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Capture festival's Jessica Eaton gives Dal Grauer Substation abstract pop

By Robin Laurence
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In January last year, England's Guardian newspaper made a dramatic declaration.

"Jessica Eaton," Sean O'Hagan wrote, "is the hottest photographic artist to come out of Canada since Jeff Wall."

The comparison could hardly be more charged, so great is Wall's reputation and so profound are the differences between the leading figure of the so-called Vancouver School of photo-based art and the young woman sitting opposite the Straight in the café of a downtown hotel.

Quite apart from the obvious distinctions of gender and generation, Eaton works in a manner completely antithetical to Wall. He and his fellows have achieved success by producing elaborately staged tableaux in front of the camera, their subjects laden with historical references and cultural theory, their practice highly digitalized.



Photography star Jessica Eaton brings a shining element of vibrant newness to a fading local landmark, the Dal Grauer Substation.

Eaton creates her brilliantly coloured abstract photographs inside the camera, her principal tool and reference being light. She improvises on historic photographic processes with a large-format analogue camera, and sets herself challenging technical parameters.

"A lot of my work really comes from breaking the medium down to its base elements and reorganizing it," she says. "Really thinking about what is inherently photographic."

Born in Regina, Eaton spent 11 years in Vancouver in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She worked in film postproduction and earned a degree in photography from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design before moving to Toronto and then to Montreal, where she is based—for now.

She's back in town to finalize elements of an ambitious new work, commissioned by the Capture Photography Festival and the Burrard Arts Foundation for the façade of B.C. Hydro's Dal Grauer Substation at 970 Burrard Street. The unveiling of her huge, gorgeous photograph, which is printed on vinyl, complements the launch of the festival. (It is also reproduced on the cover of the Capture catalogue.) Eaton's interwoven horizontal and vertical elements respond to the building's overall structure, while her individual pops of luminous colour create a visual dialogue with the mosaic tiles that frame parts of the façade.

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Kim Spencer-Nairn, founder and executive director of the Capture festival, joins us briefly to explain the project. The Dal Grauer Substation, she says, is an “icon” of West Coast modern architecture, overlooked and endangered. Designed by Ned Pratt and B.C. Binning in the early 1950s, it was distinguished by a glass and steel façade that revealed the facility’s brightly painted inner workings. The transparent effect, however, was undermined in 1977, when the glass was replaced by shatterproof Plexi, which has turned a dismal, semi-opaque grey.

“I thought that by placing a [photographic] work on it, we could draw attention to the building, to its architectural significance in Vancouver,” Spencer-Nairn says. Eaton, whose photos have sometimes been likened to hard-edge paintings, is the ideal artist to address the modernist design. And through her brilliant image and recent successes—she exhibits internationally, has won wide critical acclaim and two prestigious photography prizes, and is preparing for upcoming shows in New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto—she brings a shining element of newness to a fading landmark.

As she sips her espresso, Eaton’s conversation darts across colour theory, the science of optics, and the history of her medium. She talks about Bauhaus artist Josef Albers and experimental photographer László Moholy-Nagy. About what bees see and the adaptive reasons why some women may be tetrachromats, having four rather than the normal three types of cone cells in their eyes. About the first colour photograph ever made, based on an essay by the 19th-century Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell. And about re-creating historic photo emulsions in her studio.

Her assertions are at times startling. When we discuss the abstract nature of her images, she declares, “All photographs are abstract.” And when we talk about the intense colours she achieves, she insists, “There is no such thing as colour.” At least, not in the absolute.

Then she strikes a poetic note, proposing that the photograph can be more than a record of our earthly existence, it can be a vehicle for probing the vast unknown. “It’s a really beautiful, metaphoric way to ask questions beyond our limited experience,” she says. Questions, she adds, “about the wonders of the universe.”