

THE BELIEVER

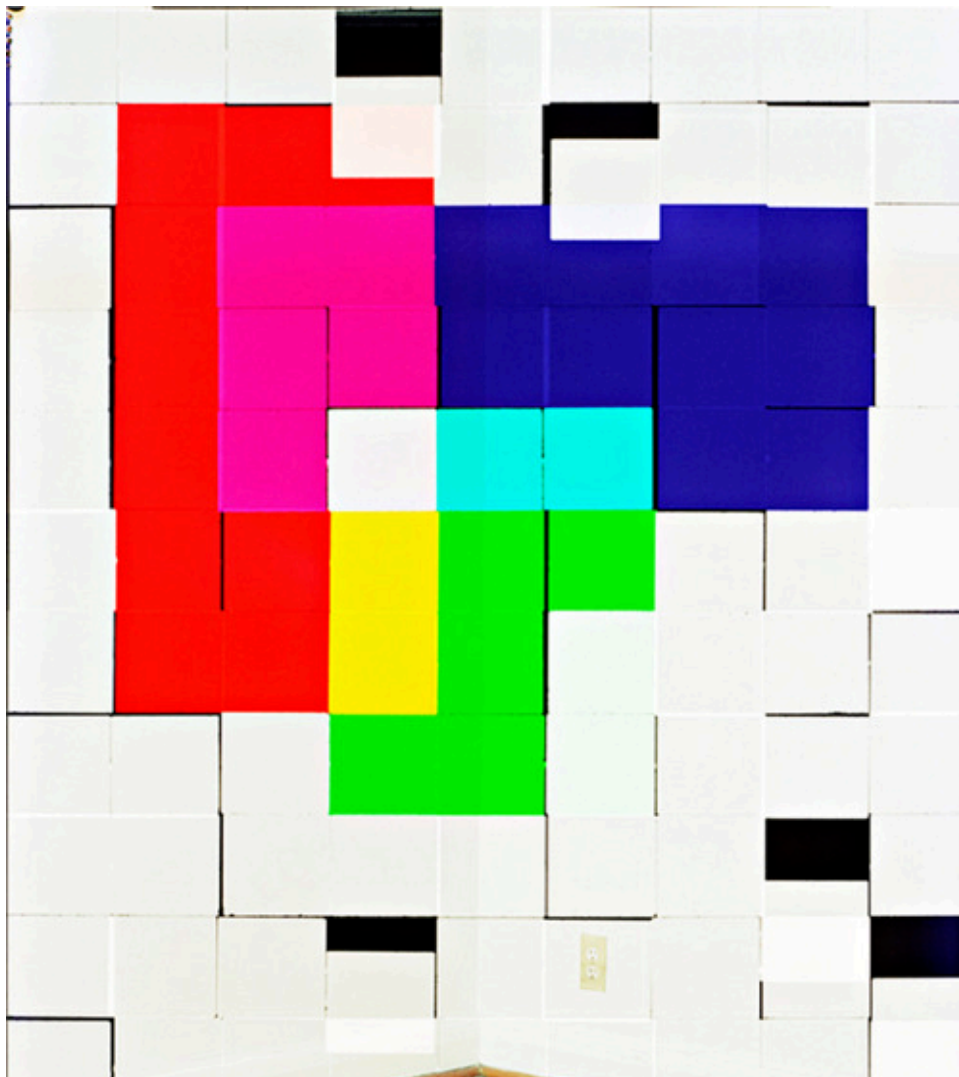
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ART

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This interview with photographer [Jessica Eaton](#) was conducted by Otino Corsano. The process behind photograph *108_06* (pictured above) is discussed. Last week, [we featured three](#) of her images on The Believer Logger.

THE BELIEVER: Is there a simple way to describe the process involved in the creation of *108_06*, or are the techniques you employ inherently complex and sophisticated?

JESSICA EATON: The techniques themselves are not inherently complex or sophisticated. The techniques involved in much of my work actually deal with the most basic elements of the photographic medium. However, these basic elements are combined in ways not readily available in the commercial packaging of the medium – so it can seem mysterious. *108_06* was made inside the camera on a single sheet of 4x5 film. I used masking—a set of 108 masks—which means covering up parts of the film during each exposure so no light sees the negative. I also used additive colour separation, which involves separate exposures of the additive primaries of red, blue and green.

BLVR: How did you mask the film?

JE: First, it's important to have an idea of how large format film works. It's sold as sheets, rather than in a roll. Each sheet of film loads into its own dark box. I worked with a designer to make a blueprint for a set of masks that would fit inside the 4x5 film holder. I worked out a grid of 108 squares, then had the masks manufactured. They were cut out of steel. So these 108 individual masks slide in and out of the film holder while the film is in the camera, each mask with a small square cut out.

BLVR: Is it difficult to anticipate additive colour effects, or have you mastered them by now?

JE: The effects are a result of colour theory and exposures, so they're predictable. Making very specific colours can be tricky, but making a general hue is easy. For *108_06*, I knew I would achieve these exact colours as it is only the primaries and secondaries against a white wall. The only surprises were the black spaces, which are the results of errors. The black areas were created from the slides not being inserted correctly, leaving some parts of the film unexposed and other parts doubly exposed.

BLVR: Tell me why analogue materials are essential to this project.

JE: *108_06* would be, in essence, impossible to create digitally. First, a digital camera providing a comparable resolution would be very expensive, and it's not exactly practical to start shoving pieces of cut metal in front of a \$40,000 camera's sensor. The beautiful thing about working with a 4x5 camera is how simple it is – it's basically a light-tight box with a lens. So it's easy to have some agency over it. There are, of course, a host of ways to deal with digital media in an experimental sense – but that requires a very different skill set. Secondly, with additive colour theory, I need a fixed a variable. Film provides this. I can see how the process relates to the results. There could be a digitally-created version of *108_06*, say one constructed in Photoshop, but that would come out clean and perfect. I'm more interested in having an immediate conversation with physical phenomena. I actually have another version of *108_06* where all of the slides were set properly. It's very predictable compared to the original, with all of its errors. I prefer the original. The imperfections make it a more interesting composition.

BLVR: *108_06* seems to have no specific narrative, beyond that of fracturing the white cube.

JE: *108_06* is almost a diagram of additive colour. Each of the squares is built up of individual

exposures of the primaries. In the center, I strip the cubes down to the three primaries. Then, where the primaries cross, the secondaries of cyan, magenta and yellow emerge. The center shows all three overlapping at proper exposure, with a return to normal. The entire outside frame is the same value as this center square. Essentially, *108_06* neatly strips down how colour in light works.

BLVR: This meta-photographic slant seems aligned with the work of the conceptual artist Christopher Williams, or even the early experiments of pioneers like Paul Strand, who embrace photography as their subject matter, to a degree. The “photographs about photography” genre can be quite literal – photographers photographing cameras. At other times, it offers more complex investigations into the medium while employing the medium. Is this reading relevant to your work?

JE: I accept any reading of my work. I can’t really see my photographs outside of my personal relationship with making them. When I look at my own work, I only see what I will do next.

BLVR: Are you invested in Purist dialogues within photography?

JE: Not really. People get attached to specific approaches and then feel they’ve figured out the only way and the best way. I am interested in trying every way.

BLVR: This photo is devoid of any human presence, yet there remains a human trace.

JE: Definitely. If a photograph can have a trace of the hand, many of mine do.

BLVR: What influences your abstract aesthetic?

JE: I think “abstract” is a weird word to apply to photography; de- or re-contextualized might be better. You’re recording light and light *is*. With analogue photography, there’s a fundamental connection to – maybe not “reality,” but physical phenomenon right? The pictures are of something that very much exists.. Regardless of how we perceive reality, light *is*. It’s outside of ourselves, and it *is*.

BLVR: So maybe the question should be, have any life experiences led you to this approach?

JE: Well, I don’t know... my mother died when I was young, so of course you’re left with these photographs, and there’s a real understanding that this has nothing to do with who she was, you know? It’s this very faint trace of a physical semblance that means very very little, compared to who that person was. It’s also manipulative. For a while, when she was in her teens, my mother dated a photographer, so of course there are these very romantic, beautiful pictures of her on the prairie, and they call up, I guess, these false ideas and emotions that build up an idea of who someone was. But of course this is not realistic. It’s nostalgic and romantic. It’s an image dictated by the desire of the photographer and subsequent abstractions of the specific camera, film and lens he used. I have a letter from my mother that was dictated and apparently tape-recorded the day before she passed away. The recording has been lost, but I have often thought I would trade in all of the photos of her for that recording of her speaking.

BLVR: You grew up on the prairies, then lived in British Columbia, then moved to Toronto, and now you live in Montreal. Do these locations inform your work directly?

JE: I don’t think you need to be anywhere specific anymore. You can live anywhere these days

and still get your work out there. But you do still need to go places. Physical presence can't be replaced, but the most important thing is the work. The only thing that really matters is the work.

BLVR: Why have you chosen Montreal as your home base?

JE: I really love this city in terms of just the general *joie de vivre*. It's a relatively easy place to live. It's relaxed. There's a lot of support for the arts. Another huge factor is economic. I can have a reasonably sized studio here for a fraction of what it would cost in any other major city in North America. My practice requires a studio, so I will live anywhere I can afford one without having to have two part-time jobs to run it. In the two years I have lived in Montreal, I have made almost as much work as in the previous ten because that is all I have to do here.

BLVR: Have your art and life ever merged in unexpected ways?

JE: Well, my artwork *is* my real life. They are one and the same. I think about photography every day for the majority of every day, and it's been this way for many, many years. So there's no separation between the two.

BLVR: As photographic images become more ubiquitous, your images appear as accessible as NASA-released solar spectra. It seems you can't completely blame a young electronica band member for using your work as online album art these days. Flattery or forgery?

JE: Yes, you can blame a young electronica band member for using work they do not own the rights to. Obviously, when you post work on the Internet you lose some control, and I have to accept this. At the same time, I think there is a lot of education going on about acceptable use of images. Being able to share images so readily as the Internet affords is relatively new. If anything, this has brought me more opportunity than it has problems. Anyway, a 600-pixel jpeg is a far cry from my exhibition prints. They almost aren't even the same thing.

BLVR: So we should end with a disclaimer: The image featured here, *108_06*, is not to be reproduced without the permission of the artist.

JE: No. Image credit is sufficient.