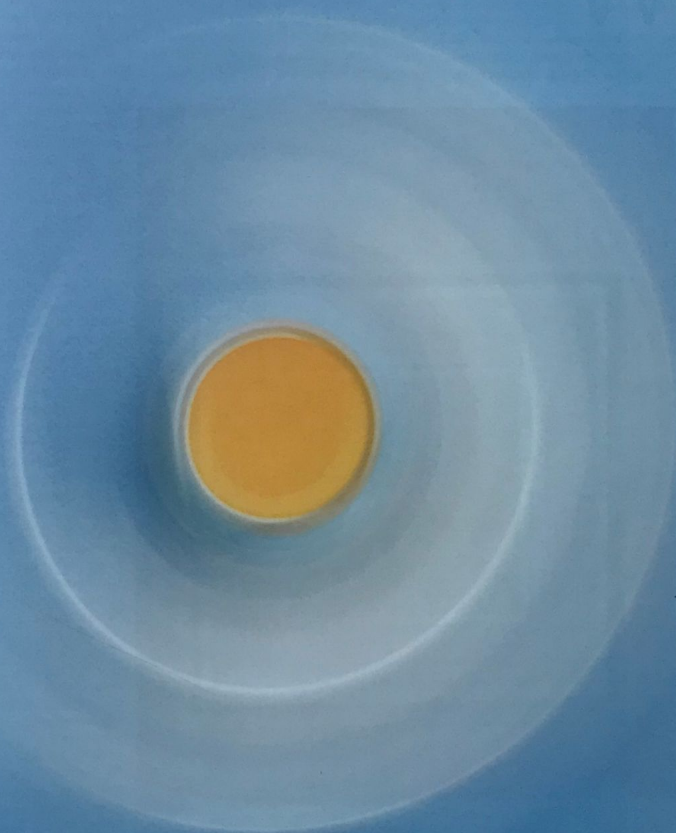


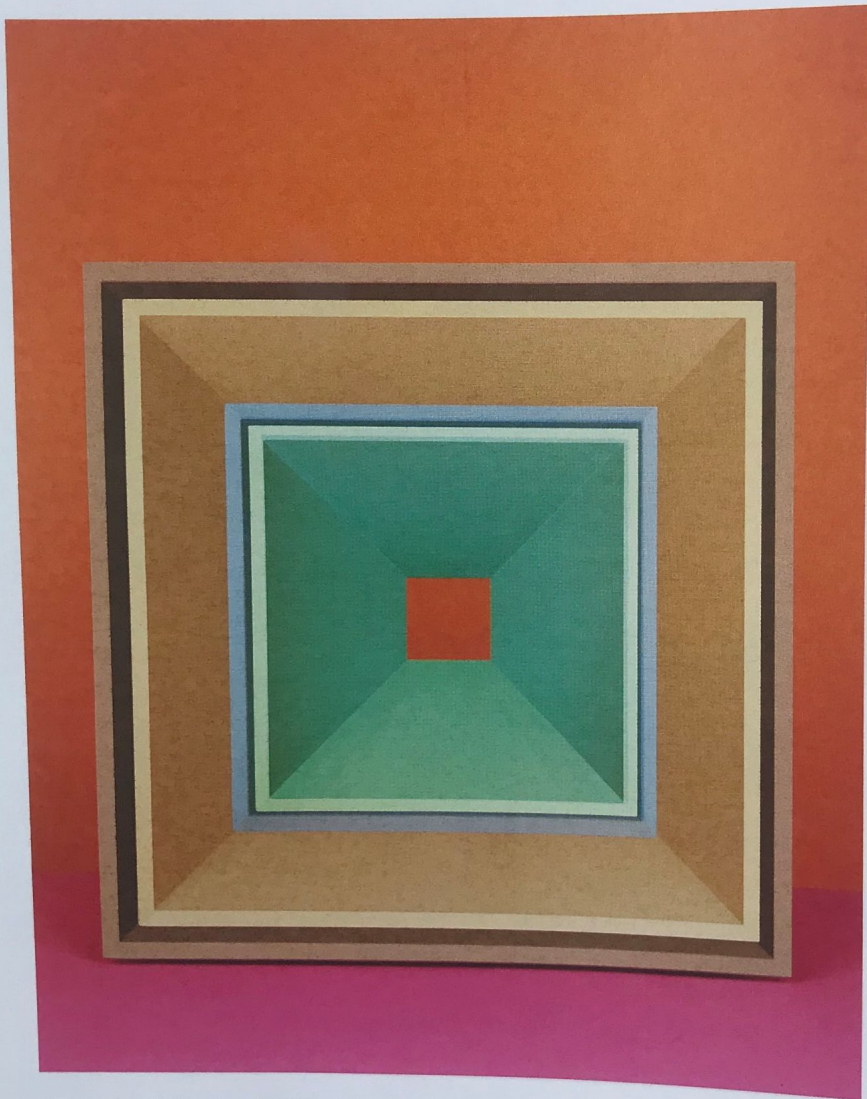
# The Visionary

Jessica Eaton's  
alternate reality

By Saelan Twerdy



When I visit Jessica Eaton's Montreal studio late in the Summer of 2018, all the props and equipment for her recent work—curtains, backdrops, tabletops, tripods, lights, scrims, medium-format camera, and an assortment of nested and stacked wooden cubes painted in white, black, and shades of grey—are neatly organized during a brief period of disuse. Eaton is taking a rare breather from her intensive production schedule as she prepares



to hang her Fall solo exhibition at Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran. Test prints from the *Iterations* series, which has occupied Eaton for the better part of two years and which is so extensive that it will be exhibited in three chapters (one at each of her commercial galleries in Montreal, Los Angeles, and New York), hang around Eaton's desk in a kaleidoscopic array.

Among them are two small prints of paintings by Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), whose work has experienced a renaissance of late, following major retrospectives at London's Serpentine Gallery in 2016 and, currently, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. I noticed that they were the only images on view

in Eaton's studio that weren't her own. Later she informed me that she had made the prints while working on her *Pictures for Women* series (2016-17), an homage to female artists—primarily abstract painters, from Sonia Delaunay and Lyubov Popova to Tomma Abts and Etel Adnan—most of whom have been either unjustly forgotten or subordinated to their male peers. Hilma af Klint, in particular, is an artist to whom Eaton feels a deep personal attachment.

Af Klint was a brilliant pioneer of abstraction, a woman whose work preceded that of male painters like Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian, all of whom jockeyed for position as the "first" abstract artist while she remained virtually unknown. This was due in part to her own privacy: af Klint rarely showed her paintings in her lifetime and, convinced that the world was not ready to embrace her work, she instructed that it not be exhibited for twenty years following her death. Nevertheless, her rediscovery has prompted a significant reassessment of the development of modernism. "The resurgence of her work is, I think, the most apt example of how skewed and wrong the entire history of the field of my career has been," Eaton tells me with palpable exasperation. "She embodies, in the present day, a narrative that was missing and that I desperately needed all my life."

Moreover, in the non-objective paintings that af Klint produced through her spiritualist practice, Eaton sees a parallel with her own process-driven experimental methods. Though her approach to photography is rigorously technical, even obsessively so, Eaton insists that the thrill, the interest, perhaps even the *point* of her work is that she is not ultimately in control of how her photographs look. "I have chosen to set things up so it is more of a conversation with the universe," she reflects, "where things outside of myself—forces, science, chance—also have a voice." Like Hilma af Klint, Eaton is a visionary.

With *Iterations*, Eaton is returning to the body of work that announced her emergence as a major artist nearly a decade ago. She first began producing works under the title *Cubes for Albers and Lewitt* in 2010 and continued working steadily on the series until 2013. By that point, she had already established that the medium of photography itself, as a model of human perception, would be her central subject. With light, colour, time, and the material capacities of the photographic apparatus as her variables, she would test the boundaries of what can be perceived and achieved within photography.

*Cubes for Albers and Lewitt* was initially conceived, in part, as a rejoinder to a passage in Josef Albers' landmark art-education manual *Interaction of Colour*. In it, he offhandedly acknowledges that his study is devoted exclusively to *subtractive* colour (that is, colour made by mixing pigments or dyes, as in painting or printing), though an entirely different system of colour exists: *additive* colour, which applies to light (and, by extension, to photography, film, and digital sensors). Albers dismisses this second system as relevant

only to physicists; artists and designers, he suggests, need not worry about it. Unlike physics, he argued, aesthetics cannot be reduced to an equation, and so artists must explore colour through experience, by manually testing juxtapositions and interrelations of colours before their own eyes. This insight is foundational not only to Albers' pedagogical approach, but also to his own signature *Homage to the Square* series (1950-76). Part of Eaton's motivation for beginning to work with the additive process was to challenge herself, to see if there

entirely monochrome, painted in eleven values of white-to-black grayscale. When photographed, the darker values leave space on the negative for further exposures, while brighter surfaces max out the negative's capacity. The brilliant, saturated colours of her photographs are generated by layering multiple exposures with one of three red, blue, or green colour-separation filters per shot. The catch is that this compositional game of building up exposures, each of which interacts with (and potentially wipes out) the others as Eaton moves cubes or introduces new filters, happens entirely in-camera. Despite her sophisticated grasp of how the process works, Eaton ultimately only sees the result of each shoot when the film is developed. Effectively, Eaton does not compose her images in the visible realm, but sight unseen; like Albers' physicist, she does in fact have to rely on equations, in the form of a complex system of notations for planning her shoots.

In Eaton's earlier *Cubes for Albers and Lewitt* (abbreviated as *cfaal* in her titles), she often highlighted the three-dimensionality of the cubes, shooting them isometrically and rotating them in different exposures to create images of translucent hypercubes nested within or drifting past each other. Often floating in black or undefined space, their glowing, jewel-toned colours suggested a science fiction aesthetic and seemed to flaunt their mimicry of CGI effects. Variations in approach were frequent: cubes might contain spheres, and planes could appear detached from their cubic body as Eaton adventurously distorted space in impossible ways; some images contain only a single cubic form with a surface patterned in tartan or day-glo gradient.

After several years of working with cubes, however, Eaton's experimental impulses took her in different directions. For her *UVBGRIR* series (2014-15), she eschewed the hard-edged geometric visions of her *cfaal* work to photograph baroque floral arrangements, while still testing the parameters of photographic colour: she shot in black-and-white and colorized her images with custom processes based on swapping and combining information from RGB, ultraviolet, and infrared film separations. Her *Transitions* series (2016) furthered the Op art aspects of *cfaal*: super-imposed circular forms shot (again) with additive colour mixing produce graphic, vividly coloured abstractions that

are seen through a disorienting lattice of venetian-blind-like stripes. *Pictures for Women* (2016) is, comparatively, one of her simplest series in execution: small prints of artworks by notable female abstractionists are mounted on coloured backgrounds with a kinetic device that makes them spin. When photographed, the resulting motion blur transmutes them into luminous new forms.

All of these different projects retain Eaton's enduring concerns: using time, light, colour, and the capabilities of analog photography to capture images the naked eye could never perceive. It is hardly surprising, then, that she would eventually return to the motif of the cube and the processes she pioneered with *cfaal*, which have been



was a way she could *make* colour within photography as freely as a painter. She resolved to work through a serialized testing of additive colour as thorough as that proposed by Albers' model.

The aim of her cubes project, then, was to limit her variables in order to focus exclusively on mixing colour in the additive system. The cube appealed to her as an elegant, elementary solution to the question of what to photograph, with Albers and Lewitt as eminent examples of artists who had used the same form as a vehicle for experiments within constrained systems. The method she eventually developed and has since refined to a virtual science is now well-documented. Her actual subjects (cubes, backdrops, surfaces) are

so generative for her practice. Given the time she's invested since she began the *Iterations* project, it seems fair to say that the cube has become her signature device every bit as much as the square was Albers'—it is her testing ground, her laboratory. In her own words: "I wasn't done."

After having exhausted her initial attempts and moving on to other explorations of additive theory, Eaton confesses that she had to accept that she had been "a bit lazy" in her first efforts. Probably only Eaton herself could look at her record of meticulous, borderline-obsessive commitment to technical innovation and make that judgment, but it is undeniable that the works in *Iterations* are even more rigorous than any of her prior efforts; the format is more regularized, and her approach even more systematic. Whereas the earlier *cfaal* works were primarily executed on a combination of intuition and improvisation, the increased complexity of the new series required what Eaton calls "extreme notes" and careful pre-planning.

"Whereas before I would also experiment more wildly with formal considerations, I cut that out this time," she confirms. Each of the images in *Iterations* is frontal, with a uniform horizon line and a vertiginous progression of nested cubes proceeding neatly towards a vanishing point. The sacrifice of what Eaton calls the "weird dimension blending" of the earlier *cfaal* series is compensated by the staggering richness and complexity of the colour mixing in the new works. In person, the large-scale photos (which are, individually, still titled as numbered *cfaals*) have the architectonic presence of cathedrals and the intricacy of fugues. The otherworldly cascade of colours imparts a metaphysical, even celestial, atmosphere, like a gateway to another realm.

The *Iterations* series also includes a range of smaller scale works that are all numbered and titled *IOC* (after *Interaction of Colour*), which are even more radiant and concentrated in their displays of colour. While the larger-scale works open up to the viewer like massive portals, the *IOC* images are more self-contained. Uniformly composed of the flat, square plane of a cube set inside a larger cube (which functions as a kind of frame), they operate even more like colour-field paintings than the large works; in lieu of the dense, polychrome dynamics of the new *cfaal* works, their simpler compositions pop and dazzle with bolder hues.

As a whole, the *Iterations* series plays with the reduction of real, solid objects to a two-dimensional image; the works constantly highlight their flatness rather than their three-dimensionality, as the earlier cubes did. At the same time (paradoxically), the recent works seem less *abstract*. Rather than the immaterial translucence and apparently "virtual" space of her earlier cubes, *Iterations*' repeating configuration emphasizes that what's pictured are objects on a tabletop, with an ever-present horizon line and the palpable surface and texture of painted wood. Nevertheless, Eaton's impossibly vivid colours, captured through the condensation of multiple instants of time, stand decidedly outside any "normal" experience of perceived reality. As Eaton puts it, "You could never see, yourself, in real time, what I've photographed. But they're objects that are really *there*."

It is this quasi-metaphysical drive to capture an alternate vision of reality, a trace of the real that exceeds our perceptual capacities, that is the essential basis of Eaton's work—though its speculative, utopian character is often missed by commentators who see her work as dry technical craft or bloodless formalism. This also leads to the surprisingly vexed classification of Eaton as an "abstract" artist. Eaton's own references to Albers and early pioneers of avant-garde photography like Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy meant that her early work was almost invariably discussed in terms of modernist abstraction, while her invocation of Lewitt also ensured that she would continuously be dogged by the spectre of conceptual art, particularly the photo-conceptualism that remained dominant in Vancouver during the period in which she earned her BFA from the Emily Carr Institute (now University) of Art and Design (she sometimes jokingly refers to her move away from Vancouver as "getting over the Wall").

Furthermore, her use of analog methods to produce images that appear "unreal" or "abstract" has been repeatedly read as a commentary on the perceptual revolution brought about by digital photography and digital image manipulation—which Eaton observed firsthand as part of the last generation to be artistically trained in classical chemical photography before the digital transition took hold. From today's vantage point, however, all these approaches to Eaton's work (modernism, abstraction, conceptualism, and digitization), while not invalid, seem increasingly insufficient, perhaps even misleading.

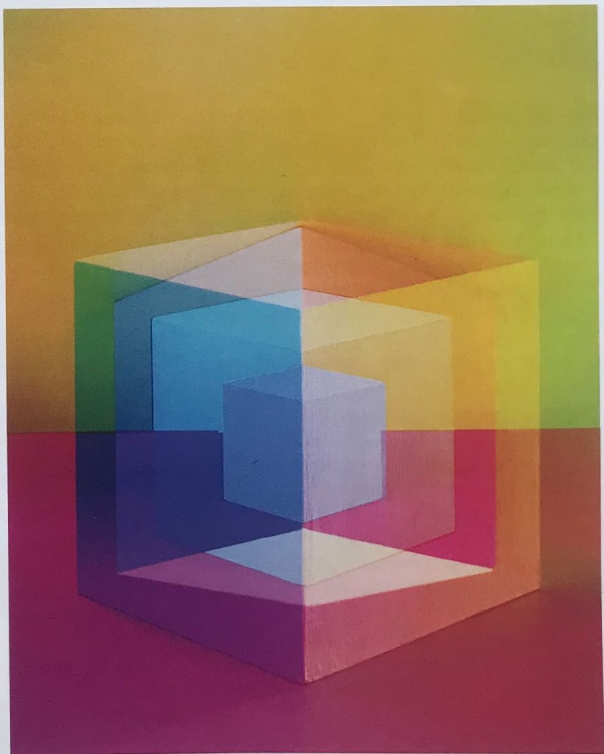
Certainly, the transition from analog to digital technology has played a major role in the development and reception of Eaton's work. Even beyond its applicability as a thematic issue, Eaton's emergence as an artist was facilitated by the photography blogosphere, which was nascent at the beginning of her career and now, a decade later, has already almost evaporated. Within an even larger frame, Eaton began exhibiting seriously in the immediate wake of the 2008 financial crash, an event which spurred fervent intellectual interest in the extent to which world affairs are governed by the abstract, algorithmic activity of financial capitalism, a force that very few people truly understand. This also dovetailed with increasing scrutiny of digital culture—that is, the specific business and political culture of Silicon Valley as well as the notion of *code* more broadly—as a dominant power system that's inscrutable to most people.

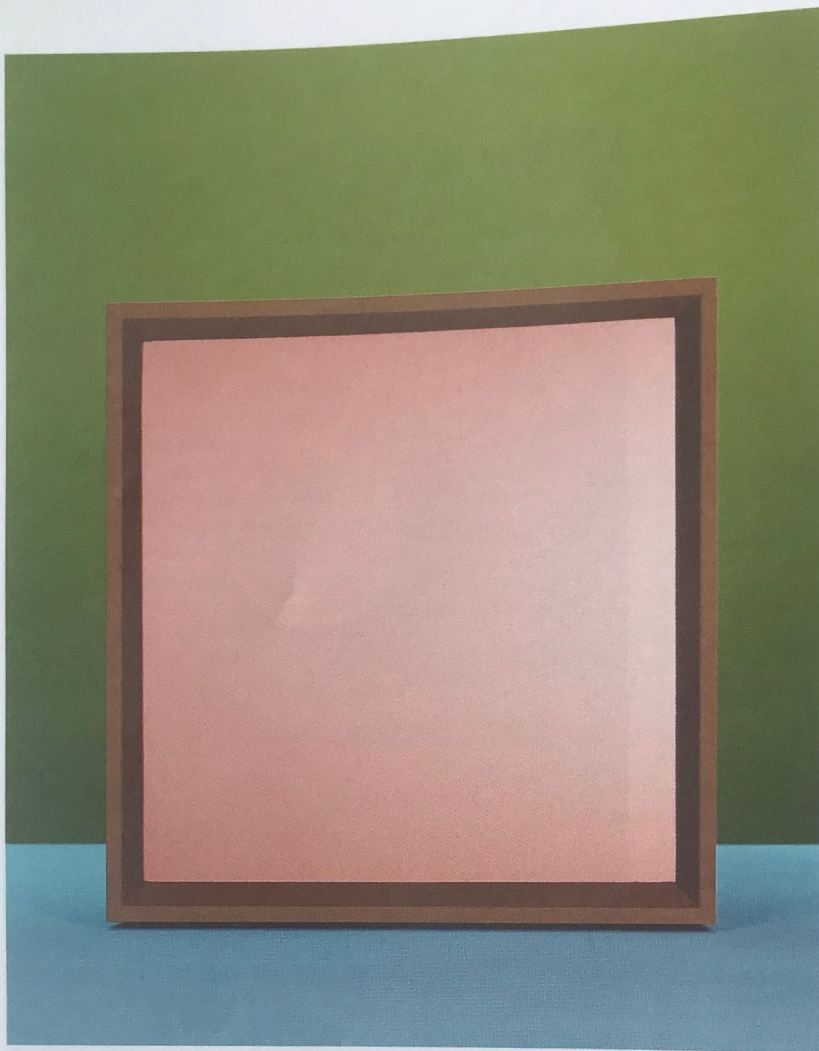
These large-scale conditions formed the backdrop for the general boom in abstraction (in painting as well as photography) of the mid-00s to the early 2010s. This includes Eaton herself, as well as the broad range of artists working with photography that she appeared alongside with in, for one, Charlotte Cotton's survey publication *Photography is Magic* (2012): Walead Beshty, Lucas Blalock, Eileen Quinlan, Erin Shirreff, Kate Steciw, and Letha Wilson, among many others. Numerous artists now categorized as "post-internet" also participated in this tendency, as did painters like Jutta Koether, Cheyney Thompson, Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker, Merlin Carpenter, and others, especially in the accounts of critics who wanted to establish a canon of "critical abstraction," as opposed to old-fashioned modernist abstraction or what eventually became known as "Zombie Formalism."

This was the context in which Eaton's breakthrough work was initially received, and its ability to be read in terms of these major contemporary currents no doubt facilitated her success. What has become apparent as her work has matured is that, however apposite these meta-contextual issues may be, Eaton's own concerns are too idiosyncratic to be reduced to the last decade's discourse on abstraction. Moreover, the mastery of her own language that Eaton is demonstrating with *Iterations* proves that her work stands alone without needing reference to prevailing trends to confirm its relevance.

For her own part, Eaton asserts that she has never considered her work abstract—at least, not any more abstract than any other photo (more on that in a moment)—nor is she specifically thinking about digital photography or the digital condition more generally when she is making her work. Despite her fidelity to analog photography, which can easily be read as a statement of principle, Eaton insists that "[the fact] that these works are analog isn't a position I take; it's a necessary fact." The point of many of her projects is to work with the specific potential of film as a medium, but she admits that digital photography has its own set of limitations and capabilities and that she is not strictly opposed to using it. "Something like the *Pictures for Women* series I could have shot digital, no problem," she explains. "Those are achieved through manipulating shutter speed, so it would have been irrelevant if they were shot digitally."

With the cubes, however, the whole project rests on the always-uncertain negotiation between the material realities of Eaton's subjects, the film stock, and the camera. Despite Eaton's own perfectionist tendencies, the whole effort would be for nothing if she could simply design a picture and execute it exactly as she imagined.





like “some photo collage version of a Frank Stella painting,” as she derisively remarks. This explains why the slight mis-registrations in her images (barely noticeable when viewing at small-scale or on a screen), the strangely vibrant borders where her colour filters don’t quite line up with the edge of the subject, or where the vibrations of a passing truck or nearby band practice imperceptibly jostled the lens, are often the most interesting parts of the picture.

Eaton likes to compare her work to free jazz or experimental music: “I remember watching a performance of John Zorn’s *Game Piece*, which is sort of controlled free improv,” she recounts. “And it struck me how technically good you have to be and how much you needed to study to be good at free improv, that it was through that you could potentially gain the most freedoms. I think I really tied this to photography...For me it’s really been through a lot of thinking, learning and experimenting with the technical parameters and limitations that my pictures have been able to happen.”

Eaton becomes the most animated when discussing what photography has taught her about perception itself. “Through photography I have come to understand how incredibly limited our perceptual capabilities are. What we call reality is no such thing. It’s a tiny slice of things beyond our wildest dreams based on our super-limited sensitivities to information, as well as limited neural processing of that information.” Through photography, she explains, we are able to access at least some information beyond our sensitivity to the electromagnetic spectrum (such as infrared, ultra violet, and x-ray radiation). Beyond that, photography also allows us to experience other dimensions of time: it can depict a short moment, an accumulation of moments, or a long duration—but fixed onto a

plane. So a photograph, she muses, “is at once abstract from our experience, but also much more real than our lived experience.”

One of the realizations that most impacted Eaton’s practice was when she grasped that, in a sense, there is no such thing as colour. Rather than a property of the world, what we call colour is merely our limited ability to process information that comes from waves. Photographic processes, as she takes evident delight in explaining, were engineered in order to mimic how humans perceive light, but nothing in the technology itself mandates that we need adhere to these limitations. Simply put, reality is not what we think it is. “Some people think that the unknown is terrifying,” Eaton remarks. “I actually find it very comforting when I can be reminded that things aren’t exactly as they seem. Reality can be a little nasty.”

After the *Iterations* series and exhibitions are finally wrapped, Eaton says that she feels the need to focus on a project without such demanding technical requirements. Without any constraints as to what she will be photographing, her goal is to focus on an issue that has been a source of frustration as both a viewer and producer of photographs: the quality of the photographic object—the physical print. This could involve printing with colour carbon, silvers, platinum, dye transfer, and perhaps even daguerreotypes or holograms. Such an open-ended brief will also allow her to go back to more experimental shooting, potentially returning to previous dead-ends and dropped projects. “I feel a bit like I’ve ‘earned’ this freedom for myself,” she affirms, “That I shouldn’t need to conceptually defend my practice to the same extent—that I can take some time to really find the joy I have in my work that can get a bit lost when I’ve set up such

extreme projects.”

As 2018 wound down, Eaton wrote me from New York, after having seen Hilma af Klint’s retrospective at the Guggenheim. She was ecstatic about the show, but particularly staggered by a series of works she had never seen before in which af Klint had drawn concentric squares and painted isometric cubes that bore a striking resemblance to Eaton’s own photographs. “I swear to God,” Eaton wrote, “when I was leaving the Guggenheim, the photographic portrait of Hilma winked at me.”

*Saelan Twerdy is a freelance writer based in Montreal and a PhD candidate in Art History at McGill University. He is the managing editor of RACAR and a contributing editor for Momus.*

#### Images credits:

**Page 23:** *Hilma 01 (Hilma af Klint, The Ten Largest, No. 2, Childhood, Group IV, 1907), 2016.*

**Page 24:** *Cfaal 1199, 2018*

**Page 25:** *Cfaal 1174, 2018*

**Page 27 clockwise from top left:** *Agnes 02 v04 (Agnes Martin, Untitled #1, 2003), 2016; Tomma 02 v03 (Tomma Abts, Oeje, 2016), 2016; Cfaal 346, 2013; Transition H42, 2016.*

**Page 28:** *IOC 033, 2018.*