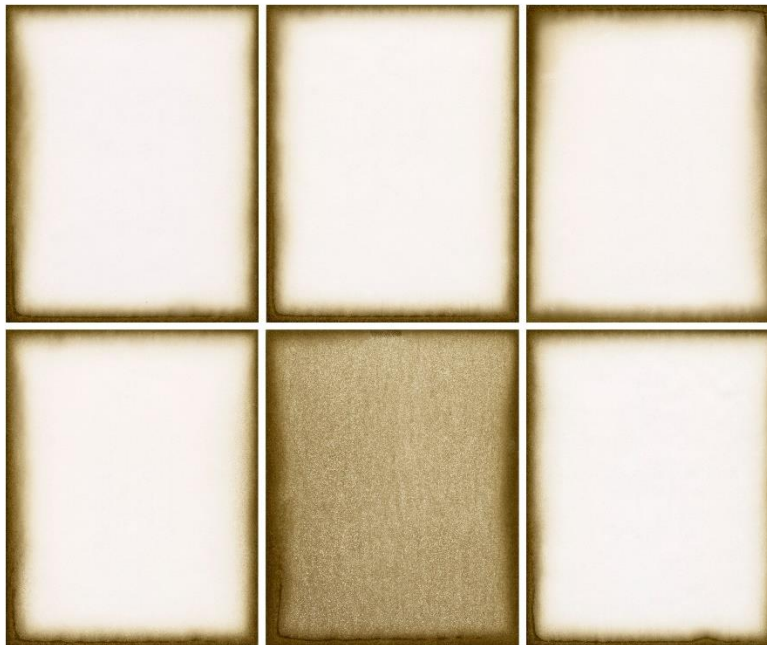


ArtSeen

Alison Rossiter: *Substance of Density*, 1918-1948

By [Zach Ritter](#)



Alison Rossiter has always worked with an acute understanding of the ways history and material circumstance can shape what is aesthetically possible. The expired photographic papers she collects and processes are curious aesthetic objects in this regard, bearing as they do the lasting effects of industrial production, the accidents of time, and the inevitability of decay. That she succeeds in allowing the life of her materials to “express” themselves, to create disarmingly beautiful abstractions without recourse to either camera or celluloid, is a demonstration of just how malleable the idea of photography can still be.

In *Substance of Density 1918-1948* Rossiter has continued her practice of processing expired photographic papers with liquid developer to reveal whatever latent imagery has developed in them over time. She then often groups together sheets from the same box or from several, creating both precise grids and undulating, almost rhythmic, assemblages. Much of the work evokes different moments in the history of painterly and photographic abstraction as it developed in Europe. An echo of Aleksandr Rodchenko’s end-of-the-line monochromes here, a touch of Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist renewal of abstraction there, with a suggestion of László Moholy-Nagy’s photograms for good measure.

The initial encounter with Rossiter’s abstractions can feel strange and subdued, as if the historical framework of the show were stifling its expressivity—most of the work seems nearly monochrome, the abstractions almost rudimentary. First impressions such as these, however, are quick to give way to more subtle appreciations of the

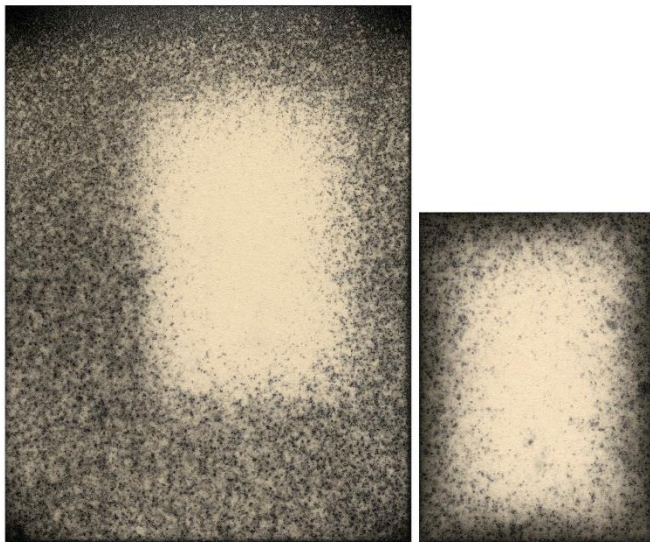


unique textures and rich tonalities that Rossiter coaxes out of the papers she has saved from the indifference of history.

The consistent strength of her work is the ease with which it produces abstractions that seem simple and familiar, only to reveal shortly thereafter the complex chain of accident, chance, and decision-making at its source. The papers she uses each have their own unique provenance, beginning with the manufacturer and then working their ways through countless owners and sets of circumstances for storage. Her typical practice of titling works by listing the paper's name, year of expiration, and year when she processed it (which the current show deviates from, though without discarding the historical focus) has the effect of compressing the paper's history while keeping it close at hand, ready to expand with each new inquiry.

Density 1947 (2020) brings together in a neat grid six pieces of gelatin silver paper drawn from the same box, each exhibiting different levels of oxidation and loss of light sensitivity. The almost uniform copper and gold silhouetting at the edges of five sheets, which frames the nearly bleach-white quality of the

papers after Rossiter processes them, is contrasted with the more advanced oxidation of the sixth and topmost sheet from the box, which absorbed the brunt of time's weathering effect. The result seems an almost organic abstraction, a static-like ripple of gold and white shimmering across the paper.



The three largest works in the show, each titled *Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1930s, processed 2020*, are single sheets of the same rare and highly prized paper, produced in the 1930's by Belgian manufacturer Gevaert Photo-Producten NV. Its coarse, almost sandpaper-like surface (a kind of tactility Rossiter has likened to that of Velcro) was considered a major achievement in the production of photographic paper, allowing for a special depth and quality of tone. The size of the sheets

(two are roughly 64" x 49" and the third 54" x 53") means they were rolled for storage. Having gone unused, the decades they spent rolled up resulted in the cracking of the emulsion which coats the paper. Through Rossiter's controlled processing of each sheet, in which she lowers only a section into the chemical solution at a given time, the impressions left by years of neglect are transformed into ethereal abstractions that, x-ray-like, reveal the x-ray-like wear and tear of a life otherwise hidden.

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Rossiter's is a unique way of bypassing more traditional photographic processes while staying rooted to the essence of the medium. The exposures are neither happening in response to a momentarily pleasing or compelling arrangement of light and shadow, nor are they being carefully devised in the more controlled space of the studio. No, the exposures that Rossiter is working with have happened over decades, a century in some cases, and without the guidance of a creative consciousness. In this equation the box functions as a camera otherwise would, providing an "apparatus," or a container, through which responsiveness to light can be registered and an image, however fragmentary, can develop. Rossiter steps in at the decisive moment (one that Henri Cartier-Bresson could scarcely have imagined) and finishes what had been up to that point an impersonal and even random process, giving it the stamp of authorship, the structure of intent.

Look at the two sheets of paper in *Density 1930s* (2018). Through a kind of organic metaphor, both underwent a decades-long process of molding—a literal rotting from disuse and neglect. That such a thorough undermining of the paper's integrity has brought about not its final ruin, but its final use as a vehicle for form, is something of a minor miracle. Such is the electric current running beneath the surface of Rossiter's work, a glimmering suggestion that for some inexplicable reason history has conspired to see these materials survive and these abstractions realized.