

JESSICA EATON
WILD PERMUTATIONS

FEBRUARY 6–MAY 24, 2015

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WILD PERMUTATIONS

February 6–May 24, 2015
Mueller Family Gallery
Organized by Rose Bouthillier, Associate Curator

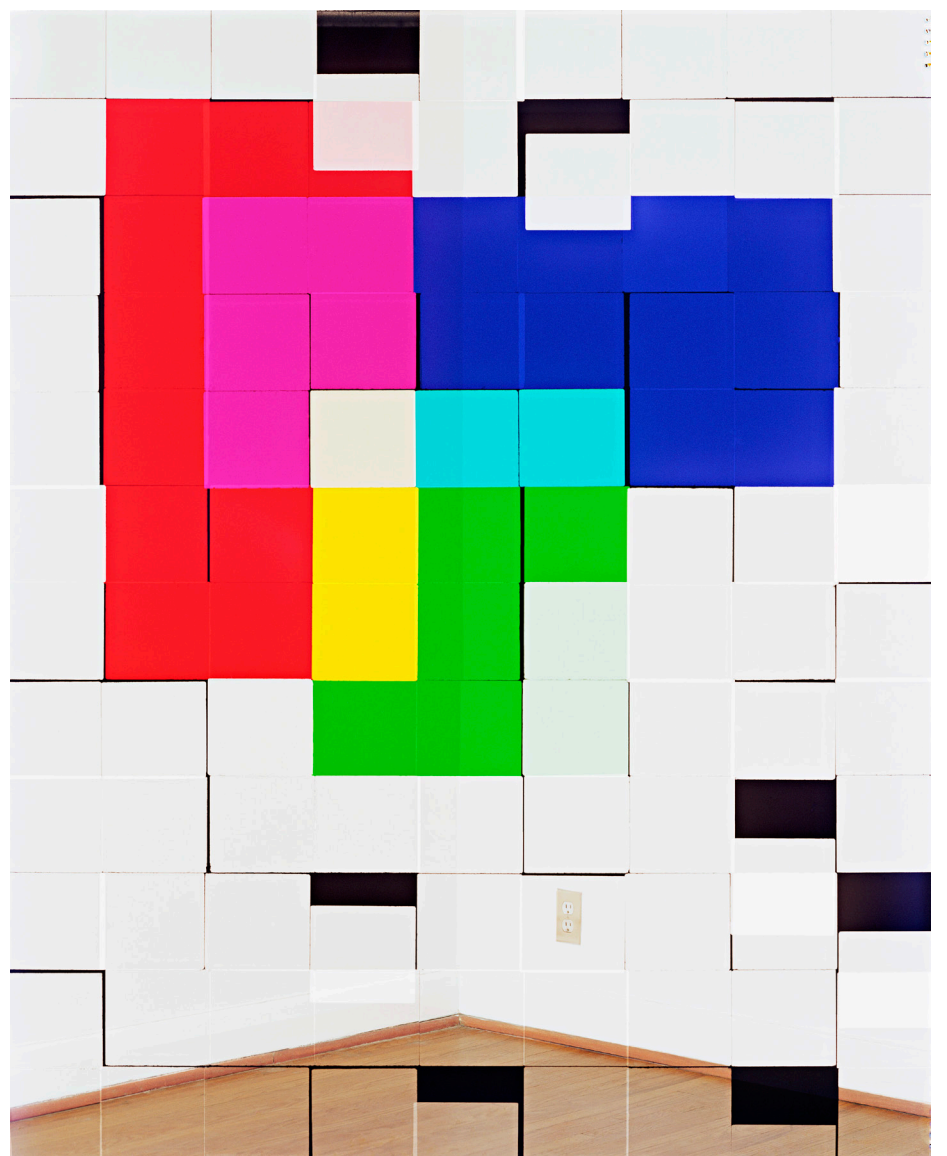
Jessica Eaton (1977, Regina, Canada) lives and works in Montreal, Canada. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at CONTACT Photography Festival, Toronto, and The Photographers' Gallery, London. She has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *New Positions in American Photography* (2014), Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam; *Phantasmagoria* (2012), Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver; *Photography is Magic* (2012), Daegu Photography Biennale, South Korea; Québec Triennial (2011), Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Eaton is the recipient of The Magenta Foundation's Bright Spark Award (2011) and the Photography Jury Grand Prize at the International Festival of Fashion and Photography, Hyères, France (2012). In 2013 she was long listed for the AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize.

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MOCA Cleveland's presentation of *Wild Permutations* is made possible by the generous support of:
Paul E. Bain
The Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell Foundation
The Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation

With additional support from: Anselm Talalay Photography Endowment

All 2015 exhibitions are funded by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Leadership Circle gifts from the Britton Fund, Doreen and Dick Cahoon, Victoria Colligan and John Stalcup, Lauren Rich Fine and Gary Giller, Joanne Cohen and Morris Wheeler, Margaret Cohen and Kevin Rahilly, Becky Dunn, Barbara and Peter Galvin, Harriet and Victor Goldberg, Agnes Gund, Donna and Stewart Kohl, Toby Devan Lewis, Marian and Boake Sells, and Scott Mueller.



JESSICA EATON

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Vibrant and enigmatic, Jessica Eaton's work considers the very nature of photography. Her works start by engaging the viewer's eye, with pulsing colors, chromatic blurs, and perplexing shifts in surface and depth. Vision is pushed, pulled, and scattered. The eye becomes aware of itself, how it moves and what it relays to the brain. Questions arise: What, exactly, are you seeing? What is the subject, and how is it understood through the image? And, a persistent and fundamental concern in Eaton's practice: What is a photograph?

Driven by such queries, Eaton's work has a certain restlessness. Using a large format film camera, she has developed an increasingly complex, experimental approach to image making, breaking photography down to essential components in order to examine and reconstruct. At its most basic definition, a photograph is a fixed image made with light. But the medium of photography is extremely variable and hard to pin down: since its public introduction in 1839, it has rapidly mutated through numerous techniques, apparatuses, and uses. As photographs saturate our everyday life, it becomes habit to view them quickly, without questioning how they are made.

Photography is integrally tied to our understanding of the physical world and ability to observe it: how light travels, bends, and splits, and how the human eye sees. Color photographs developed out of the knowledge that white light breaks down into a spectrum; that every visible color can be mixed from three primaries (red, green, and blue); and that the human eye is equipped with three types of photoreceptors, sensitized to those primaries. To this day, the RGB color system continues to define commercially available film and digital imaging systems.

With this in mind, Eaton has set out to explore the production of color, revealing its underlying structure and playfully engaging with its rules. For one of her earliest experiments with color mixing, *108_06* (2009), Eaton had 108 metal sheets made, each with a differently positioned square cut out allowing a small section of a 4x5" piece of film to be exposed. She then photographed a corner of her studio multiple times on the same negative, building the image up block by block. Using colored lens filters, she created a floating color wheel with six hues and a "re-mixed" white at the center. While photographs tend to hide or mask their construction, *108_06* blatantly reveals its own making; the loose grid is mis-aligned and the film notches are visible in the print. These physical traces are significant, indicating the labor undertaken to prove the rules of a system and develop the ability to "work it."

In 2010, Eaton began using color filters to photograph grayscale cubes and pyramids, using motion and multiple exposures to mix colors directly onto film. These include more seamless constructions, such as *Additive Colour Wheel in 12 parts: swatches mixed in camera via filtration of the primaries Red, Green, Blue, Triangular Pyramid base paint 9% Grey* (2012), showing an accordion wheel of carefully measured hues. Others, such as *RGB* (2012) arrange the elements dynamically, transforming the volumes into luminous beams. *Homage to Tartan Ribbon* (2014) features a cube swathed in a dizzying array of colors in a plaid pattern.¹ At first glance, these works can easily be misread as digital manipulations. However, on close viewing, the surface textures, edges, and shadows suggest the physicality of the objects and their "real time" existence. The use of analog film is important as it places limits and demands; the order in which things are arranged, measured, and placed dictates the outcome, visible only after the negative is developed. This also opens the work up to an element of chance.

In what appears to be a rather drastic switch from her geometric subjects, Eaton's most recent work focuses on botanical studies. However, this seeming diversion is rooted in the same questions and logic. While her previous works used color film to capture black-and-white subjects, the flowers harken back to early separation negatives, using black-and-white film to capture colorful subjects. In *Wild Permutations*, Eaton presents individual red, green, and blue separations of a tulip as silver gelatin prints. Revealing

the subject through limited information, these images show color as data: densities of particular wavelengths hitting film.

Since conventional printing methods have limited tonal ranges, Eaton has turned to the color carbon process, an early printing technique valued for its brilliant tones and grainless detail. While this process allows for a high degree of control over color, it is extremely labor intensive, and today there is only one master carbon printer working in America.² Pure pigments (cyan, magenta, and yellow) are suspended in light-sensitive gelatin emulsions, which are individually exposed and combined onto a support. Eaton recognized that the information rendered by a separation negative can be treated as a variable; once the "blue" information is captured, it may be output as "red," or any other color. Multiple separations can be scrambled and combined. Add to this the ability to filter for ultraviolet and infrared light (both invisible to the human eye), and increasingly surreal variations result.

For her first foray into the carbon process, Eaton has created *UVBGRIR* (2014/2015), a series of prints featuring the same flower arrangement. The suite includes a "normal" meant to most closely align with human vision, and a range of custom variants generated through swapping and combining information from RGB separations. Eaton's floral studies have been a prolific undertaking over the last year, resulting in hundreds of negatives. *Wild Permutations* presents the very beginning of this project. As such, these works are a proposition, a set of "answers" to a problem that gestures toward variety ad infinitum. While the flowers themselves might appear sentimental, calling up references such as Dutch still life *vanitas* and iconic moments in photographic history, their repetition, driven by a disregard for representation, acts against such associations. Eaton considers subject matter as a conduit, an element that presents a set of possibilities in a photographic system. As Sol LeWitt, an artist who has greatly influenced Eaton's approach, stated: "The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact, it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work."³

Eaton is part of a current dialog in contemporary photo-based practice, a turn towards reflexive, studio-based making that interrogates the image. Artists working in this way include Walead Beshty, Lucas Blalock, and Andrea Longacre-White, among many others. The advance of digital technologies gives these investigations urgency, but their roots lie in early 20th-century predecessors such as László Moholy-Nagy, who aspired to make photographs that operated outside of representational systems. He recognized that the medium's unique property (light-sensitivity) had the potential to create an entirely new mode of production. Eaton's work follows from this premise, exploiting the medium's inherent qualities to detach light and color from their symbolic functions. Her work explores what photography is capable of and how it behaves, always expressing, in a searching manner, a consciousness of its own medium. Rather than asking us to see things, Eaton devastates our ability to confidently do so. Instead, she asks us to see photographs.

—ROSE BOUTHILLIER
ASSOCIATE CURATOR

¹ This work was made in reference to the first color photograph ever made, produced in 1861 by physicist James Clerk Maxwell, which depicted a tartan ribbon.

² The printer is Tod Gangler at Art & Soul Photo in Seattle. For more information about the color carbon process, visit www.colorcarbonprint.com.

³ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 13. LeWitt employed the cube in many drawings and sculptures, most iconically in his series of "open" cube sculptures that visualize mathematical rules.