

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mariah Robertson: CUT UP

December 11, 2022 – February 18, 2023

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce *CUT UP*, an exhibition of new photographic prints by Mariah Robertson—the artist’s second presentation at the gallery.

Mariah Robertson breaks all the rules of photography—starting with almost never using a camera to make her pictures. She pushes against the boundaries of the system: norms, taught in educational darkrooms, that many see as the most efficient path to a perfect print, but Robertson sees as opportunities—dogmatic constraints ripe for reimagining. Rather than obsessively managing light leaks and calculating perfect ratios of time and toxic chemicals, Robertson drips/pools/swirls/sprays chromogenic developing chemistry on light-sensitive paper to create riotous worlds of color that simultaneously point to fire, water, distant nebulae, microbiology, and the unknown. Her iconoclasm is rooted in feminism: she asserts her work’s right to *be*, against the grain of the male-dominated photo world, just as women’s rights activists have been doing for the last century in the larger world of patriarchy.

Much of her newest body of work palpitates in unusually curved frames, rather than rectilinear ones. Her compositions have grown more complex, too—each comprises a stack of two, three, six overlapping pieces of her trademark metallic photo paper. Despite the ubiquity of photography today, Robertson’s approach to the medium renders it entirely unfamiliar—shocking, even.

Although making the jump from showing a single print by itself to framing a stack of them as one discrete work *sounds* simple and obvious, it took Robertson years of work in the studio—and ultimately arose from some of the dullest, most overlooked tasks any artist must contend with: storage and archiving. It was 2011 when she first unintentionally exposed (and, as convention would purport, ruined) a large roll of photographic paper to a well-lit room and, rather than throwing it away, splattered it with darkroom chemistry. Delighted with her accidental discovery of an unprecedented way of working in a darkroom (i.e., with the lights on), Robertson has spent the last decade pushing analog photo printing materials beyond their accepted limits. She has amassed hundreds of experimental prints that she initially deemed failures for one reason or another. In the course of sorting through and documenting them, she eventually noticed pieces on top of each other would sometimes resonate with one another (if they had been printed in succession with the same batch of chemistry, or torn from the same roll of paper)—otherwise the dissonance between a pair or trio or quintet could be surprisingly compelling. With a little bit of luck, images she first considered dead-ends—compounded and recontextualized over time—began to transform into finished artworks acting out in new ways.

Framing, for Robertson, has always been rich with opportunities for patricide. From the

beginning, she presented her work in frames too small for a print to lie flat, forcing her paper to ripple and curl into sculptural forms that would horrify any photographer who holds tradition dear. She would have frames of adjacent works in a show painted slightly different colors of white—warm, neutral, cool—and sometimes give a similarly inconsistent treatment to the colors of mat board visible within a single frame.

The curved frames in this show arose after Robertson realized maybe her mutinous approach to framing was too subtle. When her work is reproduced on gallery websites, in museum pamphlets, photography anthologies—wherever—her frames are often cropped out of images of her work. While this is not uncommon practice in the art world, it has driven Robertson to double down on her nonconformist framing decisions as an essential component of innovation in her work. The frames in this show are much more than protective devices meant to disappear into the wall behind the work.

When her frames have been overlooked in the past, it has reminded Robertson of one of the early inspirational forces that helped shape what her work has become: the many authority figures, over the years, who told her *No*, that new wacky idea of hers was not a good one; *No*, she could not do that. (Would Robertson have engendered these same reactions if she were a man? Lucky for her—whenever she heard protests like these, she knew she was on the right track.) The feminist project at large is still in progress—equality has not been won. Writer Michelle Goldberg recently said “For older women, feminism has a pretty clear meaning. They went from a place where they didn’t have many rights, including the right to abortion, the right to open your own credit card; spousal rape was criminalized only relatively recently. And for younger people, who maybe have never not had all these rights, it can be less clear what feminism actually stands for.” Mariah Robertson reminds us—just as Dobbs has—we cannot take anything for granted: not our parents, our children, our partners, our safety, our elections, our rights, or that darkrooms should actually be dark. Complacency is dangerous. And boring. Robertson’s chemistry prints implore us to keep our eyes open, pay attention, and fight.

Mariah Robertson was born in 1975, grew up in California, and lives and works in New York. She has mounted solo exhibitions and performances at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (United Kingdom), Grand Arts (Kansas City), MoMA/PS1 (New York), Museum 52 (New York), Museum of Modern Art (New York), and Swope Art Museum (Indiana). She has also shown her work at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Cleveland Museum of Art’s Transformer Station, de Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum (Massachusetts), International Center of Photography (New York), Museum of Modern Art (New York), and MoMA/PS1 (New York). In 2014, *Art21* featured Robertson in their documentary series *New York Close Up*. Her work is in the collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh), JP Morgan Chase Art Collection (New York), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art (New York), North Carolina Museum of Art (Raleigh), Sir Elton John Photography Collection, Swope Art Museum (Indiana), UBS Art Collection (Zürich), and Whitney Museum of American Art (New York).