



JESSICA EATON: STRATA

RED BULL 381 PROJECTS, TORONTO
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BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jessica Eaton's structured, incandescent images tend to evoke the molecular. Her solo exhibition at Red Bull 381 Projects—the gallery's last—closed the space with the sparkle of many tiny bangs. The Saskatchewan-born, Vancouver-schooled and now Montreal-based artist's photographs call for close viewing; they don't readily reveal what they are or how they've materialized. As such, this unfamiliarity gives them a striking sense of *possibility*.

To start with what can be seen, they glow. In particular, the nested layers of the *Cubes for Albers and Lewitt* series (abbreviated to *cfaal*; all works 2010) seem to be lit from within. *Interpolation Dramatization 4* and *108_21* show smaller blocks of shade and colour set in morphing, shuffling grids. All of the compositions are filled with straight lines, though the edges are soft, some ever so slightly fringed with light. Large, velvety brush strokes, worn

corners and visible wood grain provide just enough texture for the shapes to exert objectness, held up by shadows cast on the solid ground beneath them. Distinctly photographic tones—certain ranges of grey, bright magentas and cyans—are interspersed throughout a vibrant palette. Diverse visual references are called up: minimalist paintings, isometric diagrams, pixelated swatches and vision tests.

These appearances raise questions concerning the images' categorical status and construction—they're obviously photographic, but it's unclear exactly how. Such apprehension means Eaton's process is often forefront in discussions of her work; each of these images comes from a single scan of a 4x5 negative, output on an ink-jet printer, the different effects achieved through multiple exposures, masking and camera movement. To create the cube-within-a-cube effect, a large dark cube, a medium grey cube and a small light-coloured cube were photographed in succession, through different colour lens filters. Darker surfaces reflect less light onto the film, leaving available space on the negative, while lighter ones reflect more, exhausting the grain. Each cube, lit from the side, has

three tonal values, making each overlapping surface a unique variable. While it's gratifying to work through such technical details, knowing what the images are and how they came to be doesn't subdue their mystery, it only leads to a long list of collapsing distinctions: abstraction and representation, duration and instantaneousness, calculation and chance.

Photographs always show us something that is impossible to see because a mechanical eye lacks distinctive characteristics of human perception: sensitivity, unreliability, slowness and constant motion. Troubling this relationship, Eaton uses the measured system of the camera to develop opportunities for surprise, multiplied through each exposure. If Eaton's images leaned more heavily on digital compositing, they would still be beautiful; their logic would just be less intriguing. Though wary of fetishizing analogue processes, her photographs' most captivating qualities rely on a correspondence to real-time physical facts.

This indexicality takes on a sculptural dimension, as the negatives are *built up* in blocks of textured colour using light and time. Rarely are negatives so relevant; they usually exist as a forgotten step between event and image, or as sources of collagable data. *108_21* illustrates the physicality of the negative in a particular way: Eaton assembled a wall of wooden blocks, which she photographed 108 times onto a single sheet of film—limiting each exposure to a different square on a 9x12 grid. In between each click of the shutter, she destroyed and rebuilt the wall, resulting in a chance composition that was only seen later when the film was developed. Eaton's labour differs from that of Thomas Demand and Georges Rousse, both of whom also create perceptual uncertainty with their photographs but whose efforts go into building something *for* the camera. By contrast, Eaton builds *with*, or even *inside* the camera. Comparisons with other contemporary photographers don't readily spring to mind (a pleasant blank), though in their physicality and medium reflexivity, there is some affinity with Wolfgang Tillman's

† Jessica Eaton, *108_21*, 2010, from the series *108 and other Observations*
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Impossible Colour series (1997; 2001–ongoing).

Joseph Albers and Sol Lewitt are explicit art historical references, but they're called up with the sentiment of a novel's dedication page rather than as keywords for conceptual links. Even *cfaal 59*, which clearly echoes Albers' immense series of painting and prints, *Homage to Square* (1940s–1960s) seems peacefully self-contained, as if arriving at the same conclusion (or question), independently. Eaton's process resembles Albers' too: the studio as a laboratory where carefully controlled amounts of colour are combined in particular orders. Accordingly, the images feel experimental, like beautiful test results approaching some larger unknown.

Subtractive colour theory is an analogue photographer's game, but *Interpolation Dramatization 4* turns to the digital blending enabled by image-manipulation software, which can increase the resolution of a file by generating additional pixels based on the average values of surrounding ones. Starting with a wall of dark and light blocks, Eaton shifted the camera up and down, and side to side, between multiple exposures, creating the effect of a closely cropped digital zoom. Albers stressed the adaptability of vision—how the eye adapts and compensates, filling in and relativizing information. Similarly, *Interpolation* made me stop and think about how the human eye adapts to digital light, how viewing information on screens for hours every day might actually, immediately and over time, alter one's perception of the off-screen world.

Just as those versed in art history can interpret Eaton's photographs with knowledge of modern and conceptual movements, those of us who have spent hours fumbling around in darkrooms can read them with a nuanced physical awareness. Such understandings add other layers to Eaton's photographs, but what makes them so compelling is their ability to transcend such labels and techniques, to directly absorb viewers in the pleasure of images through their radiant, mysterious integrity.

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