

Mariah Robertson  
By Stephen Maine

New York City - The 17 unique photographs in Mariah Robertson's third solo exhibition since earning her Yale MFA in 2005, showed her exploring unfamiliar approaches to traditional, chemical-based color photography. In the press release, she says, "I never dust the negatives anymore," a wildly understated dig at the prissy procedures of old-fashioned printing. Composing spontaneously with collaged negatives and other objects on irregularly cut sheets of photo paper (most are roughly 58 by 46 inches, or the reverse, or approximately 20 by 24 inches), Robertson embraces all manner of fudging, fakery, fluff and funk; she disdains mastery. The results are exhilarating: giddy romps under the safelight, mash notes to the elastic shadows of the darkroom.

The exhibition (all works 2009) was chromatically rich, iconographically lean and prone to melodrama.

Despite her primary concern with technical dexterity and formal inventiveness, Robertson also offers recognizable imagery, if dimly glimpsed, in all but a few prints. In previous work she has favored hairy butts and houseplants, but intimate domesticity is lately yielding to forms of crystalline clarity and volcanic effects. A dusky half-circle lined with hot orange-yellow commands the center of the photogram *Untitled* (18), sucking up swatches of red, green and blue and speeding them toward a vanishing-point vortex: James Rosenquist meets Man Ray for cocktails in Disneyland during a solar eclipse.

In an *Untitled*, unique C-print, a quarter-circle of thick blue sky studded with palm trees seen from below snaps hard against an orange field etched with the racing perspective of a folded, radically foreshortened grid. *Untitled* (30) comprises two prints: a larger, jagged one in which a sheet of shattered glass overlays damp reds and greens that blend to a coffee color; and a silvery head shot of a spiky palm frond. As in all these works, a snug white frame corrals the pandemonium but heightens the visual pressure.

The photogram *Untitled* (47) compartmentalizes pedestrian shots of a West Coast streetscape in a wonky grid that drifts rightward to counter the leftward tilt of the curling, roughly sheared sheet. At top center is an upside-down, day-for-night potted palm that is vaguely nightmarish; chemical splashes evoke randomness and entropy; inexplicable yellowish flare-ups hint at bonfires and apocalypse. The work orchestrates photography's image-centricity, sculpture's physical presence and the potential of painting to forestall meaning: a twilight zone.