

M+B

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Critic's Choice

Mariah Robertson's vigorous tussle with photography

By Leah Ollman
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"Photography Lovers' Peninsula," installation at M+B by Mariah Robertson
(Jeff McLane, M+B Gallery, Los Angeles)

Mariah Robertson is one of photography's exciting new essentialists. She pares down the medium to a few of its most basic ingredients: light, chemicals and a light-sensitive surface.

Nevermind a lens. Nevermind a subject plucked from the visible world. Hers is an untamed art, stomach-flipping in its wild energy and jolts of rapturous beauty.

Robertson titles her formidable show at M+B "Photography Lovers' Peninsula," after her sense of herself working at the "extreme end, or peninsula, of material-based photo work."

Also, her 15 huge prints (up to 10 feet tall) are installed like a jagged peninsula projecting into the gallery space, the frames edge-to-edge and starting at floor level, forming a continuous architectural wall.

The vocabulary among images is continuous as well. Each sheet bursts and bleeds with saturated color. Veins of heart-stopping violet, quenching cyan, fiery orange, lush crimson and queasy greenish-yellow drip down, up and across the pages. Smears run and veils hang in all directions, layered with splatter, speckle and grain.

Each work is the residue of Robertson's vigorous tussle with her materials, the pouring of chemicals and improvised manipulation of their flow. She is photography's answer to stain painting, action painting and process-based performance: Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, and hot-lead-throwing Richard Serra, all rolled into one.

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Her work is equal parts assertion and denial, an irrefutable proclamation of presence born of resistance and defiance. The press release for the show, written by the Brooklyn-based artist, reads like a manifesto, or rather an anti-manifesto, a challenge to photography's standing principles regarding pristine, controlled darkroom procedures. She embraces the crease and the wrinkle. She courts accident. She works with the lights on.

Robertson's previous works have been more overtly sculptural: wide rolls of photo paper (dense with spontaneous color and markings) rippling across the floor or suspended from above, looped and unspooling.

Even though the pieces at M+B are discrete, and individually framed, the installation reads most powerfully as a whole. She has even provided bleachers to better view the works from a bit of distance, as a dynamic performance of motion, shifts, adjacencies -- as an aesthetic-athletic event.

Up close, we can more easily discern the torn, irregular edges, the flayed sections of emulsion. Standing near, the washes and skeins of intense color verge on immersive. The push/pull motion of the surface plays itself out without reprieve, and the decibel level never drops.

When the shock value of Robertson's work eventually does exhaust itself, the deliquescent details help pick up the slack. Piece by piece, and as a whole, this work seethes.

M+B, 612 N. Almont Drive, (310) 550-0050, through April 8. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.mbart.com