

The Calibration of Chance

by Claire Christie

With the introduction of chance certainty is unbound, its adherence to “outcome” is loosened as is its allegiance to predictability. Each of the artists included in this exhibition consciously embeds “chance” in the making or presentation of their work, engaging a quality of the “intentionally unknown.” Exploring ideas of control and its opposite, this teasing out of the unknown explores the limits of conscious effect, while at the same time acknowledging that moving beyond the liminal, in and of itself, overturns a controlled condition. In each instance here, the artist pivots on the axis of causality and randomness, calibrating the conditions under which chance is engaged. Unlike the supremely aleatoric works of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, which encapsulated in their presentation an analysis of the chance effect, here, chance is proposed as media, or working material, an active and enduring component.



image. Choosing a sheet of photo paper from a package, Rossiter submits the paper to the standard chemical processes used in black-and-white photographic development—developer, stop, fix—without any special intervention, to expose an image. The resulting photograph records a chance imprint, engraved by air, its relative humidity, intensity of light, or direction of light, preserved over decades in some instances, with chance doubled in the very act of its discovery.



again in the loop. Comprising 30 distinct, original frames, initially captured on video and digitized as stills, the sequence is fed through a computer script that randomized each frame, causing it to play out of sequence and superimpose images. Interestingly, the randomization of the images produces an erratic, staccato movement, not unlike the peculiarly unpredictable “order” observed in flocking birds. Graham appends the aleatory effect with a second chance event: The film loops—one of them extending to almost 50’ long—are momentarily liberated from the confines of the projector,

Alison Rossiter delicately intertwines chance with the imaging of physical memory—memory itself a phenomenon displaying somewhat random properties—in her ongoing series under the title, *Lament*. Finding and collecting batches of expired silver gelatin photographic papers covering the span of the twentieth century, Rossiter undertakes a project of coaxing its own indeterminacy. With the singular requirement, or “control,” being that the packages have been opened, these papers—all stamped with an expiration date, providing a kind of textual chronometer—hold the promise of an unknown

Whereas Alison Rossiter’s series involves the chance eliciting of image, Michael Graham, with his work entitled, *Passing* (2001-2008), devises a programmatic dissolution of an image through the enlistment of chance on two different levels. A dual 16mm film projection features images of birds in flight set against a blank sky. The film projections illuminate the same set of images—set at a staggered pace and projected at a different scale so as not to invite synchronous reading—in a repetitive cycle. As we see the birds flock, their silhouettes become successively layered with out-of-sync afterimages in a cycle that advances and recedes, as the sequence repeats over and over

careening up to the ceiling, down the wall, and dragging across the floor. This new trajectory invites foreign particles such as dust and fibers to collect on the film and feed back through the projector. With each cycle, the images become finely etched, resulting in small, vertical lines infecting the image. Over time, the chance degradation of the film “clouds” the sky, and interferes with the usually mesmerizing act of watching birds in flight.



Laurel Woodcock’s *Conditions* (2005), also a time-based work, documents the staging of chance. With a fixed frame video shot, Woodcock pictures an open field, one ubiquitous metal lawn chair tethered with a hundred bright blue balloons, and one sizeable helium tank alongside the chair. In this simple, starkly beautiful image chance is animated as a durational event. The composition of the scene encourages a sense of expectation—the helium-filled balloons could hold the chair aloft—yet at the same time resists offering a sense of certainty about it—they couldn’t, could they?—creating a near perfect tension between dramatic play and test of physics. Insisting

on an authentic chance event, Woodcock fixes her camera on the scene and starts rolling. There was wind in the air, but its impact was indeterminate. With an almost scripted building of suspense, a gust of wind teases the balloons and toward the end of the video, the balloons scramble to one side and topple the chair. The camera continues to record the scene with the fallen chair, balloons still bobbing in the wind, punctuating the notion that chance is not about fulfillment, but dwells rather in the realm of possibility.



This concept of potentiality is evident in Shirley Wiitasalo’s *Red Blue* and *Green Black*. On moderately large canvases, Wiitasalo pushes paint in purposeful swaths and details small incidents with a restrained hand, while the governing chroma of each of the two paintings appears understated. Concealed and revealed on these reductive surfaces, though, is a perpetual activation of chance, as Wiitasalo has painted with interference colours. The resulting refraction of light means that, with each shift in perspective, with the subtlest changes in light levels and direction, the surfaces of these works mobilize in an opalescence. Their abstract reductive composition, dominantly visible at square-on viewing, is suffused with dynamic variations. While there is an open-endedness at play, in Wiitasalo’s hands, chance is engaged as a medium in the painting’s resolution, and subject to her calibration of elements.