

Aura Satz: Eyelids Leaking Light

GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE
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Eyelids Leaking Light is a two-piece installation by the London-based artist Aura Satz that functioned as a complement to the commemorative exhibition *In Glorious Technicolor*, which was on display simultaneously at the George Eastman House. Together they paid homage to the hundred-year anniversary of the founding of Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation and its contribution to the development of color. Following the loudly saturated Technicolor hues of the main exhibition, the installation offered the opportunity to decompress while revealing the “behind-the-scenes” of color technology.

Satz is invested in the spaces between technology and perception: “I am keen to explore new ways of making certain pieces of technology speak differently, enabling new angles of access into corners of these technologies which might allow for unexpected associations.”¹ These unexpected associations or disruptions are an opportunity to dislocate the viewer’s attention, opening the possibility for tangential phenomenological experiences. Mistakes and deviations within any technology are understood as signals of resistance—exceptions to the rule—that unveil the potential for new dialectical spaces of interpretation.

Chromatic Aberration (2014) is a high-definition video commissioned by the Tyneside Cinema in the United Kingdom. The source material is a two-color Kodachrome test film from 1922 currently preserved at the George Eastman House. The print was a test of the potential for commercialization of this early color process and included workers of the Eastman Kodak Company and early Hollywood actresses Mary Eaton, Hope Hampton, and Mae Murray. Two-color Kodachrome was developed before the first Technicolor process and was the first to capture color without using a filter. Two-color processes registered only red and green, creating a beautiful aesthetic with a magical aura between fantasy and reality. As with most of the early processes, colors were not perfectly aligned at the edges of the picture and mixed unrealistically, producing what is known as “color fringing.” *Chromatic Aberration* explores the potential of these rainbow borders to dissolve the recognizable subject as it shifts attention toward the materiality of the medium itself.

The original print is rephotographed through the viewer of a Bell and Howell step-contact printer intermediated by a magnifying glass and macro lens. Satz uses the zoom from the printer and manipulates the speed to emulate the flickering of the human eye. The second part of the film is rephotographed from the window of a flatbed editor, slowing down the speed of the machine to its limit.

As a result, forms melt in front of the eye, transforming themselves into a mishmash of color and abstraction. Every now and then, a stray eye emerges from the abyss as an imprint of the narrative aspect of the film. In this way, experience of perception becomes an exercise for the senses and mind that swings between the materiality of the medium and the content of the image.



Still from *Chromatic Aberration* (2014) by Aura Satz; courtesy the artist

Doorway for Natalie Kalmus (2013) is a high-definition digital piece that was projected on the opposite wall of the gallery. It portrays the RGB lamp house of a 35mm color Bell and Howell film printer whose valves open and close following the instructions of the color grader. The colors of the lamps bled out into the room, showering the entire space. Natalie Kalmus was the ex-wife of Herbert T. Kalmus, the president and co-founder of Technicolor, and was the color supervisor for hundreds of films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* (both 1939, directed by Victor Fleming) and *Duel in the Sun* (1946, directed by King Vidor). In her article “Color Consciousness” (1935),² Kalmus advocated a color theory that tied color and narrative. She suggested the possibility of domesticating the powerful psychological possibilities of color by creating a color score for each film. In the case of Satz, the color score is not a secondary element but rather the center of the piece. As a result, the printer becomes a doorway onto itself and toward color, making reference to an essay that Kalmus wrote about the experiences of her sister on her deathbed entitled “Doorway to Another World” (1949).³ The printer is the entrance to another world where color unfolds its affective possibilities, overcoming any attempts at measurement.

Eyelids Leaking Light explored the interregnum between technology and experience, between materiality and psychology. After all, eyelids are the doorway to an internal world where light is not just a physical phenomenon, but also a phenomenological experience that exceeds all calculation.

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NOTES 1. Aura Satz, conversation with the author, February 19, 2015. 2. Natalie Kalmus, “Color Consciousness,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 25, no. 2 (August 1935): 139–47. 3. Kalmus, “Doorway to Another World,” *Coronet* 25, no. 6 (April 1949): 29–31.