

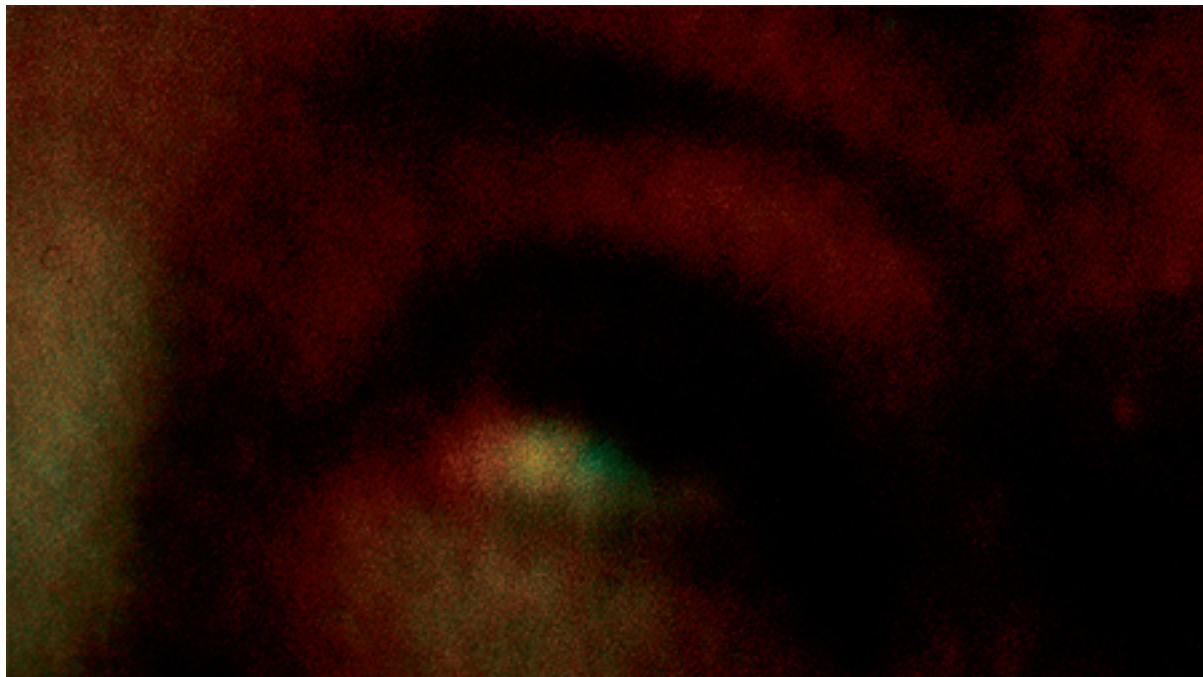


1000 WORDS

Aura Satz

TALKS ABOUT *CHROMATIC ABERRATION* (2014)

INTRODUCTION BY ERIKA BALSOM



Aura Satz, *Chromatic Aberration*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes.

PERHAPS THE SIMULTANEOUS DENIGRATION and exaltation of color in the West can be explained by its fundamental instability, its lack of fit with rationality and order. Color has variously been allied with the occult, the primitive, and the feminine; some say it is merely cosmetic, others that it is deeply spiritual. It is inherently subjective, bridging the external world and internal experience, and notoriously difficult to codify. Through the Latin *celare*, it has etymological ties to notions of disguise and concealment. What David Batchelor has termed *chromophobia* in his book of the same name is without doubt a powerful negative force—but, like so many fears, it is twinned with desire.

Cinema and color share something profound: Both are situated at the intersection of the science of optics and the seductions of visual spectacle, and they provoke similar suspicions and promise similar pleasures. In her

newest film, *Chromatic Aberration* (2014)—commissioned by Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK—Aura Satz explores this nexus through research into film color technologies. Having recently made works delving into the applied color of early cinema (*Joan the Woman—With Voice*, 2013) and the saturated hues of Technicolor (*Doorway for Natalie Kalmus* [2013]), the artist now turns her attention to a transitional phase between the two, its inauguration marked by the 1922 tests conducted at Paragon Studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey (and currently archived at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York), for Two-Color Kodachrome, a subtractive red-green process. Produced some thirteen years before the release of the first Technicolor feature, these tests return us to a moment just before the film industry had perfected a photochemical process to generate quasi-realistic color. Lacking a blue tone to balance the image, the tests have a painterly quality that would soon be vanquished by the development of three-color processes. As such, Eastman's early Kodachrome images appear as intermediaries between the nonnaturalistic intensities of early film's applied color and the increasing subordination of color to the demands of verisimilitude that was to follow. Even a figure as invested in the potential of color as Natalie Kalmus—longtime wife of Technicolor inventor Herbert Kalmus and supervisor on virtually all Technicolor films made between 1934 and 1949—wrote in 1935 that advances in the rendering of color would propel cinema toward its destiny of a “more complete realism.” Satz does not share Kalmus's proto-Bazinian conviction. Rather, she turns to the 1922 tests as a way of recovering alternative possibilities of filmic color. Rephotographing the footage off the monitors of a contact printer and a flatbed editing table, the artist fastens onto moments when film fails to render an imitation of life, amplifying these apparent errors so as to give rein to the destabilizing, corporeal effects of chromatic aberration. In so doing, Satz inserts herself into a very different history of filmic color than that suggested by Kalmus, one in which color is not put in the service of likeness but revels in excess, affect, and sensation. *Chromatic Aberration* subverts the fledgling attempts to standardize color exemplified by the test footage it appropriates, using the distortions and magnifications of rephotography to loosen color's confinement by representational forms. In this regard, it might be seen as the inheritor of both the fantastical vibrations of early cinema's applied techniques and the legacy of great experimental film colorists such as Peter Gidal, Paul Sharits, and Carolee Schneemann.

As the part of the body where color synthesis occurs, the eye plays a significant role in the form and content of *Chromatic Aberration*. Quite fittingly, when installed this past fall in the Gallery at Tyneside Cinema, the work was projected onto a screen that hung from the ceiling and mirrored the curvature of the human eye. The medium shots of the human figures in the original test footage (who were either members of Eastman's family or actors) are magnified to yield extreme close-ups of eyes that are examined frame by frame, with each advance of the contact printer functioning like a mechanical blink. Accompanying these images is a sound track by the electronic musician Scanner, composed using sounds Satz recorded while working with the printer. As the piece progresses, the metronomic regularity of its early moments gives way to a pulsating rhythm that suggests body more than machine. Representational forms become prismatic fields of color, evoking the “closed-eye vision” that was so important to Stan Brakhage. A puce flicker pushes them to the threshold of discernibility before subsiding into a gentle throbbing. The structure of *Chromatic Aberration* thus recapitulates a crucial characteristic of cinematic color: The film moves between body and machine, generating its effects at their interface. Satz suggests that though automated film color may be the product of standardizing technologies, out of and against this disciplining force can emerge unruly chromatic encounters that reside beyond any aspiration to mastery.

—*Erika Balsom*



Aura Satz, *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes.

I REALLY LIKE IT WHEN things are slightly out of sync. My work with film color came out of several projects involving technologies of sound and sound inscription in which this was always a central concern. I was very interested in the nonalignment of sound and image and in thinking about what might emerge in the gap between them. I like the instability of sound, the fact that it is constantly shape-shifting. Sound is vibration, and vibration is in essence not fixed or static. When I was making *In and Out of Synch* [2012], a filmic performance about optical sound, I visited several film labs. It was there that I discovered the color lamphouse featured in *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus*. It's an RGB color-grading machine for 35-mm film. I was completely drawn to this beautiful tiny box, and it got me really obsessed with color. In that film, I zoomed in on the clanking mechanical valves that, like portals in some strange architectural construct, orchestrate the amount of color that seeps through onto the film strip. In my film, this effect is extended, showering the viewer in a color field and often generating stroboscopic afterimages.

I was intrigued by the notion of color as a kind of frequency, much like sound. Color is affected by everything around it. Its materiality is never stable. It is transformed by the surrounding light and by how our eyes perceive it, somewhere between the physics of matter and physiology. I'm interested in things that resist notation. All my work with sound centered around how it can never be truly written, even though we try to capture it in various ways. The same applies to color: It constantly challenges fixed forms of categorization, writing, and encoding. That said, Natalie Kalmus wrote color scores for the films she worked on as color consultant, such as *Gone with the Wind* [1939], Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* [1946], and *The Wizard of Oz* [1939]. I love the idea that she would turn a narrative into an almost musical sequence of colors, translating it into an abstract code—though, in her view, color was at the service of narrative, not working against it. *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus* played with scale by magnifying a very small piece of technology. *Chromatic Aberration* also plays with scale but is more about inner vision and perceptual mechanisms. It moves into a

dreamworld and offers a more intimate sense of perception behind the eye. So together these two works create a strange spectrum between technology and perception.

To make *Chromatic Aberration*, I worked with preservation prints of two reels of Two-Color Koda-chrome from 1922 sent to me by George Eastman House. This test footage featured medium shots of various actors and members of Eastman's family. With an archivist at the British Film Institute, I used a contact printer to rephotograph the footage frame by frame, focusing on close-ups of the subjects' eyes. In my work, I use technology that is mechanical, but there tends to be a level of human intervention and chance involved. I am often the puppet master, the motor of the machine or its pulse; it is only semiautomated. In working with the contact printer, I could physically choreograph the pace at which each frame would run through. The end result was an echo of the eye mechanism, in that each clank of the contact printer was like a blink of the machine. I varied the rhythm throughout so as to achieve a range of effects that mimic the flickering eye. *Chromatic Aberration* was filmed through the tiny little window that allows the technician to monitor the print. In addition to the contact printer's zoom, I used a magnifying glass and a macro lens to zoom in farther. The monitor window features visibly in the film, with its slightly frosted glass texture and grid lines. I also rephotographed footage off a flatbed editor, which has a viewing window with textured glass onto which the image is reflected. Here, I experimented with really pushing the machine to its limits to see how slow it could go, to create a throbbing effect.

Chromatic aberration isn't a distortion specific to the 1920s—it can happen even today with digital cameras when the lens fails to focus all colors to the same convergence point. In these early experiments, the industry of color film technology was still somewhat primitive. I was particularly interested in examining those cases in which something called color “fringing” reveals itself, appearing almost like a misaligned halo. It's a bit like the Benday dots in Roy Lichtenstein's paintings: When the dots are so enlarged, the effective illusion of the image starts dissolving.

I'm interested in spending time with materiality—with the glitches, the surface irregularities, and the color aberrations. When things aren't seamless, the viewer is thrown out of the film. You're ejected out of the suction power of realism, and a different kind of looking can take place. In *Chromatic Aberration*, there are little narrative hints toward horror or ecstasy—at the end, for instance, the female subject of one of the color tests appears to be in a dreamy reverie familiar from many narrative films—but since something else is happening on the chromatic level, the viewer constantly shifts between the representational content and the materiality of the image. It is as though one is hearing both the music and the surface noise on a vinyl record. All my work inhabits this threshold between signification and noise, between communication and interference. Sometimes the technology itself is the filter. For instance, the frosted glass of the contact printer serves as an added mediator, and the film strip has its own grainy disturbance. All these layers make what you're looking at harder to decipher. In *Chromatic Aberration*, this also happens in Scanner's sound track, which hovers between noise and identifiable sounds or mechanical rhythms. These thresholds are very important to me because they demand a continuous readjustment of spectatorship, inasmuch as the code is ever shifting. It remains open to constant reconfiguration.

Chromatic Aberration makes its North American debut in Aura Satz's solo exhibition “Eyelids Leaking Light,” on view through Apr. 26 at George Eastman House in Rochester, NY.