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INTERVIEWS

## The City Proper

Artist Zoe Crosher interviews artist and exhibition curator James C. Welling

*The City Proper*, on view through January 15th at Margo Leavin Gallery, is an exhibition of photography focusing on Southern California's urban landscape, featuring works by John Baldessari, Cindy Bernard, Zoe Crosher, Shannon Ebner, Christina Fernandez, Frank Gohlke, Anthony Hernandez, Peter Holzhauer, Brandon Lattu, William Leavitt, Lisa Ohlweiler, Catherine Opie, Arthur Ou, Allen Ruppertsberg, Asha Schechter & Jacob Stewart-Halevy, Ger Van Elk, Mark Wyse and Amir Zaki.



On the occasion of the opening, participating artist Zoe Crosher interviewed James Welling about the show's inception, ways of looking at Los Angeles, the legacy of the *New Topographics* exhibition, and photography in the city's contemporary moment.

**Can you speak about how the show came about?**

The idea of the show began when Margo invited me to curate something for the fall. Originally, I thought about doing a historical show of things like the work of Sol Lewitt and other sculptors in Europe. This quickly morphed into making a show about the way Los Angeles looks. I spoke to Tony Hernandez this summer and I knew that he was printing in inkjet some of his 1978 5" x 7" negatives. I met Tony that year and I wanted to start with his work, which I think is so strong. And rarely seen. I next thought of Peter Holzhauer, who, of the photographers in the show, is probably the most committed to recording the way L.A. looks. And I've always loved your airport piece so I knew that had to be in the show.



**How did you choose the title?**

A few years ago I drove my father-in-law who developed condos in Florida back from MOCA to the Westside on 3rd St. As we drove through Silverlake I remember he said that there didn't seem to be any zoning in Los Angeles. This chaotic side of L.A. is something I love, as do most of the artists in the show, I'm sure.

So as I thought about work for the show, I wanted to look at this side of the city. But as I thought of different pieces, I realized that some were not *city-enough*. That is, I wanted pictures that showed the city itself, the city, as I imagined it, properly. I also like the expression "City Proper," as opposed to the more rural side of L.A. The "hills," for instance, are not really in the show. But the urban beach is.

**Can you talk about the show's relationship to the *New Topographics* exhibition, which you site as an**

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### inspiration for *The City Proper*?

Britt Salvesen's re-staging of *New Topographics* at LACMA was certainly on my mind. I saw it the first time it came to L.A. in 1976 at Otis's old gallery on Wilshire by MacArthur Park. It blew my mind then, and seeing the same work 35 years later reignited my love for clear, well articulated photographs. *New Topographics* is, more than anything else, a descriptive quality of light, a clarity that comes from a certain relation to the camera, film and location. *New Topographics*, in some important way unites all the photographers in the show as being under it's spell. Of course Ed Rusha was cited as a touchstone for the *New Topographics* and I completely forgot about his work until the day of the opening.



### What does this historical basis mean for contemporary photography at this moment in Los Angeles?

Most of the work in the show is probably more influenced by Jeff Wall's torque on how the city is recorded than by *New Topographics*. I think Jeff sees the world as a stage and almost all the photographs (from William Leavitt's and Ger Van Elk's and Al Ruppertsberg's to Lisa Ohlweiler or Asha Schecter's work) take more from a notion of staging, than they do in using the camera faithfully.

The great thing about re-doing *New Topographics* is that you see how direct and straight the work was when it was exhibited. It's from another era, another idea about how a picture is made. And that's why I really wanted to put the Gohlke in the show, right up against the Wyse piece that references Jeff Wall, you literally see the change of attitude.

### How is the "myth of the American West" manifested differently in this moment than in *New Topographics*

I think *The City Proper* has more ironic work than did *New Topographics*. Baldessari, Lattu, Ou, Zaki, you. I think that you all have a very amused way of working.

### Do you think you've created a "gang"?

My sense is that the show spans many different ways of working, so is it a gang I've assembled? Not so much. I like the movement from one artist's work to the next as you walk through the show. On one level nothing is similar as you go through it. In the front room, Christina Fernandez, William Leavitt, Shannon Ebner, Catherine Opie; their work is completely different one from the other. Perhaps the gritty subject and the use of black and white holds it together. And as I said, this is what I like about the show. Everyone is working with very different ideas but with a roughly similar look and maybe even camera.



### Why did you hang the Durer fascimile in the show?

That's my intervention. I was thinking about Mark Wyse's show a few years ago called *Disavowal* where he installed reproductions of works in his show. It was painted 516 years ago and it's in the courtyard of a building in Innsbruck, done very observationally, very photographically. After Durer finished this painting, he walked around the courtyard and painted it looking the other way. I guess it goes back to my original idea of doing something historical for Margo. The show spans almost 40 years but there's a "present" that's in every work so things look completely contemporary even with the time span. Except for Durer.

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