

MARIAH ROBERTSON
LET'S CHANGE



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When I first visited Mariah Robertson in her Brooklyn studio in 2009, I felt like I had been transported into the lab of a psychedelic scientist. Her small workspace, dominated by a giant enlarger and industrial metal sink with an attached garden hose, smelled of chemicals. On a hook were a respirator and an apron. Prints were hanging from the ceiling on clothespins, drying like laundry above our heads. The studio was littered with colored gels, vats of chemicals, and rolls of photographic paper (both exposed and not)—ingredients necessary for making her photographs. The artist cleared a small space on the floor, about four by four feet, and she proceeded to pull out print after print for me to view. The photographs were oddly shaped, most of them cut unevenly or even ripped, but the artist didn't seem to notice. Each photograph was more brilliant than the next. The works exploded with highly saturated color, odd textures, bursts of shimmers, and chemical messes. In them I saw flashes of recognizable imagery (male nudes, palm leaves, geometrical shapes), but mostly they looked like abstract fields of color and drips—paintings made with light and photographic chemicals. They belonged to a world far away from the drab industrial Brooklyn building we were in. They existed on another plane of reality.

Robertson makes her pictures by using analog darkroom process—cutting and combining negatives, dripping and coating chemicals on photographic paper, exposing the paper (sometimes with a flashlight) to colored gels and lights. She often employs multiple techniques in a single image—enlarging negatives, employing filters, crafting hand-made patterns of colored gels, and placing objects (such as agate, hoses, and glass) directly on the paper. By applying critical analyses to the rules of traditional darkroom photography, she challenges the very definition of the medium and blurs the line between representation and abstraction. Each work is unique, the end result of a process in the darkroom that seemed as mysterious to the artist as it did to me. During my visit, Robertson recounted her obsession with trying to re-make a certain print. But a process like hers cannot be duplicated as it's not an exact science. There is an imprecision in how long the paper is exposed, how long it sits in the bath and how it is fixed. Each work has the imprint of the artist's hand; each is absolutely unique in the world.

One of the defining characteristics of photography (arguably its most unique and seductive quality) is that it

Mariah Robertson, *100*, 2011. 50"x75". C-print. Photo courtesy the artist.



can be mass-produced. "You click the button, we do the rest" Kodak famously advertised to the scores of enthusiasts that took it up as a hobby. In traditional photography there is no original. Photographs exist in editions and they can be easily reproduced and widely disseminated. Photography is a democratic medium that has become ubiquitous in the age of iPhones and Facebook. Of course, any connoisseur of darkroom printing knows that the artistry of printing is as nuanced as woodworking, but photography's ability to exist in multiples and to be viewed widely has been one of its defining properties. Robertson's work challenges everything we know and assume about the medium today. Her process recalls photography's infancy, when it was an art not yet available to many and developed by risk-takers intent on finding a new visual form. When photography was invented, it was the domain of alchemists, dreamers, and spiritualists. There were no rules. Gentleman scientists (of course, the early pioneers of photography were mostly men) dedicated themselves to the art of drawing with light, cooking up home recipes to calibrate the right balance of chemicals so that an image could be recorded permanently on a light sensitive material. Through trial and error, the science of photography was developed, replete with rules, conventions, and mass manufactured papers and chemicals. Along the way, hard-edged realists and the socially concerned took up the medium because of its ability to tell us something about the world. And in the twenty first century, photography sits at the precipice of a digital revolution. But for Robertson, the secrets of the darkroom and the mysterious element of time that enchanted her Victorian predecessors still promise endless possibilities.

Can making a photograph be considered a performance? Unlike the mechanical precision of today's digital photo labs, Robertson's work is the result of a private performance in the darkroom. The physicality of her work, which is getting larger and more monumental in scale, means that the artist's body is an integral part of how the work is made and how it looks. The limitations of her body (her height, the length of her arms) are just as much a factor in the outcome of her work as are the limitations of light, available chemicals, and the space of her darkroom. Originally, Robertson studied sculpture and she is self-taught in photography. While she was a graduate student in sculpture at Yale University, she began experimenting in the darkroom. Her unique photographs reveal her sculptural roots in her attention to the tactile qualities of the medium and her unfettered, hands-on approach to production. In the darkroom, she breaks all the rules of exposure and proper developing techniques. Her work can be seen as an exercise against a codified set of rules, an approach to photography that is an immersive conceptual project. It is in the pushing against the conventions of photography that Robertson is carving out an artistic language of her own.

Robertson's finished photographs are presented in unorthodox ways, underscoring how the process of making them is integral to the experience of viewing them. Often cut from large rolls of photographic paper in the dark,



Mariah Robertson, 59, 2011. 86"x53". C-print. Photo courtesy the artist.

the odd shaped pieces of paper sit uncomfortably in their frames, creating hybrid sculpture-photographs. The photographs battle with their frames, resting and curling at the bottom, a cardinal sin in traditional photography presentation. Robertson calls our attention to the surface of the paper, emphatically challenging the notion of a photograph as a window into the world. She makes us aware of the frame, of the outer edges of the paper, where it has been ripped unevenly, and the small buckles and bulges on the paper are evidence of being handled by the artist. These imperfections are the antithesis of the glossy perfection of so much photography today. Instead she shares an affinity with painters or sculptors—those that spend time making things in the studio.

Recently, Robertson's work has taken on the scale of site-specific installation. Her large-scale photographs inhabit rooms—they hang from ceilings, are draped on walls, and cascade elegantly onto the floor. In many ways, she has come full circle, re-visiting the space of sculpture through her practice in photography. These ambitious photographic sculptures, which push the limits of chance creation, are



as beautiful as they are fragile. For her exhibition at Grand Arts, Robertson has created three 100-foot photographs—the length of a roll of commercially available photographic paper. To make them, the artist essentially works blind, never able to see the entire work, rolling up portions of the paper as she works on other parts. The images on the long photographs ultimately rely more on chance than precision, but each piece of the triptych has a visual theme: male nudes, palm trees, and color abstractions. In addition to the large prints, a handful of framed photos on temporary walls re-orient the flow through the gallery. The whole gallery effectively becomes a container for her photographs, a world created by the artist that viewers can step into. In this environment, Robertson conjures the history and myths of photography, evoking the unknowable and the magical.

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Top: Mariah Robertson, studio view. 2012. Photo by the artist.

Right: Mariah Robertson, 9, 2011. Installation view, BAL TIC Center for Contemporary Art. Photo courtesy the artist.

Cover Image: Mariah Robertson, 7, 2012. 82"x50". C-print. Photo courtesy the artist.

