

MAUREEN PALEY.



JAMES WELLING AND BERND & HILLA BECHER

7 March – 19 April 2025

Maureen Paley is pleased to present a joint exhibition of works by James Welling and Bernd & Hilla Becher. This will be the fifth presentation of Welling at the gallery and our first exhibition including the Bechers with kind assistance from Sprüth Magers and Max Becher.

Though the Bechers began their practice in the 1960s – preceding Welling by a decade – each artist has pushed at the medium of photography in their representation of architecture. Welling first saw photographs by the Bechers at the seminal 1970 MoMA exhibition, *Information*, and he met Hilla Becher three years later whilst studying at CalArts. In 2022, following the Bechers' retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Welling reflected on their work in an essay he wrote for the Brooklyn Rail, reaffirming his long-standing admiration for their "pursuit of a singular photographic dream."¹

James Welling is known for his work that considers the history and technical specificities of photography. Since 2023, Welling has worked on his *Thought Objects*, in which he experiments with exaggerated "unsharp masks", a common set of image sharpening tools that are often imperceptible. Welling instead modifies these unsharp masks to produce halos, exaggerated bas-relief effects, and intensified saturation, underscoring the fluidity and malleability of photographic images.

The works here are drawn from *Breuer*, a series that can be viewed as a "chapter" within the *Thought Objects* and depict buildings by Brutalist architect Marcel Breuer. "In these photographs, I respectfully and consciously worked against certain principles the Bechers employed – depict the whole building and present multiple views. Instead, I show details, partial views, and interiors. What I tried to suggest with these partial views was the feeling that all the individual work of an architect can be linked together to form, via my photographs, a single mega-work that spans time, location and materials."²

The German artist duo Bernd and Hilla Becher began their programme of methodically photographing disappearing industrial structures in 1957. Over five decades, the Bechers captured water towers, gas tanks, blast furnaces, and other functional buildings, primarily in Europe and North America. Their work can be read as an elaborate anthropological project devoted to documenting the architecture of various locations and industries, once the key engines of modernity.

"The Bechers' sensitivity to the perils of extinction reminds me of bird watchers. Like serious birders, they were always on the lookout for fresh industrial specimens and when they saw one, they would carefully note the location and return later to photograph it." – Welling, 2022.³

The duo consistently photographed their subjects under overcast skies to avoid shadows and employed a large-format camera for detail, a point of difference from Welling who works across seasonal conditions. The depth of focus in the Bechers' pictures exceeds what the human eye is capable of, ensuring that every architectural rivet is clearly visible. This approach highlights their desire to reduce subjectivity, positioning these utilitarian objects as subjects of contemplation, challenging viewers to reconsider the aesthetic and historical significance of these structures.

“As a photographer, I see the pleasure they took in their work... For all the formality of the Bechers’ work we have seen how it could engage different modalities and meanings – portraiture, graphic design, preservation, humour.” – Welling, 2022.⁴

This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to see these artists’ works in conversation in London.

James Welling (b. 1951, Connecticut, USA) lives and works in New York, USA.

Selected solo exhibitions include *Thought Objects*, David Zwirner, New York (2024); *Wako Works of Art*, Tokyo (2022); *Centro*, Musée des Arts Contemporains, Hornu, Belgium (2021); *Choreograph*, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York (2020); *Metamorphosis* (travelling exhibition), Kunstforum Wien, Vienna, and Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent (2017); *Things Beyond Resemblance*, Brandywine River Museum of Art, Pennsylvania (2015); *Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon*, Art Institute of Chicago (2014); *Monograph* (travelling exhibition), Cincinnati Art Museum and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2013); *The Mind on Fire* (travelling exhibition), MK Gallery, Milton Keynes; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela; and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2012–13).

Welling’s work is held in major museum collections, including Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Vancouver Art Gallery; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Bernd Becher (b. 1931, Siegen, Germany; d. 2007) and **Hilla Becher** (b. 1934, Potsdam, Germany; d. 2015) lived and worked in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Selected solo exhibitions include San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2022); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2022); National Museum Cardiff, Wales (2019); Josef Albers Museum, Quadrat Bottrop (2018); Photographic Collection/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne (2016, 2013, 2010, 2006); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2008); Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2005); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2004); K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2003); and the 44th Venice Biennale (1990).

Works by the Bechers are included in major museum collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Tate, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn; Sprengel Museum, Hanover; Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; and Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

^{1,3,&4} Welling, James, *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, Brooklyn Rail, September 2022

² James Welling in correspondence, February 2025

image, left: James Welling, *Staircase*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2023/2025, UV print on Dibond, 76.2 x 50.8 cm

image, right: Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Gravel Plant*, Kretz/Andernach, D, 1987, silver gelatin print, paper: 60 x 50 cm