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‘There Are No Optics Involved’: Mariah Robertson Explains What It Means to Make Vivid Abstract Photos—Without a Camera

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein, September 15, 2023



Production still from the Art21 "New York Close Up" film, "Mariah Robertson's Chemical Reactions." © Art21, Inc. 2014.

There's more than one way to make a photograph. That's an insight that [Mariah Robertson](#) has made a career out of exploring.

The artist's breakthrough came with an accident in a darkroom. Having left photographic paper unintentionally exposed, Robertson found that her work was ruined—until she decided to try and make something from the mistake. This chance event became the basis of a novel mode of art-

making that involves Robertson splashing materials in the darkroom, creating striking “camera-less” photographic prints.

“I always enjoy trying to make something out of the unwanted thing,” she says in an exclusive interview filmed as part of [Art21’s New York Close Up Series](#).

This mindset extends to other parts of the photographic endeavor: At the edge of any photographic print, there is always residue left over. While most artists consider this detritus something to be cropped off and thrown away, Robertson takes the opposite approach.



Installation view “Mariah Robertson: Everything counts & local reality” at Van Doren Waxter. Right now, Van Doren Waxter is showing a site-specific exhibition of Robertson’s photographs. The exhibition illustrates the breadth of her experimental technique in raucous color. Described by art critic Andrea Scott as “swinging between Man Ray and Jackson Pollock,” Robertson’s work uses science and technology to manipulate light and color into what looks like a blend of screen printing and watercolor.

The fever of experimentation that led to her breakthrough is something that Robertson recalls fondly. “When you’re young, there’s nothing to stop you from always working up to the last minute,” she says in the Art21 video, as she dances in her Bushwick darkroom, laughing. “The

mental locomotive is really pumping... scattered ideas that were all over. [Then] they're suddenly crystallized and form new things."

That sentiment also captures how Robertson has arrived at some of her signature images. Though the process behind them may be random and messy, they ultimately coalesce into the dreamy finished images. "I go in there with a plan—but the good ones are ones where they exceed the plan."

Watch the video, which originally appeared as part of Art21's series New York Close Up, below. "[Mariah Robertson: Everything counts & local reality](#)" is on view at Van Doren Waxter through October 28, 2023.