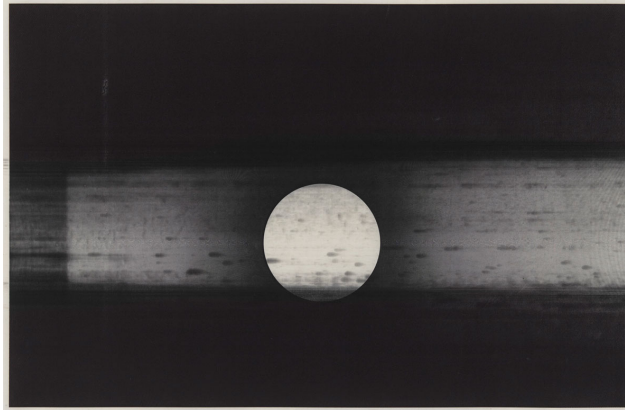


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Mistakes in the Matrix

Marsha Cottrell Summons Beauty From Machines

by R.C. BAKER

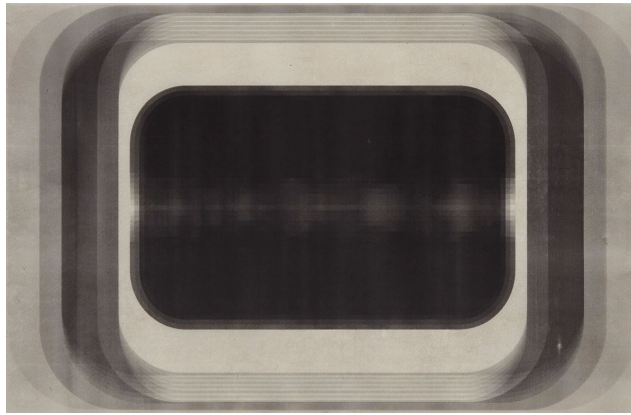


Marsha Cottrell, "Untitled," 2017 Laser toner on paper, unique 12 x 18.5 inches (30.5 x 47 cm)

Most of us have done it — vilely curse the office copier when the pages pop out faded or blemished because of a depleted toner cartridge or dirty printing drum. It's enough to make you reflect on every mistake you've made since high school, a life of failures crystallized in this single instance of User Error.

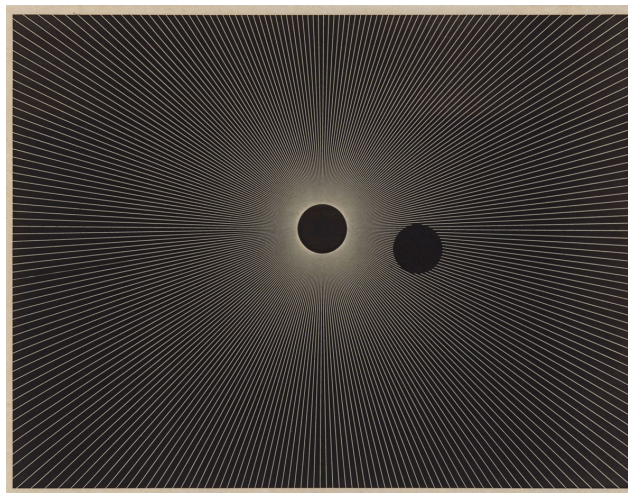
Unless you're Marsha Cottrell, who apparently pulled a ruined image out of a black-and-white copier at some point in the late 1990s and said something along the lines of, "Oh, isn't that lovely?" With that realization, Cottrell fulfilled an important tenet of the serious artist's job description: Discover overlooked beauty and appreciate how the flawed can be as engaging as the refined — and oftentimes more so. The Brooklyn-based Cottrell, who was born in 1964 and received an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, stated in a 2012 interview that while in school she painted landscapes from life in a "fairly traditional manner." But she also told the interviewer that she'd been fascinated by da Vinci's "Deluge" drawings, because she was attracted to the idea that "they were not representations of actual places, but eternal/internal landscapes that might be found anywhere at any moment in time. Their energy, architecture, and intricacy — but not rigidity — always appealed to me."

In Cottrell's current show, at Van Doren Waxter, one series ("Environments") features interlocking rectangles and wedges that she designs on the computer and then prints over and over again, with the output size changed slightly each time the page passes through the laser printer. This painstaking process imbues the gray fields with a cloudy atmosphere that undermines their structural solidity, as if pyramids or cathedrals had been constructed from smoked glass rather than stone blocks. Chinks of light glow between the soft penumbral contours, implying vast space behind the walls of toner. In two small untitled pieces from 2017, ghostly vistas emerge from carbon-black fields, evoking in one case perhaps a desert sunset, in another a violent sandstorm.



Marsha Cottrell, "Aperture Series (50)," 2016 Laser toner on paper, unique 11.625 x 18.125 inches (29.5 x 46 cm)

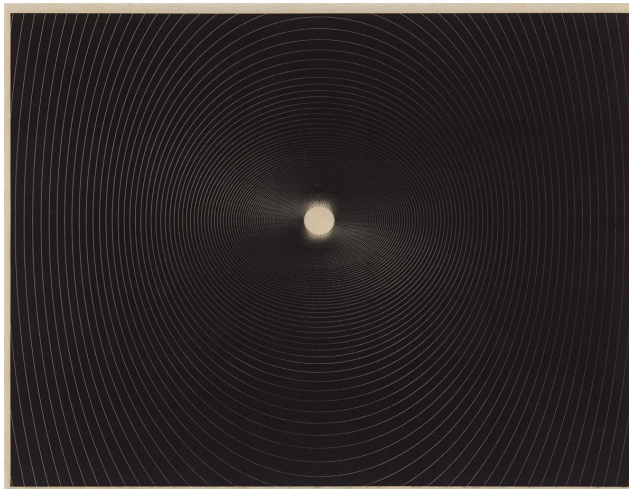
Architecture. Landscape. Weather. It's hard not to read aspects of the real world into Cottrell's prints (each of which is unique, ranging from notebook size up to a yard wide). And her printing techniques pull a viewer in past the depicted shapes to try and understand how her subtleties are achieved, how these multiple layers fuse into ethereal slabs of matter. Cottrell's luminous spectrum calls to mind charcoal drawings, in which whispers of tone can be applied by lightly sweeping a charcoal stick across the page or dense lines laid down by pressing hard on the pointed end. But a disconnect arises, because Cottrell's geometries are concise and repeated, signaling the machine-made rather than the handwrought. Interposing a computer between the artist's concept and the paper's surface changes the human dynamic of drawing — the mind must map out the gestures and then wait for the fingers to type in the keystrokes that send the sheet on its journey through the ridiculously complicated pathways of your average copier. Toner, baked onto the page by heating elements inside the machine, cannot be erased, so Cottrell's process is fraught with the problems that arise from trying to print on a surface already layered with dry ink, not just once but multiple times. When I asked her at the show's opening how many prints end up in the waste can, the soft-spoken artist looked down and said, "Lots."



Marsha Cottrell, "Untitled (5:35:21pm)," 2018 Laser toner on paper, unique 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm)

Yet Cottrell has worked diligently to understand her singular medium, sometimes using a cartridge that is low on toner in pursuit of the clots and streaks that add naturalistic ambience to her vistas. In another untitled piece from 2017 (notated on the exhibition list as "MC 156"), a white circle hangs in a darkly striated realm, a dusky aurora evoking the adulterated radiance of the sun seen through smog. Alternatively, flitting blotches across the lower half of the image might recall for some viewers the inconclusive shadow play of a low-resolution surveillance tape. Signal and noise play catch as catch can here, neither getting the upper hand in this netherworld between abstraction and lived experience.

Like Warhol before her (and Wade Guyton more recently), Cottrell has a profound sensitivity to just how gorgeous a screwup can be. Warhol used clogged or faded printing screens to return a bit of humanity to Hollywood's airbrushed goddesses; Guyton's massive and imperfectly repeated inkjet prints combine industrial scale with the swagger of post-war abstract painting. In contrast, Cottrell's smaller pictures welcome tip-of-the-nose-level study, imparting a surprising intimacy to the viewer who discovers how tiny matrices of lines are interrupted by a rough fiber in the paper's weave or a bit of schmutz on a copier's imaging drum. In this way Cottrell transcends her laborious techniques to communicate a genuine empathy for her abstract forms.



Marsha Cottrell, "Untitled (9:22:40am)," 2018 Laser toner on paper, unique 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm)

Cottrell also plays with moiré patterns, which occur when printing grids are improperly aligned and create wavy fields that distract from an image. Back in the day I had a production boss who would sing, "That's a moiré!" in his best Dean Martin baritone every time he trashed negatives with bad screens. But he never saw Cottrell's skill at converting defects into graceful evocations of the gravitational pull among celestial bodies. In 2017's *Spectral Sun* (25), two bright bursts on a neutral background are joined by a rippling geometric web, as if transmitting energy between each other. And yet the title implies that only one is real, the other a mirage, a figment, a specter — a palimpsest of the cosmos.

"Screen Life" is not an ironic title for Cottrell's exhibition, since we all spend too much of our lives staring at computers or phones, our nerve endings and desires, the two most compelling ways our bodies interact with the world, mediated by flat panes of glass emitting flashing light. Cottrell's magic is to straddle this divide — meat and breath on one side, machines and software on the other — in order to draw out the ghosts in our machines.

'Marsha Cottrell: Screen Life'

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