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COLLECTOR
DAILY

Mariah Robertson, Permanent Puberty @American Contemporary

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By Loring Knoblauch

JTF (just the facts): A total of 20 photographic works, 5 drawings, and 2 artist's books, variously framed and matted and displayed against white walls in the two room gallery space. The five large works in the front room are all unique chemical treatments on RA-4 paper, made in 2013; they range in size from roughly 58×68 to 72×72. The 15 smaller works in the back room are unique color prints, made in 2013; they range in size from roughly 15×15 to 66×25 (or reverse). The 5 drawings are all ink/graphite on paper, made between 2011 and 2013, with sizes between 18×15 and 35×43. (Installation shots below.)



Comments/Context: Mariah Robertson's new show finds her exploring the limits of control in her darkroom practice, pairing a series of large improvisational works with smaller, tighter exercises in crisp geometries. Gone are the recognizable images and silhouettes that inhabited many of her previous works, replaced with varying experimental forms of all-over abstraction, creating a lively back and forth dialogue between chance and intention.

The muscular works in the front room began with an inadvertent opening of a box of paper and a subsequent resolution to probe the edges of a throw away situation. Robertson took these exposed sheets and doused them with developer, bleach, and other chemicals of varying temperatures and consistencies, creating expressionistic, unabashedly painterly layers of fluid gestures. Energetic drips, splotches, and washes cover the paper in mixed up motions, the edges sliced into irregular shapes. A series of sweeping striped pours recalls Morris Louis, while other works tussle and jostle with more chaotic abandon, settling into motifs reminiscent of waterfalls or fish scales.

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A step into the next room is a pull back towards order. Rigid rectilinear patterns like piano keys step across the surface of the works, alternately tinted by uneven colored gels. Successive generations of these ideas bring in stuttering angles, boxes, and squares, overlapped like shadowy ripples in a pond and left to linger in hazy, glowing blurs of competing color. The watery gestures of the previous works have been transformed into ghostly edges of movement, repetition building up into dense figure/ground compositional complexity.

I've been a fan of Robertson's work since I first encountered it a few years ago, and while her risk taking produces its share of works that don't quite coalesce, there are far more hits than misses in this show than one might expect. While she is by no means the first to explore photograms and darkroom processes, there is something altogether fresh and vital about her results. She's playing with scale and color, setting hard edge and loose gesture against one another, and incorporating new visual elements into her approach. Those that haven't yet discovered her work need to start paying attention.

Collector's POV: The photographic works in this show are priced as follows: the large prints in the front room are \$20000 each, while the smaller works in the back range from \$3000 to \$10000 each (based on size). Robertson's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up. One of Robertson's large scroll works is currently on view in the XL: 19 New Acquisitions in Photography show at MoMA.