

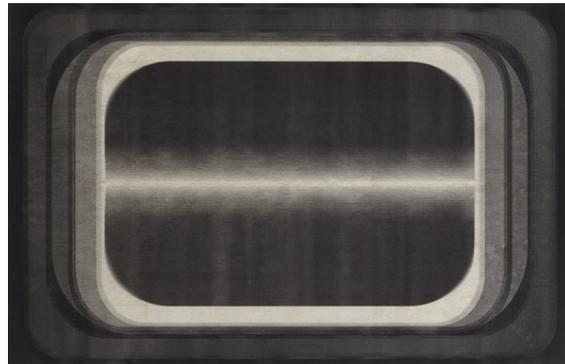
MARSHA COTTRELL

Eleven Rivington | February 27 – April 5, 2015

By Taney Roniger

Writing at the tail end of the Machine Age, Lewis Mumford, that most incisive critic of culture, noted an emerging irony: the more human-like our machines were becoming, the more lifeless and mechanical were the human agents they were created to serve. Today, in the era of smart technology and our increasing dependence on a panoply of gadgets, his observation could hardly

seem more prescient. Indeed, for so many of us, endlessly clicking and tapping our way before the looming screen has led not to the freedom the Information Age once promised but to a state of crippling apathy and mental vacuity.



Marsha Cottrell, "Aperture Series (15)," 2014. Laser toner on paper, unique, 11 3/4" x 18 1/8"

For Marsha Cottrell, the desktop—the primary locus of our self-imposed automatism—is both studio and an arena of defiance against this state of affairs. Using only a desktop computer and an office laser printer, Cottrell has developed a distinctive oeuvre by creating abstract drawings out of typographical and other standardized marks which, when printed, become unique-edition works of uncanny beauty. In this two-part show, on view at both of Eleven Rivington's Lower East Side venues, a range of work created over the last decade and a half is presented alongside the artist's most recent series, her most mysterious and profound to date. With understated elegance and a decidedly contemplative aesthetic, the show makes a commanding case for the resuscitation of that endangered species for which Mumford fought so passionately: the inner life. Cottrell's invocation of psychic interiority is deft and subtle—and, fittingly, requires sustained looking to be fully realized. At first glance, many of the works could be mistaken for representations of cosmic space, especially those in the Rivington Street gallery. In this part of the show, radiating sun-like orbs figure prominently in the four works on view, but equally pervasive allusions to language and human touch preclude any simple read. "Index I (Presence of Nature)" (1998 – 2013), an array of

10 small prints, both attests to the range of Cottrell's practice and underscores its genesis in the keyboard. In some places, sweeping clusters of commas, parentheses, and em dashes form compositions suggestive of fantastical architectural interiors, exotic musical scores, or asemic calligraphy. In others, the typographical characters give way to geometric bursts, vectors, and streaks set against a deep black ground. Throughout, the allusion to the business document—that icon of corporate culture—is maintained by the size of the paper, which ranges from letter to legal to tabloid, and lends the work an undercurrent of humor in its refusal of dull conformity. Occasional smears and other physical manipulations to the paper announce the presence of the artist's hand, providing further counterpoint to the drawings' mechanical origins.

While the smaller pieces are busier and more lyrical, a single tapestry-sized piece commands quiet. In "The Deliciousness of Staying Still" (2015), 142 sheets of mulberry paper glued together in a grid form a vast expanse of velvety black, the rectangle of darkness interrupted by a single inkless disc hovering just off the composition's center. Here, the parchment-like paper exudes touch, as discernible wrinkles and pocks in the toner-saturated surface suggest that the artist has deliberately distressed the material. At once intimate and austere, the work's poetry lies in its subtle subversion: the masses of paper acting as its accomplice, cartridgefuls of text-ready ink speak only of silence.

In the gallery's Chrystie Street location, the show's appeal to interiority is intensified in three additional series of small works. Here, soft fields of laser toner are densely overlain in 16 pieces evocative of psychologically charged spaces. The glowing orbs so prevalent in the other gallery recur here, but now, in the context of the second exhibition, acquire a stronger allusion to inner rather than outer space. The most powerful are from Cottrell's "Aperture Series," all made in 2014. In these, a flickering horizontal band of light, reminiscent of an electroencephalogram, hovers in the center of a deep black field, each framed by myriad concentric rectangles. All horizontal pieces with the aspect ratio of a computer monitor, the reference to the endless regress of files within files is strong. But a more resonant association suggests itself. Gazing through the succession of frames at the distant light, one is reminded of the thrill of sitting in a dark theater, eager with anticipation of the

unknown—an encounter itself so powerful, perhaps, because it mirrors our own experience of consciousness. Peering into these mysterious theaters, one senses they could be exotic landscapes, glimpses of the infinity of cyberspace, or, indeed, glimpses of the infinity within.

At a time when rote work and a constant barrage of technological noise threaten to eclipse our capacity for wonder and the human imagination generally, art that reminds us of the potential richness of interiority seems especially urgent. It is also rare. Cottrell's use of the very instrument so often the source of the problem to illuminate an alternative makes her work particularly compelling. Clearly no luddite, Cottrell is living testament to the fact that reclaiming our deepest humanity does not require severing our ties to our devices and heading back to the land, nor that we destroy our machines in reactionary pursuit of some better world. Freedom from the machine exists in the world we have now, in exactly that place it has always been. To find it, we need only turn—and tune—in.