

M+B

CANADIANART

LENSCRAFT: Jessica Eaton Asks Us to Think About What We See

December 14, 2012

By Gabrielle Moser



It's a hot late-summer afternoon in Montreal the first time I meet Jessica Eaton, and the artist is taking a brief but well-deserved break. She and her assistant have spent the day cleaning and reorganizing her large, light-filled studio on the second floor of a renovated warehouse in Little Italy. Their work has paid off: it is one of the tidiest studios I have ever visited. On a worktable by the door, Eaton's most common photographic subjects—wooden cubes and pyramids in a range of sizes, each painted in black, grey or white—are piled up like an imagined cityscape. Tripods, lights and bouncer scrims are nestled in an adjacent corner. Lengths of carefully folded fabric in gold and tie-dyed patterns hang from a clothes rack, separating the photo studio from a small living area and office space, where a bookshelf is filled with

M+B

physics textbooks, old photography manuals and catalogues of the work of American landscape photographer Ansel Adams. By the big loft windows at one end of the studio, a strange vignette is evidence of some of Eaton's recent experiments: 10 vases filled with an array of fresh, dying and dried flowers are framed by a mirror ball hanging from the ceiling. A small, taxidermied black bear looks on.

Over white wine that emerges from the bar fridge under her desk (where the bottle contends for space with boxes of film stock), Eaton strategizes about how to tell her gallerists—in Toronto, New York and Los Angeles—that the studio will be closed for production for the next few weeks. Eaton is instituting a self-imposed studio residency so she can focus on making new work for the two solo shows she has agreed to mount this fall. "I'm in a bit of a strange place right now," she explains. "I have my dream job, making photographs all day, but I've also ended up with a job I never wanted, which is managing my own small business. I can finally afford to make the photographs I want to make; now I just need to find the time."

If Eaton has some trepidation about her success, it is with good reason. Studio time has been at a premium over the past two years, a period that has signalled a watershed moment in the 35-year-old photographer's career. Since graduating with a BFA from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 2006, the Regina-born artist has gone on to show her work in exhibitions across North America, including the Québec Triennial 2011, Toronto's CONTACT Photography Festival and a solo show at New York's Higher Pictures gallery. But, in the last year, the demand for her photographs and her time has increased dramatically. This spring, for instance, Eaton was in France for the 27th International Festival of Fashion & Photography in Hyères, where she took home the prestigious Photography Jury Grand Prize for her *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt* series (2010–ongoing). The summer saw her fly to Vancouver to install her work in Presentation House Gallery's critically acclaimed survey of Canadian photographers, "Phantasmagoria," then head to Toronto to participate in the "New Meditations" exhibition at Daniel Faria Gallery, and finally go on to LA to visit M+B, her newest dealer and the venue for one of her upcoming solo shows. In September, Eaton opened another solo show at Toronto's Clint Roenisch gallery before taking part in the main exhibition of Korea's Daegu Photo Biennale, curated by photo historian Charlotte Cotton and aptly titled "Photography is Magic!"

It is an itinerary that is not uncommon in an art world structured around international biennials, but Eaton's frenetic pace seems at odds with the slow time that unfolds when you stand in front of one of her photographs. Composed of geometric shapes in rich, saturated hues, Eaton's photographs glow from within. Spend time with them, and the edges of her forms begin to shimmer, dissolve and, in some cases, appear to move. In her most recent series, *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt* (usually known by its acronym, *cfaal*), cubes are her main subject, often nested inside one another like Russian dolls. *cfaal 260* (2012), for instance, features four translucent cubes that appear superimposed over one another, the largest a deep navy blue, the smallest an icy grey on one side, a warm melon on the other. The cubes seem ethereal, suspended in mid-air, yet they are also satisfyingly real. Evoking the building-block shapes used by modernist sculptors like Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt but also calling to mind the simple wooden plinths used to display art in museums, Eaton's cubes are solid, three-dimensional objects: their corners dented from use, the seams where their edges meet reflecting light, their bulk casting shadows on the ground around them.

An earlier image, *cfaal (mb RGB) 18* (2010), is even more mysterious. In it, 13 bars of blurred colour—yellow, red, blue, black and white—seem to teeter precariously on top of one another. Although a horizon line grounds the composition, the edges of each row blur as though the objects are vibrating at an

M+B

impossibly high frequency. It's hard to discern just what we're seeing in some of Eaton's images. They encourage a prolonged process of contemplation, asking us to think about how we, and the camera, see. If we're accustomed to seeing photographs as images frozen in time, Eaton's works wriggle loose, teasing the eye with their refusal to stay fixed.

As a way to try to get a handle on the elusive qualities of her photographs, most writing about Eaton's work inevitably turns to an explanation of her process. While the effects she achieves at first seem the product of Photoshop, they are in fact created within the mechanism of the camera, using large-format, four-by-five- or eight-by-ten-inch analogue film. The *cfaal* series is the result of several basic manipulations of the photographic process, such as multiple exposures and the use of lens filters. To achieve the nested cubes, for instance, Eaton uses one negative to photograph several cubes in succession. Some are painted a dark black, which reflects the least amount of light and therefore leaves space on the negative, while others are painted in shades of grey or even in a bright white, reflecting the greatest amount of light and maxing out the negative's ability to register images. By carefully tracking her exposures, Eaton builds up her compositions, testing the film's potential to hold information (in this case, light). She calls it a "strategy game" of trying to keep track of how previous exposures will be affected (or obliterated) by a future one. The premise is simple, but it yields a remarkable range of results. Eaton need only to invert a cube between exposures to shift the entire spatial arrangement, turning the familiar squares into overlapping diamonds, trapezoids and parallelograms.

Her radiant, otherworldly colours are also created in-camera, this time through a tripartite additive colour process she discovered in an old Kodak manual. The technique involves making multiple exposures of the same object, but placing one of three colour-separation filters—in red, green or blue—over the lens for each photograph. When the colour-filtered exposures are layered over top of one another, these additive primary colours produce a rich assortment of bright hues, from the more common cyan and magenta shades to subtler mint-greens and warm peach tones. Unlike the subtractive colour theory we are more familiar with from painting, where red and blue combine to create the darker colour purple, every time the perceptual additive system overlaps colours (as it does with televisions and computer monitors), they become brighter, eventually yielding a brilliant white.

Eaton's finished objects seem restrained, even cool, in their careful execution, but in her studio, explaining her working methods and walking me through her discoveries, the artist is warm and talkative, handing me polarized lenses and 3-D glasses, plastic prisms and custom-made steel plates: the simple materials of her practice, with which she seems to work magic. She often sketches her ideas using computer software, then tests her experiments in-camera. The result entails dozens of "failed" images for every successful photograph that ends up printed and hanging on a gallery wall. Though Eaton is a self-described perfectionist, she is most excited by her accidental discoveries: the experiments that "go wrong," but in the process reveal something new about photography, light and vision that she could not have otherwise seen. She describes these images as "photographs I wasn't able to see before they existed."

She shows me a video documenting one of her first photographic experiments with everyday materials: her BFA thesis work, a series of black-and-white photographs of Silly String caught in mid-air as it flew through the space in front of the lens. In the footage, we see Eaton standing behind her large-format camera and directing the action, where two lines of volunteers—male colleagues from art school—are crouched, each holding his own can of dollar-store string. Eaton counts down to one and string flies in

M+B

front of the camera. She rushes to deploy the shutter, the string runs out, and the first take is over. Eaton jumps up and down on the spot.

That enthusiasm has been tempered by experience, but it has not waned. In preparation for a new body of work, she has just bought a multiple-ray projector, a device she read about in an article from the Harvard physics department, which uses lenses to direct five incredibly bright beams of light. Eaton paid an “exorbitant” amount for the small machine, which she is now using to experiment with blending and splitting light using lenses and geometric forms. When she aims one of the beams through a convex lens, the light divides into a rainbow of its constituent colours, sending rays of red, green and blue across the floor. She plans to make a series of images of these prismatic colours, creating photographs whose subject is light itself. In many ways, it is a deconstruction of one of her cube photographs. “I think in another life I would have gone into the sciences,” she muses.

Though her work is often compared to the abstract practices of Josef Albers and LeWitt, Eaton’s working methods have more in common with some of photography’s earliest pioneers: figures like William Henry Fox Talbot, who, as an amateur scientist, tested the camera’s capacity to capture the effects of light, space and motion. I mention these early photographers to her, and she nods enthusiastically: “I feel an incredible affinity with Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, in particular,” she says. “The thing I’m jealous about the most with those photographers is that they existed at a time before these boundaries were enforced between fine-art photography and all the other forms of photography. They could make the most experimental, surreal photographs one day, and then a conventional portrait of someone the next, and that made sense as two ways of asking the same question. It is a medium that at its historical roots is, first of all, full of nerdy geeks, but also filled with experimentation, with asking questions of light and seeing what it will do.”

Taking a cue from these predecessors, Eaton’s new works use a variety of materials as their subjects: one series features shots of cheap plastics, such as packing tape, photographed between two types of polarizing lenses to reveal rainbow patterns within their normally transparent appearances. And, despite her reservations about their reputation as a clichéd subject, Eaton is also photographing flowers, in huge, baroque arrangements by her studio windows.

Knowing Eaton’s process is satisfying, but it does not resolve her images. Despite carefully imposed conceptual parameters, her photographs remain enigmatic. She says this is because of the medium’s inherent contingencies, its ability to capture more than its operator can ever anticipate. But something else is at work in her photographs that keeps me looking, a sense that she has managed to activate the unrealized potential that remains embedded in photography. Eaton’s photographs suggest that what we see is never as simple as it seems: that there is a whole substrata of phenomena taking place at the level of light that only the camera can reveal.