

## Marta Djourina - Photographic interactions

Text: Dr. Thomas Köhler

Born in 1991 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Marta Djourina is an artist who has studied various aspects of the visual arts at three Berlin universities since 2009. She began her studies at Berlin's Humboldt University where she majored in Art and Visual History. She then continued her studies at Berlin's Technical University with a focus on Art Theory and Technology. She is currently a student at Berlin's University of the Arts, where she has studied Fine Arts with Pia Fries, Gregory Cumins and Christine Streuli since 2012.

The different aspects of artistic observation, analysis and work processes explored in her fields of study all resurface in Djourina's unusual photographic approach. What to an observer first looks like an ordinary photograph turns out – upon closer inspection – to be a multifaceted exploration of technical and visual effects, but it is also a study of the impact that various phenomena such as time, space and chance have on the artistic creative process.

Djourina's approach to her work, in brief, makes use of the principle concepts that define analogue, abstract, and chiefly cameraless photography. Her work primarily involves direct exposure processes and light paintings; in some cases, the artist uses camera-like tools to make pictures, such as in her *filtergrams*.

For those works that she herself refers to as *filtergrams*, Djourina doesn't use any digital cameras, but an enlarger in the shape of a box where light, object and photographic paper interact. The composition that results from this process is guided only by the exposure time, the paper's color, and an everyday object positioned between light source and lens. The rest of the pictorial process happening inside this device is largely dependent on chance, which means that the process is unique and not repeatable.

What Djourina calls an enlarger, is her own version of a pinhole camera. In pinhole cameras, light enters a blackened box at a specific point, creating

an upside-down image on the inside back of the box. Depending on the exposure length and the photographic paper's sensitivity, images with different contour intensity are produced. For her *filtergrams*, she often uses color photographic paper, which reacts to direct exposure by reversing the colors. In addition, by *filtering* the light and uniformly distributing the depth of field, the imaged object loses its three-dimensionality, which also happens in photograms, and instead takes on an abstract, graphic look. Marta Djourina is interested in creating *filtergrams* that are as abstract as possible. For that reason, she specifically selects everyday objects that are more or less transparent or that have as few characteristic contours as possible, such as plastic bags or Tupperware.

In addition, the artist manipulates the photographic paper, turning it into three-dimensional forms. She wrinkles and folds the paper so additional abstract effects will occur during the photographic process. In some areas, the process of exposure "paints over" the folds; in others, points of light and shadows develop that also affect the final form. Djourina hangs her finished paper sculptures on the wall in such a way that movements of air cause the folds to "breathe," to move in space, to expand and change. The paper itself thus becomes an agent in the artistic process. By casting shadows, it acts as though it were creating images of itself; and even after the photographic process ends, it uses climatic conditions to cause further change as to its structure, surface and form.

In addition to air and light, temperature is another important atmospheric factor that influences her cameraless photography: Inside the enlarger box, the light source creates a lot of heat. In an irreversible process, the heat causes the exposed original objects to lose their shape. They literally dissolve. The result is an image that is even more abstract, more unpredictable. Djourina refers to the photographs in this work group

as the “dematerialization of everyday life.” She thereby alludes to the various processes of abstraction that the photographed object undergoes in the course of its emergence. During the process, a familiar object created for a specific purpose is filtered, illuminated, dissolved and deformed. What we discover as a result of this process are delicate, poetic images that, in part, still contain vague traces reminding us of the original object. Mostly, though, they look like playfully floral or entirely abstract arrangements of color.

The artistic process driving this dematerialization is one of targeted, selectively influenced chance. Djourina runs tests to explore the effects of even the most diverse phenomena on her final artwork, including light, heat, humidity and air movement, deformation, light and shadow play, superimpositions, and other optical phenomena.

Djourina describes this artistic process as follows: *It is a type of photography that does not photograph the reality that is in front of the camera, but instead looks right inside. (...) Sometimes the image is produced by the play of light and shadow that takes place between light source and lens in the enlarger; sometimes folded photographic paper is exposed using different light sources and, as a result, the paper itself depicts the painting activity that has just taken place. The traces this creates are not direct but abstract consequences of the interaction between light and paper.* (from Marta Djourina’s press statement)

The “painting activity” mentioned above points to another group of Djourina’s works, one which is more painterly or graphic in outlook: her light paintings. While these works also rely on direct exposure, random phenomena and unpredictability, in this case there is no experimental photographic setup that determines the artistic result; instead, the artist’s gesture itself does – just like in traditional painting. Using different colored light sources, Djourina paints her own movements in the photo lab by way of a blind, experimental process. Again, the light’s color is reversed on the color photographic paper. The result: expressive light drawings – many of them brightly co-

lored and abstract. With this group of works, Djourina situates herself in relation to a question that has been asked throughout the history of photography: How does light itself become the topic of photography?

It is very important to note that all of Marta Djourina’s works are characterized by the activities of process. There’s the time needed to develop the photographs; there are the various factors emerging along the way to influence the work; there are the questions she asks about the possibility of artistic influence and creativity – all of these issues are of crucial importance in her works.

The idea of uncontrollability and the artistic documentation of time elapsed are taken to the extreme in her project *Von: Mir / An: Mich* (From: Me / To: Me). Here, the artist sends herself a pinhole camera with photo paper in it. On an approximately three-day “journey,” the camera records uncharted territory for Djourina. Working as though it were its own master, the camera acts as a test instrument. The artist defines the setup, as well as the picture’s starting point, but then is no longer in a position to influence the photographic end result. The pictures cross paths on the photo paper and become superimposed, which makes for blurrily abstract and enigmatic photographs. The resulting photographs are an attempt – by artistic means – to illustrate a space-time continuum – i.e., the physical idea of fusing two categories that human perception otherwise regards as separate.