

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Mariah Robertson
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Production still from the ART21 New York Close Up film Mariah Robertson's Chemical Reactions. © ART21, Inc. 2014.

For Mariah Robertson, the genesis of this series began as a question: How can a person work from the imperfection of human memory to harness repetition as an independent creative force? As seen in this selection of work, Robertson began with a specific attempt to make a series of editions, a nod to the traditional tools of her medium, from a unique set of repeated actions. This concept has been a throughline in her practice ever since, the “errors” and variations in each repetition becoming Robertson’s conceptual framework, interrogating how we come to understand deviation; can it be seen as pure creation, or perversion from a truth?

Working on RA-4 photo-paper (which refers to the color processing reaction of the paper), Robertson uses clamps to hang each pre-cut sheet of paper over her sink. A departure from her photogram works made entirely in the dark, this series of works harnesses the power of full overhead light to induce the chemical reactions seen on the paper in real time. As the paper is rotated and sprayed with both developer and fixer, the chemical reaction emerges instantaneously, Robertson playing the role of referee as she adjusts the balance of chemicals to recreate past iterations. All her actions occur and recur in some more refined version, creating paradoxical relationships between multiples - images that harbor essential differences - and questioning the authenticity of photographic representation in any form.

This balance between the developer and the bleaching fixer is itself a representation of the opposing impulses present in all matter. The developer activates the dye in the paper, and the fixer stops the reaction, if not entirely washing it away. The zones of intense darkness (and the opposite areas of pure white) reveal the score of the game, places where opposing forces fought, and where only one conquered. The intermediate bursts of orange outline the boundaries of this battle, forming places of uncertainty. The balance between creation and destruction, positive and negative, as seen in this chemical fight, is Robertson’s focused study of opposing forces, recreating the balance between the artist’s own impulses of control and chance, critical themes seen throughout her practice.

By fully leaning into the opposing forces of expectation and accident, Robertson eschews the completion of her initial analysis. Rather than resolve the query of repetitive forms, the body of work actually questions the existence of some *first* authentic gesture, conflating all human motivation with serial tries, for which there is no original model; one might always be taking a chance.