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MARSHA COTTRELL



© Marsha Cottrell. Impossible Night, 2011. Iron oxide on mulberry paper. 62.4 x 97.9 cm

No artist uses the computer quite like Marsha Cottrell. She began as a painter, but, caught up in office work, enslaved by the machine, she had no choice but to fight back by means of the machine. Cottrell was drowning in typography while working in the production department of a large-circulation magazine when it occurred to her to misuse, in off hours, periods, commas, brackets, and other graphical tidbits as compositional shrapnel. The rich, non-linear functionality of the page-compositing program she was harnessed to — its layerings, groupings, and hierarchies; its cuttings and pastings; its memory states — would now do Cottrell's contrarian bidding. That original program was aptly named Quark (she has since moved on): inadvertently, but by its very nature, it provided the means for Cottrell to crush text into subatomic particles.

But Cottrell's repurposing of office technology didn't end there. As a studio artist, she remained committed to physically manifesting what she was composing in the immaculate digital ether. These vector images were floods and storms of razor-sharp fragments at hyper-zoomed-in resolutions writ large, as in large-format; to print them would require hi-tech machines and more trial proofs than Cottrell could easily afford. The important point to grasp, however, is that Cottrell always intended the process to result in a single, unique print. Once satisfactorily achieved, the file itself would be destroyed, just as an X-mark is sometimes slashed across a metal etching plate after its edition has been pulled. Cottrell thus declared her emphatic, almost Luddite antagonism to cyberart, virtuality, interactivity, new media, emergent media, and all the rest of it. Further, she soon began to question the merits of professional printing, which was expensive and remote — inconsistent on both counts with her do-it-yourself, edition-of-one, technological dissent.

The solution was the desktop laser printer. Affordable and simple to use, it specializes in monochrome text. Unlike an ink jet, which sprays a rainbow of wet inks, the laser printer fuses powdered iron-oxide toner to paper with heat and pressure, creating the potential for gorgeous fields of matte black. In the immediacy of her studio, Cottrell could now probe and calibrate this liberated office machine with the zeal of a traditional

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printmaker. Besides testing different kinds of paper, her innovations include multi-pass, slightly offset printings of the same file, or of a modestly altered file, which can produce controlled blurs and moirés, not to mention denser blacks; glued tilings of standard-size pages that scale her files up to cinematically large arrays; and foldings and crinklings of the paper after printing, which, by releasing toner along the fold, etches white lines within the black fields, constituting a kind of drawing by subtraction.

Cottrell's new body of work is a proving ground for these techniques, and the imagery has changed along with the process. The shop-printed work was black-on-white, impossibly dense, myopic, and fragmented, yet it all coalesced — astonishingly — into a cataclysmic grandeur, as if a Frederic Church volcano vista had materialized among the angstroms of scanning electron microscopy. The new work, printed and assembled in the studio, is opposite in color and temperament. A gazillion tiny white dots, dashes, and spherical vibrations that might be stars, planets, or molecules drift across empty black space. In some drawings ribbons of staves twist in depth, and a variety of circular discs and conic sections sprout from hidden dimensions, hovering like a dispersed fleet of flying saucers, or like a chattering swarm of insects in a Charles Burchfield night chorus. But where the previous images roiled and overwhelmed, even the most energetic and entropic of these new drawings assert a calm geometry of deep contemplation, steadied by the subtle grid formed by the seams between the sheets of tiled mulberry paper. Geometric rigor is further superimposed by horizontal, vertical, and, in some of these works, diagonal white lines that act like the crosshairs of a celestial viewing scope, their spartan alignment plotting Sol Lewitt-like vanishing points into bottomless saturation.

Look closely, though, and you can see how these clean white lines are complexes of cause and effect: sometimes they trace vectors from the file, left white in the printing; they may also be folded, and thus be white by removal; or they might not be lines in the first place, exactly, but rather a conspiracy of dots. In the last case, if Cottrell folds the dot-cluster along its spine the paper will comply readily, perforated by the tiny variance of the thickness of the toner — a sort of homemade laser milling.

If Cottrell's new drawings put us in an interstellar mood, it is one quite distinct from Vija Celmins's astronomical photorealism, which might or might not be an influence. By contrast, Cottrell's complex arrangements are made from internal observation, and the "stars" and "planets," when you zoom in to look, are shifty illusions made from leftover scraps that buzz in the eye. In their acute frequencies and delicacy of placement, these hanging bodies have less to do with the untroubled literalism of Celmins and far more to do with Lee Bontecou's exquisite organic precisionism.

For that matter, the star-field reading barely registers when Cottrell adds a new wrinkle to her process — or rather, a luminous network of wrinkles, an effect achieved by scrunching up the paper after printing. When flattened out, the toner skin retains the memory of its distress, ghostly and blurred at the crumples. Meanwhile, the crisply folded orthogonal grid seems to hover far above — again, like crosshairs, but here no longer those of an observatory telescope. Instead, the view suggested in the wrinkled drawings is that of a bombardier on a night sortie scoping out a mountainous desert suburb, dark ridges and valleys indicated by a fractured grid of street lamps. Equally, we might be neurosurgeons navigating a tomography of ganglia and dendrites during an epileptic storm.

However uncertain the terrain, the smaller works can assume the seductive authority of maps: foldable, portable, yet omniscient. The very large arrays, on the other hand, never cease being galactic. Indeed, it is tempting to think of these starry clusters of periods and em dashes as "Gutenberg Galaxies," after Marshall McLuhan's 1962 study of why "print culture confers on man a language of thought which leaves him quite unready to face the language of his own electro-magnetic technology." Writing at the dawn of the computer

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age, McLuhan was rehearsing many of the grandiose inversions of common sense that were to make his insights about media, machines, and culture so magnetic, so seemingly prophetic (if not actually all that lucid). The Gutenberg Galaxy echoes William Blake's protests against modern, analytical man's loss of psychic and perceptual integration: "It was not until the experience of exactly uniform and repeatable type that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses." Blake, of course, had hand-engraved his poetry, with the aim of unifying text and image. And there have now been at least fifty years of avant-garde art (with precedents in Cubism and Constructivism) in which the foreground meanings of alphabetic text have been backgrounded, made to oscillate with their own visual gestalt; from Jasper Johns and Lawrence Weiner to Jack Pierson, Joe Amrhein, and Fiona Banner, artists have been turning typography back on itself. But Cottrell's approach comes closer to redeeming McLuhan's ecstatic techno-primitivism — by embracing the most powerful typesetting tools of the day, rather than a nostalgia of fonts, while at the same time denying text altogether in search of a deeper visual code. Her work returns us, in other words, to that pre-Gutenberg state of grace before the eye had become a mere reading tool, a mere cog in the technology of the word. Freed from typographic oppression, Cottrell's eye tunes into those vibrations of dark matter, timeless and beyond deep, that trace the cosmic enigma.