

Flash: Jessica Eaton

August 10–October 26, 2013



Jessica Eaton, *cfaal 313*, 2013

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Still life. A cube is set upon a tabletop. It has surfaces, edges, and corners. It casts shadows. The lens of a camera is perfectly focused on its closest edge while the body of the object convincingly recedes. It exhibits these physical attributes, and yet this box seemingly has no weight: each of the cube's surfaces displays a hyper-real spectrum of color in bands of concentric squares. Primary red and blue each make a single appearance but are otherwise enclosed by stripes of secondary and tertiary color. The left face is dominated by blues, violets, and fleshy beiges; the right shows off turquoise and lavender, autumnal greens and browns, and a strong red center. The top of the cube is different still; a sky-blue center is surrounded by warm off-whites and a rich, dusty navy. Perhaps many of these colors are repeated, but our perception shifts based on their proximity and sequence. The optical effect forces the various surfaces forward then back, causing the cube continuously to flip inside-out as the viewer's mind attempts to constrain the picture to the perspectival order implied by its boundaries. Despite its optical games, this is, after all, a photograph of a simple object in space.

Construction. To make the series “Cubes for Albers and LeWitt (*cfaal*)” (2010–13), Jessica Eaton constructs a monochromatic set consisting of a flat gray tabletop, a white background, and several fiberboard boxes painted in various shades of white and gray. To make each picture, she photographs the cubes using color filters, exposing the large-format film multiple times. In between exposures, she occasionally alters the studio set, for instance shifting the position of the box or inserting a new one. By defining a set of procedures, her simple studio arrangement becomes a palette for color play. Each piece of film accumulates multiple exposures—from three to as many as 96.¹ Using this additive color technique, Eaton creates compositions in vivid, otherworldly spectra that harness the properties of light waves and photographic film in camera. Grounded in experimentation, her practice evinces a tinkering spirit that harkens back to the 19th century inventors of photography. She uses empirical knowledge and well-honed skill, but pushes her cubes to new limits by introducing elements of chance. “The final color scheme is a complete surprise,” she writes. “The system obliterates my control.”²

Seeing double. This picture therefore is a photograph of two orders, one not more real than the other. Its color is produced during its very making: light waves pass through a filter onto a light-sensitive surface to create a flat image. The light is registered in vibrant colors, proof of the analog processes that made them. Multiple registrations of the same object, or similar objects, are superimposed into a single image. In *cfaal 313*, bands of color overlap in slight misalignments, hinting toward the method by which they were achieved. The result is uncannily flat. But this is, as we've seen, a photograph of a simply constructed object in a studio. The linear perspective, depth of field, and the shadows cast by the object onto the table are familiar effects in photographic practices that strive to approximate our physical world. These elements are further corroborated by the edges of the cube, ragged from handling and repainting, and the visible brushstrokes in thickly applied paint. These details, too, register the truth of physics as light falls on film to create a flat picture, in this case depicting a cube on a table. Consequently our attention is split, hovering between our apprehending of the phenomena of color waves, and the bare truth of the referent itself.

Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions

Notes

1. Correspondence with the artist, August 2013.
2. *ibid.*

Jessica Eaton is an artist who lives and works in Montreal. To make her photographs, she engages the chemical properties of film, the effects of light, and the materiality of her medium. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, among elsewhere at the Abron Arts Center, New York; Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver; and Foam Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam; and was included in the Daegu Photo Biennale in South Korea in 2012, and the Quebec Triennial in 2011. *Flash!* is her first solo museum presentation in the United States. Eaton earned her BFA at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 2006.

Flash! is a contemporary art series organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *Flash: Jessica Eaton* is curated by Joanna Szupinska-Myers and is the second project in the series.