

EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY: An interview with Brandon Lattu

Charlotte Cotton: There are so many facets to your artistic practice that, on a material level, see you moving between sculptural and photographic registers and forms that oscillate between surfaces and volumes - 2D image and 3D object - bound inextricably together. You describe your artistic investigations as a movement away from the traditional idea of photography as a monocular vision, where you can draw a direct line from the photographer's eye, through the camera, to their chosen subject. Instead, your artworks have an 'omnidirectional' vantage point - and often a sculptural affect or form. Your works liberate photography from simulating human vision and encourage us to enter another way of seeing. Can you tell me about this and why you think that has been such a through-line in your practice?

Brandon Lattu: This question is such a challenge to answer because the very premise or definition of photography is so broad now: is it a name for the global distribution of images, the discipline as practiced with cultural reflexivity, or the activity that a majority of the world practices with their phone daily? I think that my suggestion of the omnidirectional quality addresses each of these aspects, but maybe let's stick to the use with conscious cultural reflexivity - art.

Charlotte Cotton: The objects represented in your works on show in Experimental Photography are what I call "ostensible". In Ritz and Premium and It's-It and It's-It, you work with food packaging and in Photoshop and Photoshop it's the packaging of Adobe Photoshop, perhaps the default image-making medium of this century so far. I really like the straight comparison that having these 3 works in the same physical space prompts - the idea of both image software and savory crackers as off-the-shelf, basic goods of daily life, given distinction by the branding of their packaging design, and given form by the volume of a box, which we know from our experiences of opening such boxes contains a lot of thin air within it! Can you say more about what these "ostensible" objects are for you?

Brandon Lattu: I think they are spectres - apparitions - of the system of exchange that surrounds them. My enthusiasm for the container is almost entirely divorced from the actual product purchased. I am sure that I am not alone in having bought things purely because of the delicious visual aesthetic that surrounds them. But maybe that's too vague. Ritz and Premium are superlatives that mean the best, and who doesn't want the best, even if it is delivered on a lowly cracker, right? It's-It and It's-It is about goo and unknowing and primordial ooze; the perfect confection of iced cream dripping down everyone's chin and chocolate slathered up their arm. They couldn't even come up with a name for the product! That said, their box is one of the most beautiful selections one can make from the 40,000 odd items the average U.S. supermarket offers.

I've been making these images of product containers since 2001 and almost all of them have been consumables. Photoshop and Photoshop is a new direction and the newest of these works. It's a bit like explaining to a child that music used to come on a disc and photographs were contained on film - but in reverse. It's downright odd to imagine software, the product par excellence of the so-called information economy, as needing a material presence for a consumer to exchange money to receive it. In fact, soon after these editions, Photoshop moved to all digital distribution.

Charlotte Cotton: You are an artist who traverses analogue and digital processes and, I suspect, deliberates greatly on what form an idea needs to take. You are unusually 'bilingual'! Do digital

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means provide you with the same freedoms and experimentation as your analogue decisions?

Brandon Lattu: I write this in Los Angeles and send it to you in Doha through a magic of similar dematerialization as effects photography. (Across this divide, we can digitally exchange images, ideas and emotions but this dematerialized flow has not eliminated the dissociation between people, not to speak of nation states). I gained access to computers early – my mother had studied COBOL - an early programming language in the '70s - and my family purchased a used computer in the '80s. I jumped on it. I've not had some of the hesitation of using digital tools that many of my peers felt. One thing I will say about the general comparison between art and computing is that perseverance is their greatest commonality - getting what you intend on the first try is the exception rather than the rule. Honestly, I wrestle with this as a teacher too. Students often want to be instructed on the industrialized aspects of digital tools when I want them to focus on their ideas. But just as one can say that lenses became more refined in service of military photography, I think we can recognize that the digital tools were developed from needs that align more with corporate or other larger entities rather than the individual. But to return to digital automation, I am unsure if it elides the actual relationship to either subject or material. Let's consider film. If we reflect on the films of cinéma vérité or neo-realism, and that everyone's phone has the capacity to record events as well or better than the tools at these artists' disposal but really very few even try. Or Warhol! I always love that Warhol strived for the easy way - photographically and technically. His work certainly allowed incident in relationship to material and I think that incidental capacity is equally available now. What I see is fewer people interested in stepping outside of prescribed uses of tools and also a normalization of works of art that may not even manifest in physical form at all. Many are quickly becoming aware of the reversal of actual subject and mediated representation now during the quarantine but really it is only causing an acceleration of a cultural shift in which we are all active and implicated.

Charlotte Cotton: How would you describe the impact of our contemporary image environment upon the choices that you make - or the viewership you anticipate - for your work? I think I am asking you about what you are asking us to pay attention.

Brandon Lattu: I'm now thinking about Lucy Lippard's book, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972 and the way that she narrates tendencies to be international and social in development and how this ties into the idea of what an artwork can be. I guess people came to call this conceptual art, but really it is about an idea that is coming from everywhere at once. I think that something parallel is happening again now – social change that can be recognized in the changing expectations and reception of artworks.

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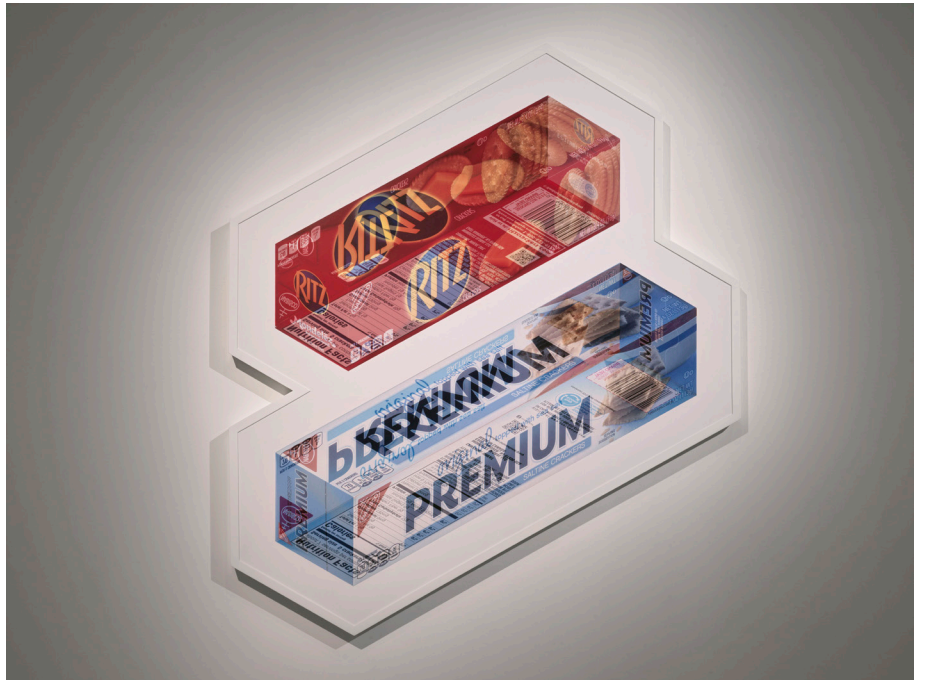


Installation views, Markus Elbaus

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QM GALLERY - KATAR
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Experimental Photography draws together six innovative contemporary American artists who are re-shaping photography's 200-year history of experimentation with new ideas and processes. Their photographic practices include fusing analogue traditions and materials with pixel-based software and new printing and image-rendering technologies. Within a contemporary creative context, the material presence of photographs is an ever-changing experience - the scope of which is set well beyond the confines of artistic practice per se, and in the realms of Web 2.0 and the 'cloud' of networked images. This exhibition offers up a range of active and subjective choices made by artists to transform and translate images into tangible objects, harnessing the experimental potential of a collective 'image environment'.

In this era of unprecedented compatibility and transparency between viewers and artists, the artists presented here are at the forefront of a dynamic facet of contemporary art photography that intentionally speaks to the universality of digital image capturing and sharing which permeates daily life. Through their work, we experience the physical implications of operating in this utterly new media environment, where the origination, behaviour, and reading of photographs have been culturally upended, and we are invited into the experimental terrain that extends before our eyes.

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