

M+B

Interview

MARIAH ROBERTSON'S UNPLANNING

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By Rachel Small

Mariah Robertson can't predict the way her photographic-art experiments will turn out. "It follows a thread of accident and chance," she says. It's hard not to wonder how the sizzled, runny mixes of colors, floating objects, and strange, obscured scenes that appear in her work came to be. And it's harder to look away.

To understand her art—or, understand why you do not understand it—it's important to realize that Robertson is not a typical photographer. She spends most of her time in the darkroom, where for years she's taught herself how to manipulate basic tools of photography, like chemical treatments and photo paper, blurring the lines of the medium. Recently, she concocted a 100-foot long photograph called 11 (2012), comprising superimposed negatives and dripping colors. The piece hangs in the MoMA, unfurling over walls and ceilings.

Her latest efforts will be on view at "Permanent Puberty: Part 1," opening today at New York's American Contemporary. The show is a diverse one. Five psychedelic chemically-rendered paintings are the results of particularly dauntless experiments. "I set out the plan... I don't actually know what's going on," she explains.

Robertson at first used only developer and bleach, getting simple blacks and whites, but she soon escalated to tweaking temperatures, the liquids' densities, and finally "throwing hot chemistry at this certain angle" to achieve an intended effect, be it bright blues, rainbows, "tiny triangles all over the place," or "Pac-Man ghost shapes" (results Robertson describes she has down to a science, almost).

The exhibition also presents a series of formal prints Robertson made as a darkroom intern in the early 2000s, uncovered and reworked this summer. ("I can never throw anything away again!") With that, there are two photography books, drawings, and a sort of self-portrait video starring her, her superego, and her id, featuring a scene in which a psychotic id covered in menstrual blood attempts to phone Klaus Biesenbach.



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Mariah Robertson
42
2013
Unique chemical treatment on RA-4 paper
72 x 72 inches



Mariah Robertson
11
2013
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Born in 1975 and raised in California, Robertson started out doing performance art—"social experiments," she says—and decided to learn photography to document them. She went on to get her MFA at Yale, where she concentrated on sculpture—though grad school, it turns out, wasn't quite right for her. "I hid my photography practice from everyone. It was private...And therefore untainted by the enormous endless drama psycho B.S. happening in grad school," she half-jokes. She moved to New York after graduating in 2005, turning her focus back to photography and all its possibilities.

"I [like] the unexpected parts, the parts that go beyond what I could have planned," she offers. "Because the plans are kind of pedestrian. Planning happens in the frontal lobe, where you deal with logic and numbers. It's very effective for getting things done. But if you execute something perfectly, you get something pretty boring."

What does it all mean? "There's no answer. It's just... I'm going on."

"PERMANENT PUBERTY: PART 1" IS ON DISPLAY AT AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY FROM OCTOBER 31 THROUGH DECEMBER 20.