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Jessica Eaton: Cube, Color, Cosmos

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By Lily Rothman

Canadian photographer Jessica Eaton uses her camera to create color invisible to the naked eye. She gives bright hues to gray forms in her series *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt*, and that work was recently awarded the photography prize at the 2012 Hyères International Festival of Fashion and Photography—a prize for which TIME’s director of photography Kira Pollack sat on the jury.

“We’ve all mixed two colors of paint together, and either it makes another color or, if you keep going, it gets muddy and progressively gets darker,” she explains. “In light, things work really differently.” Eaton explains that she exploits the properties of light through additive color separation: whereas the primary pigment colors (red, blue, yellow) get darker as they blend, the primary colors of light (red, blue, green) move toward white. Eaton applies filters in those three colors to her camera and takes multiple exposures, a process that turns the gray form seen here into the vibrant ones seen above. “The color itself is mixed inside the camera,” she says.



One of the byproducts of Eaton’s process is an element of surprise: because her images are created within the camera, she doesn’t know what she’ll get until the photos are developed. “It’s a bit of a conversation with the world,” she says. “With the forces of time and space and contingency and errors that happen, because often there’s so many steps going into one of these, I get back something that’s also new to me, and those are the pictures that tend to end up in exhibits.”

Her work in other series, samples of which are also included in this gallery, may use different techniques (for example, *Spectrum* is the product of covering a window with gels, as shown here), but they all come back to experimentation with light and color. That experimentation is something that she has been building toward throughout her career. Eaton says that when she began taking pictures, in 1998, her work tended toward documentary and portrait photography. But even then, working in the dark room, she says that she felt a push to test different processes and see what would happen. She was aware of the science of light at work even in what she calls “normal” photographs, aware that subject and content buried those

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phenomena, preventing viewers from seeing what was there. In 2006, her work shifted and she began to bring those hidden elements to the forefront. She isolated light and color and time, even though to do so was to challenge the classical definition of photography as a way to capture a single moment. Her multiple exposures—as in *Quantum Pong*, which comprises four exposures of more than 500 ping-pong balls that had been dropped 20 feet—allow her to leave that definition behind. “In most of these photographs, what you’re looking at is more than one moment,” she says. “They aren’t static moments of time. They’re layers of time.”

But the photographer likes challenging definitions, and not just photographic ones. Although she dislikes the term “abstract” as a description of her work—it implies that the light she captures doesn’t exist in reality—Eaton says that her photographs acknowledge “how incredibly limited our ability to perceive the world is.” We lack the sensory mechanisms to see her colors with our naked eyes, and Eaton sees that as a metaphor for our inability to see the extent of the physical universe, whether it includes multiple dimensions or parallel universes. And, in that metaphor, she sees hope. “I love the idea that no matter how bad it gets,” she says, “there’s this wild so-called reality way beyond what we have decided it is.”

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