

Tyler Wood Gallery

Stuebner, Anton. *Review: Eleanor Oakes.*
<http://www.artpractical.com/review/eleanor-oakes/> May, 2015.



PL3360, 2014 archival inkjet print 35 x 44 in edition of 3 + 1 AP

Our bodies leave behind innumerable traces: dead skin, soil, loose follicles of hair. Most are invisible to the naked eye, but these traces can also become stains, markers of our physical encounters with material environments. We use solvents and solutions to hide these marks and make them invisible, and we try to eliminate proof that our bodies are capable of physically disrupting the world around us. But what happens when we encounter a stain that we cannot remove? How do we react when we realize that our bodies leave behind traces that we cannot control? And how do we feel when confronted with bodily marks that will inexorably continue to exist long after we are gone?

Eleanor Oakes' solo exhibition at Tyler Wood Gallery raises critical questions about how we "trace" presence by examining the material substances that we leave behind. The two photo series on display, conversely, investigate the correlation between bodily encounters and their stains. The series *Expired [1927]* (2015), on view in the rear gallery, features eleven panchromatic silver gelatin prints arranged in a grid. At first glance, the prints on display seem like nebulous experiments in abstraction, with streaks of white cloudlike shapes against a gray paper stock. Initially, it's unclear what is being photographed here, and some of the images depicted resemble bodily organs. The flocked, oval-shaped objects in *Panchromatic 1* (2015), for instance, could be mistaken for an X-ray image of a

Tyler Wood Gallery

lung. Other images in the series are more ethereal. It would be difficult to discern any remotely figurative shape, for example, in the whiteout wash of *Panchromatic 11* (2015), which amorously bleeds from the center out toward the edge of the frame.

In fact, “nothing” is photographed here. Developed from an unused box of expired Eastman Kodak sheet film from 1927, the series documents how film stock distorts when exposed to inconsistent environmental conditions and, more importantly, time. The materiality of film is the primary focus here, and as such, it would be all too easy to dismiss the series as an interesting formal exercise without a clear “subject.” Oakes certainly challenges notions of authorship by printing unused film stock that, arguably, has not been activated (or *used*) by the artist’s camera. However, Oakes uses this diffuse quality to raise larger questions about the intended use of artistic materials. In aestheticizing the random distortions effected onto this film stock, Oakes shows how time marks material substances with a distinctive presence. At their most basic, the prints on view depict images of deteriorated film stock, but distinctively abstract, they also represent how temporal and environmental conditions invariably leave both a literal and metaphorical stain on physical objects long after their original place and time of use.

Stains reappear in the inkjet prints featured in the series *Residual Loop* (2013–2015). On display in the main gallery, *Residual Loop* depicts still lives of fabric hung along a flat background and above a square-faced surface. The fabrics in each print are unique—burnt orange silk charmeuse in one image, a royal blue satin in another—and draped with varying degrees of care and haphazardness. Some reveal the fabrics’ frayed and whiskered edges, roughly cut by unseen shears and hanging loosely off the rear wall; in others, the rough-hewn edges are blocked out of the image’s frame, giving the fabric the illusion of a continuous, smooth hang. Their soft sheen and elegant drape makes it clear that these are luxury fabrics, most likely used for eveningwear.

The fine sheen of the fabrics that Oakes depicts, however, is often soiled. Violently strewn grease marks cover the pastel peach satin of *PL8215* (2014), splattered against the fabric as if from a projectile spray from an exploding bottle. Similar stains spread out against the cerulean satin-sheen fabric in *PL3360* (2014), the oily smears dripping slowly along the fabric’s folds in rough starts and stops, over-stains covering older marks to produce subtly gradated smudges and spots. The juxtaposition of erratic stains against soft folds of fabric suggests unsettling narratives of violent force and deliberate intervention. Something here, we are lead to believe, has been spoiled, and Oakes plays on common assumptions that stains are unwanted marks—disruptions in our collective attempts to maintain order and integrity in objects and ourselves.

The works suggest untold narratives, but if there are hidden stories here—of art making, of human tensions, of implied violence—Oakes refuses to reveal them.

Tyler Wood Gallery

In doing so, Oakes forces us to recognize that our physical interventions leave some permanent artifact and resonance outside of their original time and place. As her title suggests, these stains are a constant reminder of the effects that our actions continue to have even after we are gone. Even in our absence, our bodies still impact others in the present through the marks they leave behind. These artifacts are sometimes unclean; they may even make objects that we find beautiful dirty.

As Oakes' work reveals, though, these stains can also be beautiful in and of themselves, visually arresting markers of a specific moment in the time and place of someone's life. *Residual Loop* suggests that we all leave unintended marks in the world around us. Sometimes we try to correct and erase them from our collective memories. Oakes' work encourages us to acknowledge these traces as part of our social fabric—not as stains, but as unique embellishments representative of lives lived fully.