

“Jessica Eaton: MFO5”

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Jessica Eaton’s photographic practice is experimental and labor-intensive, pushing the basic components of the medium to their limits. Beginning in the studio with a large-format film camera, each image or series develops as a pictorial, sculptural and durational exercise, at once systematic and illogical. The results are confounding, carefully planned accidents that query vision and its tenuous relationship to knowing.

Color has long been a focus of Eaton’s work: how it can be pulled apart and put back together, and how it might be detached from representation. In her long-running *cfaal* series (an abbreviation of “Cubes for Albers and LeWitt”), Eaton captures grey-scale geometric objects on color negatives; building up complex volumes with multiple exposures and color filters. But there are inherent limits to commercially available film and printing processes, tied as they are to RGB color systems and naturalistic tendencies. Just as the pursuit of “realism” motivated photography’s development, it continually masks the fundamental ways in which every image is an abstraction.

Eaton has long been fascinated by what we don’t see: wavelengths moving through our world that can only be sensed by other beings or technologies. To explore these unknowns, Eaton has turned to separation negatives and color carbon printing—methods used to produce some of the oldest color photographs. Red, green, and blue light is captured on separate black-and-white negatives; this information is then transferred to layers of pure cyan, magenta, and yellow pigments suspended in light-sensitive gelatin emulsion. In this way, each color becomes an entirely isolated and potentially arbitrary variable—once “blue” is recorded, it can be output as “red,” or any other color. Multiple separations can be scrambled and combined; add to this the ability to filter for ultraviolet and infrared light (both invisible to the human eye), and increasingly surreal variations result.

For *UVBGRIR* (2014/2015), Eaton used the carbon process to present a single floral arrangement through a variety of chromatic formulas. *MF 05 / Tricolour V 02: (R > R, G > G, B > B) Registered* matches input to output, reproducing the flowers in hyper-real lush saturation. Its *Unregistered* companion keeps the exposures in their original, unaligned positions; it reads like vision being pulled apart, kaleidoscopic vibrations that defy focus.

From there the series depart into palettes both historic and propositional. *MF 05 / Tricolour V 06: (IR > R, R > G, G > B) after Kodak Aerochrome*, recreates the formula of a discontinued infrared film. (While Aerochrome’s surreal effects made it popular with artists, the proliferation of infrared films is closely tied to military and surveillance purposes. Ways of seeing are never neutral.) Other variations are entirely new possibilities, as Eaton describes: “colour films that never existed but could if we wanted – particularly if we gave up our attachment to representing the visual world as we perceive it.” These deviations invoke the psychedelic; intense, dreamlike colors that gesture beyond our limited senses. As the beginning of Eaton’s foray into a new process, these works are speculative; a set of “answers” to a problem that gesture towards variety ad infinitum.

While the flowers themselves might appear sentimental, calling up references such as Dutch still life *vanitas* and iconic moments in photographic history, their repetition acts against such associations (as does the series’ objective, formulaic titles). Like the cubes preceding them, Eaton chooses her botanical models as conduits that deliver a unique set of photographic possibilities. While electro-magnetically complex, bouquets are pictorially redundant. For that reason it’s easy to get lost in these images and their unfamiliar chroma; the subject recedes in the spectrum, allowing something deeper to surface.

- Rose Bouthillier