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Art review: Phil Chang at LAXART

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Photo: Phil Chang, "Cache, Active" installation view. Credit: LAXART, Los Angeles.

Phil Chang's suite of 21 photographic works at LAXART look like slabs of old milk chocolate that's just about to turn white. Each work is actually a piece of expired photographic paper exposed with either a negative or various objects placed directly on top. The paper was then left unfixing, which means the images were never set, and the works kept "developing" as they were exposed to light in the gallery. Hence their smooth, chocolate-y sameness.

Each however, has a rather evocative title like "Sea #2" and "Woman, Laughing." Searching for traces of these images is a bit like looking at an Ad Reinhardt black painting — a rather existential experience as you search for minute variations in the darkness. Chang's work did bring a smile as I searched in vain for some evidence of something as simple as "Three Sheets of Thin Paper." But the chocolate refused to give anything up.

In this sense, the exhibition is both the aftermath of the work and an integral part of its making, a paradox that points to the tension between making art and exhibiting it. Does viewing complete the piece? And conversely, can a work be said to be finished if no one ever sees it? By blurring the line between making and exhibiting, Chang's enigmatic show reminds us, quite starkly, that the conditions under which we look at art largely determine what we see, and whether we recognize it as art at all.