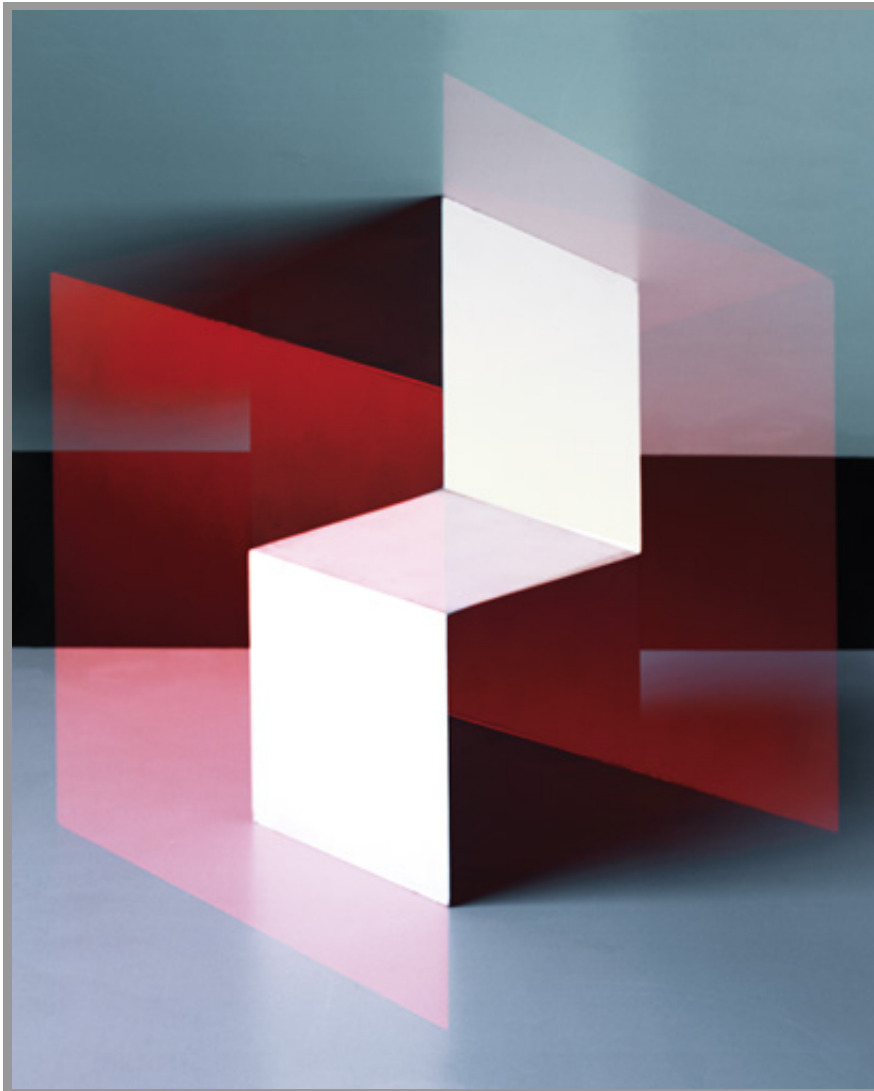


Jessica Eaton's Abstract Analogue Photographs

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By Conor Risch



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"Cfaal 115," 2011, a work from Jessica Eaton's "Cubes for Albers and LeWitt," series. Working with layers in Photoshop helped inspire her analogue work. To see more images, click on the Photo Gallery link below.

Working in a studio with a 4 x 5 camera, [Jessica Eaton](#) creates images that recall the Abstract Expressionist and Color Field Painting movements, but which are firmly rooted in an exploration of the ideas and possibilities of the photographic medium.

Her most-recognized series, "Cubes for Albers and LeWitt," for which she utilizes multiple exposures of cubes to explore the layering and blending of primary colors, was recognized this year with the Hyères Photography Prize; and in 2011 with the Magenta Foundation's Bright Spark Award and with publication in *Foam* magazine's Talent Issue, among other honors. Her work is showing this month at [M+B Fine Art in Los Angeles](#).

One of a number of artists who are pushing at the edges of the photographic medium and questioning its uses and definition, Eaton's work has intrigued audiences by being both pleasing to look at and interesting to think about.

Some of her fans gravitated "to this idea that because I'm working on 4 x 5 film and mostly in camera, that there's this whole analogue purist thing to it," Eaton says. "Of course I love film," she says, but learning Photoshop and working with layers was one of the ways she was "able to conceive" of her "Cubes" work. "I've always been someone who dissects things, so I started to question, 'Well, what happens if I create a photograph in layers?'" she recalls.

Eaton creates her "Interpolations Dramatizations" images by photographing blocks using motion blur or stepped multiple exposures to cause the blocks to blend together. This process was "loosely mimicking Bicubic Smoother versus Nearest Neighbor" Photoshop interpolations, she says, and grew out of her thinking about and looking for a real-world metaphor for how interpolation software works.

Color theory and specifically the Munsell color system, which understands color and the creation of color in three dimensions—hue, lightness and purity—helped Eaton work out that she could use grayscale and a simple object, the cube, to explore a range of color that she was unable to achieve when she began experimenting with the tricolor process in 2004.

While she can plan and predict what her photographs might look like when she gets the negative back from the lab, there are some "extraordinary failures," she admits, noting she just pitched a book of these to a publisher. When she was preparing for AIPAD this year, she spent three months shooting 200 sheets of film and ended up with three images, "so [my success rate] really varies," she says.

“People always ask me how I came up with such complicated things,” Eaton laughs. “I think that’s actually not true, it’s actually infinitely simpler, I’m often using the most base elements of things. It seems complicated because ... we’ve increasingly automated the medium to the point where you don’t actually have to consider how anything works.”

Her 4 x 5 camera doesn’t have a brain, she notes. It’s a “light tight box with a lens and an aperture. [The work] really is the opposite [of complicated] but it acknowledges how a picture is made, what’s really happening.”

Her work also defies the notion that “photography [is] a reflection or a referent [of] something that exists in the world,” a definition she rejected ten years ago when it was taught in her undergraduate classes. In school, Eaton was “annoyed about these attempts to define what photography was,” she recalls. “I remember reading [Roland] Barthes and found it completely ridiculous. None of it really made sense, it was really personal to him.” Her work is “not a frozen moment in time, it’s often many moments; it’s not even something you can necessarily see with the naked eye so certainly there is no real-world indexical equivalent.”

Eaton wasn’t initially conscious of making work that commented on or questioned the medium, but, “it’s certainly something I can intellectually acknowledge,” she says. She chose to pursue abstract, studio-based work because technique and darkroom experimentation were what made her happy. She recalls that while making one of her last staged, narrative photographs with her 4 x 5 she realized she was more interested in “having the plane of focus work out” than the substance of the narrative she was creating.

Eaton rejects the “everything’s been done” banter that she reads, both about her own work and about the photographs of others. She posits that at least some of the reason she’s won prizes and recognition for her work is that her photographs simply look different. When she applied to *Foam* for the Talent Issue, she says, “Out of the 900 [applicants], 800 people are photographing in the world and using the exact same automated machine,” she notes, referencing the proliferation of the Canon 5D Mark II as a tool of choice for many emerging photographers. “Of course I don’t think cameras make pictures, but those cameras all have the same sensor and the same automated functions and they all react the same way if you’re using it set to any of the automated settings ... If you let it override you, you end up with a lot of pictures that look exactly the same.”