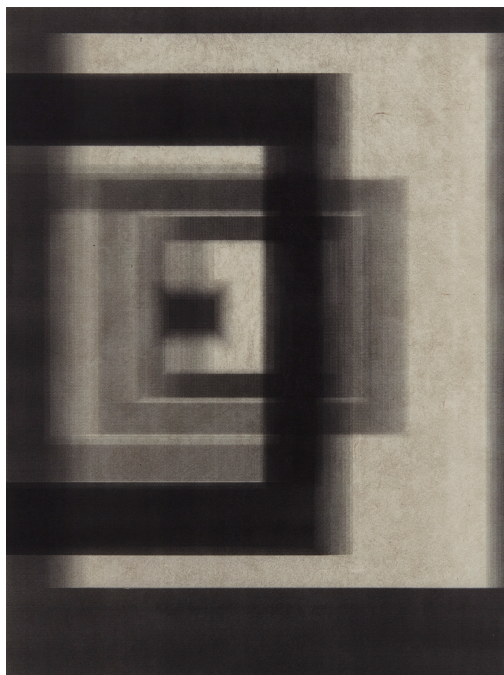


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AWKWARD TECHNOLOGIES: MARSHA COTTRELL BRINGS A HUMAN TOUCH TO THE LASER PRINTER

By Margaret Carrigan



"Untitled," 2016. Laser toner on paper. (Marsha Cottrell and 11R, New York.)

At first glance, Marsha Cottrell's work can appear cold and mechanical. Limited to a gray scale color palette, populated by elusive geometric forms — single circles, multiple rectangles, radial stripes, or broken lines — and crafted using vector-based software and laser printers, it seems to lack a human touch. Yet the mathematical precision that the artist's tools offer is complicated by how she uses them, manually manipulating the handmade papers that she feeds in and out of the printer, over and over. "The disconnect between myself and the interface of the computer — the sense that I'm operating at the limits of my control — is what engages me and continues to drive me forward," she says. The result is a body of work that collapses the tactile and digital.

Cottrell's Brooklyn studio is filled with flat files holding a slew of laser-printed "rejects" — a natural consequence of an additive layering process where one misstep can undermine hours of labor. Nearby is a large-format Epson inkjet printer that can print up to 44 inches wide, and two refurbished HP electrostatic laser printers, "one for when the other one breaks down," she laughs. Cottrell invites the mundane office connotations that laser printers bring; her interest in the devices stems from the 17 years she spent in magazine publishing. Cottrell recalls a doubtlessly familiar feeling of disembodiment while sitting at a desk in front of a computer screen, often for hours on end. "I felt like the screen was this barrier and my inclination was to move into it," she recalls. "Since I couldn't be in my studio, it was natural for me to consider how I might use the tools in my immediate environment."

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Materiality and physicality are paramount for the artist, although she recognizes this may seem ironic in light of the digital processes she uses. "Painting and drawing in the traditional sense are linked so directly with the body," she says. "Screens are flat and planar like a canvas or piece of paper, but the activity that takes place within or on them has very little immediate physicality. In a sense I'm trying to get this stuff—all the hardware and software—out of the way. I want to introduce a nervous system, a realm of human feeling or awareness into this rational environment." The carbon-based toner builds a wide range of grays on the surface of the paper and, though she doesn't make physical contact with the page when laying down these marks, Cottrell sees the process as "more like visualizing a physical action, which requires an odd sort of mental and emotional energy."

Cottrell's process, in many ways, goes against the convenience and speed digital technologies are meant to offer. Because toner can't be erased once it's fixed to a surface, she spends a lot of time looking at what's on the paper and thinking about what to do next. "In addition to making the object, I'm gaining some control over the pace at which time moves forward," she says. "Everything becomes about an intense concentration."

While laser-printing technology first developed in the 1970s, Cottrell often looks back to an earlier epoch. Her New York Gallery, 11R, will show a series of her latest platinum prints at this year's Armory Show, March 2-5. To make them, the artist hand-coats a sheet of paper with a metal-infused, light-sensitive solution that is then exposed to UV or sunlight with a negative. (It's a process that, for Cottrell, resonates with the basics of laser printing, where a beam records information on a light-sensitive drum inside the toner cartridge.) She's experimented with platinum and other 19th-century contact printing processes since 1999, but Cottrell returned to them in a big way in 2015 as she sought ways to produce larger works.

Although she is currently collaborating with a studio that specializes in alternative photography processes, she originally undertook the Sisyphean task of creating the prints at home. "I was making these 1:1 digital negatives — the size of the final work itself — and wheeling a homemade, wooden dolly layered with a large sheet of glass out onto the sidewalk in front of my studio to make exposures using the sun," she explains. Afterward, she would load the exposed paper into her car and transport it to her apartment, where the developing work received a wash of chemicals and water in a makeshift setup atop her bathtub. For Cottrell, the strenuous procedure only highlighted the importance of the body in her practice. "In all of my work," she says, "there's a physically awkward or technically challenging approach that underscores a dialogue between the corporeal and the intangible."