

by MORGAN QUAINANCE

November 27, 2013

Aura Satz's "Color Opponent Process"

PARADISE ROW, London

November 1–December 6, 2013

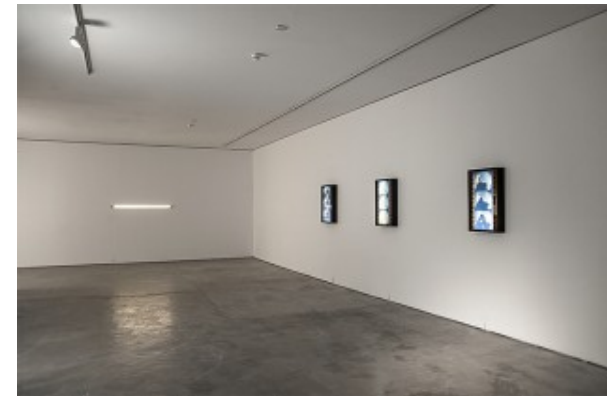
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Joan of Arc in flames, women and technological innovation, and the retinal quirks of color perception—there is a complex swirl of ideas and images in the current exhibition by London-based artist Aura Satz at Paradise Row. Collectively, they present a kind of shadowy gestalt, using the cover of darkness to draw links between dreamily polychromatic, and strangely muted, photographic and moving image work. Up close it is a different story. Beyond the formal cohesiveness of color content and abstraction, each work is a different take on Satz's historically rich subject matter, which includes the story of Natalie Kalmus—a color adviser on the majority of Hollywood's Technicolor films from 1934–49—as well as a general account of the use of color in early twentieth-century film.

The exhibition's centerpiece is the eight-minute, high-definition video *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus* (2013), a lyrical dedication to the color expert, in which the interior of a functioning 35mm color printer is captured with finely detailed, macro-lens close-ups. The effect is quite surprising. Rather than a series of lackluster, mechanics-in-motion images, footage of the printer's workings looks like amorphous, telescopic photographs of outer space, or the strange, cellular landscapes of the human body. Progressing from slow details to a stroboscopic finale, images of the unit's lenses are shot from the corner of the frame in a way that makes them seem planetary; dust motes float amid beams of light like starry matter, and washes of reds, greens, and blues fill the space with a diffuse glow. In some places the effect is similar to Stanley Kubrick's more abstract stellar imagery in his 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



1 Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013.

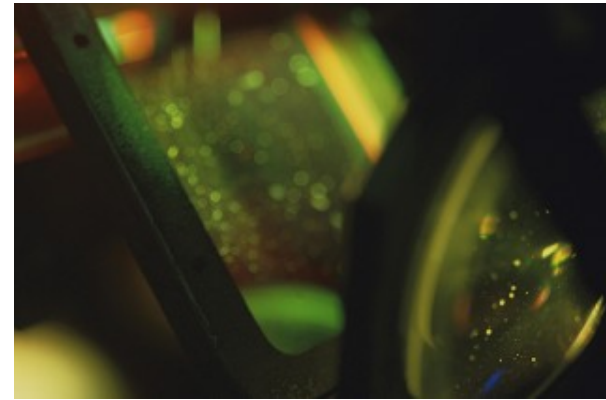


2 View of Aura Satz's "Color Opponent Process," Paradise Row, London, 2013.

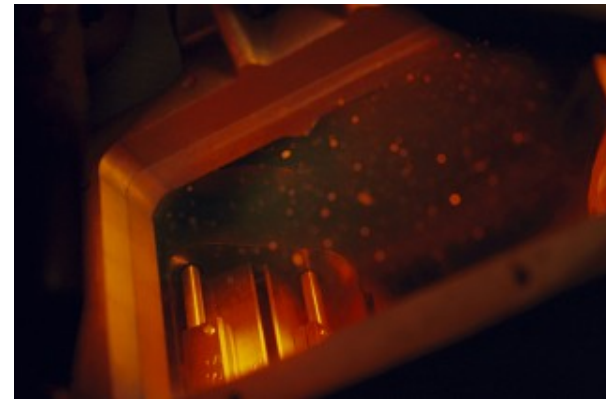
A haunting, reverberant soundtrack composed by Steven Severin—founding member of Siouxsie and the Banshees—accompanies the piece. A perfectly accomplished, if pedestrian, avant-garde soundscape in its own right, Severin's contribution feels superfluous here. Why is it redundant? Satz's imagery is evocative enough, and the periodic clicks of the printer in action provide a staccato of 4/4 rhythms that are as insistent as any techno beat. This extra, and unnecessary, overlay of sound is repeated in her "Joan the Woman" series (2013), consisting of three film stills taken from the climactic scene of Cecile B. DeMille's 1916 silent movie about Joan of Arc. What we see, in stages, is Joan being consumed by monochrome smoke and colored flames, while each light box emits the sound of Norwegian vocalist Maja Ratkje's throaty utterances. This may be a gesture of giving voice to and thus empowering the image of opera singer Geraldine Farrar, the film's original star; however, Ratkje's performance veers towards the macabre and melodramatic, evoking the campy death of the Wicked Witch of the East.

There is a subtle undercurrent of feminism running through "Color Opponent Process." Continuing from where one of her previous projects left off—specifically, *Impulsive Synchronisation* (2013), a meditation on the pioneering "frequency hopping" communications technology that Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr invented with composer George Antheil—Satz's focus on Kalmus highlights the work of another female figure who has been overlooked in most male-dominated technological histories. This historical displacement also occurred on a material level: shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the hand-coloring work typically performed by women was replaced by color stenciling, a semi-automatic process that produced the colored flames found in DeMille's film. Drawing attention to this forgotten history of female labor sheds light on the systematic elimination of skilled women from the making of cinema. Frustratingly, this useful background information is included in the printed gallery guide, but it does not come across in the work. While there is nothing inherently wrong with separating the research that inspired the work from the work itself, the fusion of the two would surely lead to exceptional results—an example of this is Susan Hiller's *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972–76), a project about the women who hand-colored postwar postcards sold along the British coastline.

"Color Opponent Process" is a conceptually ambitious undertaking. The works are all visually compelling propositions with one unwritten proviso: the true depth of each piece is only discoverable upon reading the gallery's printed materials. While some artists may be content to see gallery visitors glance



3 Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013.



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5 Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013.

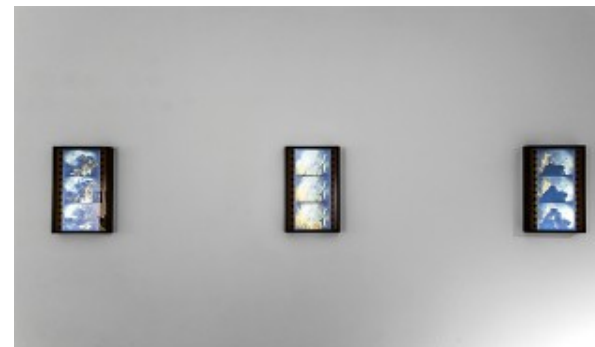
repeatedly from printed sheets of A4 paper to the works on view, the scope of Satz's vision promises something much more engaging. Since the early 2000s her skilled practice—encompassing video, sound, sculpture, and installation—has consistently encouraged audiences to cultivate a more attentive relationship with their sonic environments. But what has made her work exciting over the past two years is the evidence of a move into new investigative territories. In light of what's on display here, the synthesis of research and material will be the key to unlocking the potential of future works.

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Morgan Quaintance is a freelance writer, musician and curator; he is also the producer of the weekly broadcast radio program "Studio Visit" on Resonance 104.4 FM.

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6 View of Aura Satz's "Color Opponent Process," Paradise Row, London, 2013.

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Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013. HD film, surround sound, 8:00 minutes. Image courtesy of Paradise Row, London. Photo by Mia Dudek.

2 View of Aura Satz's "Color Opponent Process," Paradise Row, London, 2013. Image courtesy of Paradise Row, London. Photo by Mia Dudek.

3 Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013. Still from HD film, surround sound, 8:00 minutes.

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5 Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013. HD film, surround sound, 8:00 minutes. Image courtesy of Paradise Row, London. Photo by Mia Dudek.

6 View of Aura Satz's "Color Opponent Process," Paradise Row, London, 2013. Image courtesy of Paradise Row, London. Photo by Mia Dudek.

7 Aura Satz, *Joan the Woman - With Voice (#1)*, 2013. Duratrans print framed in lightbox with audio, 71 x 45 x 12 cm.

8 Aura Satz, *Joan the Woman - With Voice (#2)*, 2013. Duratrans print framed in lightbox with audio, 71 x 45 x 12 cm.

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Berlin Roundup

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