

Spectra: The Role of Chance in Photographic Abstraction

by Allen Schill

Spectra: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5a>

Most of my photographic work is highly controlled. But in my personal observations and explorations, which have a lot to do with the ideas that drive me in that work, I have always taken great delight in serendipity – the chance discovery, the anomaly, the lucky accident. It's the same delight I have always taken in nature. In fact, much of what has always appealed to me in nature is precisely the element of chance, or what we call chance, actually the visible manifestation of a series of interactions too complex to analyze but marvelous to behold. In photographing these things I wanted to communicate something of my sense of wonder.

A spectrum is a range. We speak of the electromagnetic spectrum and the spectrum of visible light – the territory and the medium, even the material, of photography. Spectrography reveals the range of light emitted by a star or other material and in this way lets us determine its composition. (It's amusing to think of the spectrograph of a star as an image of the "ghost" or spectre of that star, but the root of the word has simply the sense of a thing which is seen, as in "spectacle", even as applied to ghosts.) Every material or object, seen by reflected or transmitted (or even emitted) light, likewise has a characteristic range of colors and values, depending on circumstances, which can be recorded photographically. Ordinarily a three-dimensional subject is photographed to produce a two-dimensional image. What if one were to take just a line, a one-dimensional slice of that image, as geologists take a core sample, and extend it into two dimensions to make it visible, in order to represent the whole, and perhaps something else besides?

I have made many scans with a flat-bed scanner, of transparencies, negatives, reflective art, and various materials. Now and then the scanner malfunctions – while scanning it will stop abruptly at some point and make a file with what it was able to scan before the glitch. (I think of it as a sort of electronic burp or tic.) But the file will still have the same pixel size that it would have had if the scan had been normal. The image will be normal from the top to perhaps halfway down the height of the image. The finder will show a preview that is normal down to a point, and then white for the remainder of the image. Ordinarily you just throw it away and scan again. But if you open the file, you will find, instead of white, a continuation of the last row of pixels scanned, a sort of spectrum of that subject, with their vertical bands of color extending from left to right. Just what it will be depends on the subject scanned and exactly where the scanner malfunctioned – a matter of pure chance – but it is remarkable how beautiful they sometimes are. I started to collect them, eliminating the "normal" part as I proceeded, and eventually made a selection and prepared files for printing with a digital pigment printer, using artist's paper and pigments of archival quality.

In keeping with the spirit of chance – since the decision of exactly which one-dimensional cross-section would be repeated was made *for* me – the files are essentially unmanipulated in their colors and values. About all I've done to prepare the files has been to duplicate vertically the raw "spectra", which were often narrow strips, in order to arrive at a rectangle of a standard proportion, and then to enlarge them to a suitable size. So far I have only made medium-small prints, with images about 41 x 32 cm., but they would be very effective in a much larger size.

It would have equally possible to turn these images 90° and present them with their spectral bands oriented horizontally, but I much preferred the vertical orientation and format for their psychological impact – better for something which I hope may inspire a bit of awe (as it does in me), like the architecture of a Gothic cathedral. The horizontal, besides feeling more anchored to the ground, evokes too strongly the idea of landscape, and I wanted to avoid any such suggestion. For me, these images are aesthetically close to the traditions of Abstract

Expressionism and the Abstract Sublime, and the spiritual concerns they shared regardless of their obvious differences in style and technique. I also find appealing the opportunity to integrate into my works an element or a perspective which, if not scientific in the strict sense, has something of the spirit of science, at least of that wonder and curiosity without which science, and much else, would not exist.

On the web each spectrum is followed by a detail, since these images are particularly hard to appreciate so small. It is curious that, rather like fractals, which appear the same at any magnification, each detail tends to look the same as the full size seen on the web page. I find appealing the idea that the same sorts of relationships obtain at different levels of reality, as in physics and astronomy, but I should note that the actual, full-size prints of these images are much crisper than they seem on the web. The colors, too, are far more subtle than the web can show.

That this series of images is essentially the product of chance is information some might feel I shouldn't share, as there seems to be a prejudice against art works that derive from chance or rely heavily on it. Some might think badly of the works if they knew how they came about, notwithstanding the many acknowledged works of modern art deeply involved with chance (e.g., conspicuously, the music and other work of John Cage). The idea seems to be that such works, because they partake so much of the arbitrary, lack something possessed by works in which the author's intentions and decisions are crucial. In most artistic fields – writing, music, theater, dance, and the visual arts – this is in fact generally the case, and reasonably so. After all, if a work could turn out in any one of many ways, depending on chance, what value does it have in its particularity? What has the artist achieved? On the other hand, there may be a conceptual value to this aspect, in which chance itself is in some way the subject of the work, rather than or as much as the thing before us, in whatever form it may take.

In visual arts like painting and sculpture, the importance of the artist's decisions is usually clear. In the photographic arts, in which fundamentally there is nothing analogous to a brushstroke, a qualification or two have to be made. The artist's decisions are limited to what to photograph, and how and when. Even composition is limited to how the subject presents itself; the photographer can only choose the point of view and the frame. The artist is limited to appearances. This is true of all photography and film, of whatever style or genre, not made under controlled conditions. In this sense, the images derived depend heavily upon chance, even if the artist chooses the subjects. We photograph what we find beautiful or compelling or interesting in some way, and chance plays a big part in this. It is largely chance that provides and prepares the raw material. (I realize that my view camera still-life photography can be seen as a way of dealing with chance under controlled conditions, a way for me to choose which manifestations of chance to allow to become part of my compositions.)

After this reminder of the role of chance in art, I can only say, since I ordinarily prefer a maximum of control in my creations, that in this body of work I have renounced the control I usually exert, and allowed chance to guide me.

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