

VOGUE

Mariah Robertson's Fantastical Abstractions Flip Photography on Its Head

By Grace Edquist
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When the contemporary artist Mariah Robertson first started playing around in her darkroom with light-sensitive paper, hand-applying chemicals and trying out different exposure techniques, a whole new world opened up. Colors bled and burst. Streaks and specks were features, not bugs. All the carefully laid out rules of traditional photography now felt mutable. "I thought, This is totally insane," she says. "I had no idea this was possible."

In the 15 or so years since those first happy accidents, Robertson has honed her practice of camera-less photography, creating ferocious photograms with explosions of pigment that slingshot you to another dimension. Thirteen such transportive works go on view today at Van Doren Waxter in New York. The featured photograms in "*Everything counts & local reality*," all made this year using a type of photographic paper called RA4, conjure distant galaxies.



To make her large-scale experimental pieces, Robertson has to cede much to chance. "A lot of photography is holding on to things," she says. Her process is the opposite: she has to let go of control. It's a concept she thought about a lot while making the new pieces for this show.

Many of the works are spliced together from cut rolls of paper, with their jagged, curling edges exposed. These are part of Robertson's ongoing Lost Puzzle series. In 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371—Robertson's titles nod to her image-sequencing process—the glossy blues and greens erupt like algae bloom. The luxurious 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486 reminds me of melted, molten candy.

Other pieces at Van Doren Waxter fall into her Radical Intervention series and sit snugly inside custom-cut asymmetrical frames, like the expansive, weblike 2016, 152, in which bolts of pinky orange streak across waves of teal. These densely patterned, kaleidoscopic numbers give off notes of Gerhard Richter and Joan Mitchell.

A standout is the site-specific light box. Cut and scattered photograms levitate over LED lights placed on the floor beneath, creating an almost magical effect as the translucent paper glows from within. It's like each individual work has its own gravitational pull; it's hard to walk away.

Robertson initially got into photography as a means to capture performance art, her first artistic love, when she realized how hard it was to document those social experiments. She took photography classes at a v-tech school in San Francisco and interned at a studio named for Man Ray. She witnessed early on the “macho culture” that often runs through the photo industry—men are seen as the gifted photographers, the expert developers, the *artistes*. Women are the assistants, the muses. She called bullshit on this dynamic, and her innovative, rebellious practice unfurled from there, eventually taking her to New York, where she is now based. Her work has been shown internationally and is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Robertson’s whole body is involved in the creation process. She uses her hands and feet as she applies her chemicals to paper. Her studio attire includes a hazmat suit and gas mask, and she breathes through a tube that pipes in fresh air from another room. (When New York City’s air quality plummeted this summer because of wildfire smoke, she couldn’t work.)

“I’m a little prone to disaster,” she says. But those disasters are hardly mistakes, and every drip, whoosh, splotch, and crinkle adds to the sprawling intrigue contained in each work. She studied religion in undergrad at Berkeley, with a

focus on Buddhism, and sculpture at Yale, where she got her MFA. It’s easy to see how philosophy and art commingle in her practice. Case in point: The title of the new Van Doren Waxter show references the Depeche Mode song—whose melancholic A minor chords give off what she calls a “palpable feeling of a paradox”—and the concept of local reality in quantum physics, which she’s been thinking about a lot lately.

The concept is complex, but basically it’s about the idea of realities running parallel in the universe. What a perfect way to describe the feeling of standing before a work of Robertson’s. There’s the real world, where your two feet are planted, and then there’s the fantastical world of swirling colors and cascading shapes before you, created by spraying, dousing, painting, and otherwise manipulating chemicals onto paper, not knowing exactly how it’s going to turn out.

“Everything counts & local reality” is open from September 13 to October 28, 2023 at Van Doren Waxter, 23 East 73rd Street in New York City.