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Jessica Eaton, Custom Colour at Higher Pictures

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JTF (just the facts): A total of 10 black and white and color photographs, framed in white and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the single room gallery space. 8 of the works are color carbon prints, while the other 2 are gelatin silver prints; all of the works were made in 2014/2015. Each print is sized 21×25 and is available in an edition of 3. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: Very few contemporary photographers understand color as well as Jessica Eaton does. In her world, the colors we encounter every day aren't a given – in fact, they are something we can assume very little about. Her artistic output is grounded in an intense interest in the science of color, starting with the RGB rods and cones that process color in our eyes, moving to the ways cameras, films, and papers have been constructed and tuned to mimic that human color processing system, and finally coming to the ways printed inks are blended to create colors that attempt to recreate/match what's been captured. She's spent much of her short but fruitful artistic career deconstructing color, analytically ripping it apart and then building it back up again with rigorous, meticulous attention to the science of every step in the chain. While her results might look bright and bouncy, don't be fooled; her photographs are about as technically and cerebrally complex as anything being done in the entire field of contemporary photography right now.



Eaton's newest works are a stark move away from the crisp Albers-like geometries of cubes and blocks she has become known for, and if we didn't know better, we might be tempted to try to understand her recent overstuffed still life floral bouquets in the context of the history of that subject matter, as some kind of modern Dutch homage. Instead, her bursting explosions of flowers, set against an equally dense Victorian floral wallpaper, are really just a smart vehicle for her ongoing investigations of color. As her exuberant set-up covers nearly every hue and tint in the rainbow, she's just using something representational as her baseline instead of something abstract.

Given that Eaton's new works are luscious carbon prints (a now nearly extinct photographic process, often associated with the glamorous saturated colors of Paul Outerbridge), another mistaken assumption we might make is that Eaton is somehow now interested in antique photographic processes for their retro anti-digital nostalgia. And yet, Eaton's foray into the carbon process actually comes back to her thirst for exploiting arcane color technicalities – as a process, it is very flexibly (if difficultly) controlled and engineered, particularly in its wider tonal range and its suspension of individually exposed pigments in the emulsion that are later combined. Even with all its hardships, it offers unmatched color possibilities.

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While all this might seem like far more than we really need to know, it's actually just the beginning of the lightning bolt of inspiration for Eaton. Starting with a very colorful subject (the flowers), she then takes an exacting array of images of that composition, each time adjusting the light the camera sees with different colored filters, effectively creating individual color separations that can be combined using, you guessed it, the now rediscovered carbon process. Where it gets even weirder is now imagine taking the "red" separation and outputting it not with red pigment but with blue; every red flower, every pink leaf, indeed everything with even a smidgen of red is now a substituted shade of blue. What emerges is photography as a complicated mathematical equation, where each end result photograph is generated by modifying a set of logical variables.

With this knowledge in our back pocket, the brilliance in this small show of 10 pictures starts to become more evident. Eaton sets the stage with 4 images: a "standard" gelatin silver print (where the colors are output as normal in black and white), a "standard" color print (where the colors are output as normal in color carbon), an "unregistered" color print (where the colors are output as normal but effectively offset just a hair so that they seem fuzzily and disconcertingly misaligned), and a "standard" infrared print (where the infrared separation is included). These images are like the control group in a scientific study – they show us what happens when we follow the rules and take the placebo.

The other six pictures on view are Eaton's iterative improvisational permutations, each moment of perception an unruly gathering of choices. What happens when she combines an IR separation output in red, a red separation in green, and a green separation in blue? The flowers become a sea of acidic yellow and orangey brown (reminiscent of Kodak Aerochrome). When she inverts the two red and blue separations, the original purple alliums turn yellow and blue spears turn orange. As she lets changes percolate through the formula (throwing in even more variables like ultraviolet separations and dodged/burned versions of the standard colors), the flowers alternately turn a psychedelic shimmering pastel peach, a soft shade of brown as though they were dead and dried, and even more puzzling and unnatural combinations of purple and green.

The point here is not only the surreal (and often oddly beautiful) nature of these images, but also the deliberate and thoughtful hijacking of our own visual system that is going on – Eaton is proving that camera vision and human vision aren't at all the same (however much they have been engineered to be similar), and that things can go wildly off the rails with even just a little clever (if unexpected) technical intervention.

What's most exciting about Eaton's work is her quietly confrontational stance – she's actively and aggressively challenging photography, rather than agreeing to take it at face value. For her, a camera is not just a tool to be casually used, but a whole technological world that can and should be dissected, unpacked, and unraveled as the basis for further visual experiments and adventures. In a sense, she's systematically hacking the code of color photography, and doing so with an artistic mindset. These new images are photography about photography at its richest and most robust, full of contagious intelligence and inquisitive persistence.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show are priced as follows. The color carbon prints are \$15000 each, while the gelatin silver prints are \$8000 each. Eaton's work has little consistent secondary market history, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.