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‘They’re a Fleeting Mystery’: Watch Artist Mariah Robertson Harness Unexpected Chemical Reactions to Make Otherworldly Photos

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein, December 3, 2020



For artist [Mariah Robertson](#), every day in her studio is an experiment, and often the failed endeavors make the most successful work.

Though she’s often identified as a photographer, a lot of her work doesn’t even use a camera, and she could equally be described as a scientist. Clad in a bright yellow hazmat suit and rubber boots, Robertson’s days are spent mixing and applying chemicals in her laboratory-cum-darkroom.

In an exclusive interview with Art21 filmed over the course of four years, Robertson describes her physically rigorous practice and the accident that inspired a new series.

In the video, which originally aired in 2014 as part of the New York Close Up series, the artist recounts using a leftover roll of unexposed photosensitive paper to make kaleidoscopic, abstract color studies

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"I always enjoy trying to make something out of the unwanted thing and go[ing] deeper into the disaster," she says.

Robertson's work is usually described using words associated with painting or photography, but her work exists in a sort of liminal space between those two: she's not pointing and clicking a camera, and she's not applying a substance in brushstrokes to canvas. Not having the right vocabulary seems right for these otherworldly works, which she calls "a fleeting mystery."

Another serendipitous event occurred when Robertson realized that the metallic paper she'd been itching to work with was only available in huge rolls, not in the pre-cut sheets she'd been expecting. "It took me way too long to realize, 'Oh, I could make this any size I want,'" she says, laughing.

In the end, the unwieldy lengths of paper covered in tiny chemical reactions were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. Right now, a new series of works is on view at Van Doren Waxter in the show "Repetition and Difference."

Watch the video, which originally appeared as part of Art21's series New York Close Up, below. The brand new 10th season of the show is available now at Art21.org.

"Mariah Robertson: Repetition and Difference" is on view at Van Doren Waxter through December 19, 2020.