angeles



