

Art born of darkroom alchemy

Work plays on mysteries of photography

By Nancy Tousley

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Alison Rossiter: Latent and Chris Cran: "if something appears to be photographic, it is," on view at Trepanier Baer Gallery, through May 1.

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It is hard to pinpoint exactly where the mysterious beauty of Alison Rossiter's work is located.

Some of it was pulled out of the air by chance and some of it is wrought. Beauty and mystery both have to do with her materials and the ways she uses them to make her work. All of it is brought to light in the dark, and born in an idea.

The darkroom is paramount because Rossiter skips the first step in the usual process of making a photograph. She does not use a camera. She produces cameraless photographic images, which she coaxes out of hiding with her photographer's alchemy. Much, but not everything, depends on her use of expired photographic paper, which she collects and buys on eBay. She may or may not expose the paper to light, but she will treat it with the darkroom chemistry of developer, stop and fixer.

Rossiter's images are abstractions and it helps to know how they were made because her work is a lot about materials and process and her process is radical. She has stripped photography down to a light source, light-sensitive material and darkroom chemistry.

Instead of printing out an image made on a negative, the 57-year-old photographer chooses the paper itself as the originator of the imagery. As there is no master negative, each image is unique. In her work, image and object are conceptually as well as physically inseparable.

The TrepanierBaer show contains 29 works from five series and one single image. The Stacks and one of the Lament series are photograms, the first of books, the second of expired film sheets. A photogram is made by placing an object on a piece of photosensitive paper, exposing it to light and developing the image on the paper with darkroom chemistry. The image is a negative

shadow that varies in tone depending on the density or transparency of the object. In these two series, the paper is contemporary.

A second Lament series consists of silver gelatin prints made by simply putting expired 20th-century paper, exact date unknown, into the developer to see what was there. This produced silver markings on the warm cream paper that look like light reflecting on water. The Pools and Pours were made on expired Japanese paper from the 1920s and 1930s that was totally exposed to light, so that a processed sheet would print solid black. The paper has a delicate, polished surface; the glossy forms are deep black with knife-thin edges.

Rossiter creates these images, which recall abstractions by such artists as Morris Louis, Tony Smith and Elsworth Kelly, but are what they are, by pouring developer onto selected areas of the otherwise dry paper. Although the sheet was exposed, the developer still acts on the emulsion to produce the black shapes.

Many artists work with photograms, one of the oldest forms of photography, but no one else I know of works the way Rossiter does with expired photographic papers. There, in the paper, is where mystery lies.

The oldest paper in her collection dates back to 1911. She has papers from the 1920s to the recent past. Whenever she gets a new batch of old paper the first thing she does is to test a sheet to find out if anything is there. There is often a surprise.

What Rossiter has found includes fogging, mould that creates Jackson Pollock-like trceries, borders of silvery oxidation, other effects of deterioration and, what never had occurred to her, fingerprints of long ago photographers who were the last to handle the paper, before her. The archaeological element of her project points not only to individual photographers, however, but also to the history of photography, the industrial history of paper, technological developments in photography, market economy and shifting consumer trends.

Rossiter's project is conceptual and rigorous. A rare combination of exquisite visual poetry and industrial history, it demonstrates the contingency of photography, which has always been there. The two series under the title, Lament, note the passing of the pre-digital era in photography and the materials that supported it. The title of the show, Latent, refers to the dormant imagery in the expired papers and, perhaps, to the latent potential of materials that are vanishing along with analogue photography.

Speaking of the photograms of expired and discontinued film sheets, grey on grey compositions in which the centred film sheets are something like stele or tombstones, Rossiter says, "I wanted the pieces of film to disappear into the

dark grey tones of the paper just as the films have disappeared into the past. It is a lament for something lost."

The idea of latency, on the other hand, suggests that new life can be breathed into obsolete materials. This is what Rossiter, who began her career as a photographer in Calgary and Banff, where she studied with Bob Alexander at the Banff Centre at age 17, does with brilliant results.

As a foil to the basic non-illusionistic nature of Rossiter's work, Chris Cran's Untitled (Photo Series) presents six intriguing ink drawings that evoke the photographic largely by mimicking the negative shadow of the photogram. Cran has long played with the idea and look of the photographic in his paintings, mimicking both the positive/negative aspect of the daguerreotype image and the dot screen of offset printing.

In juxtaposing the work of these two artists, the exhibition raises questions, such as What is photography and what can it become? Certainly, one of the many answers is this: photography is an idea that permeates our culture.

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