



# Danica Chappell Thickness of Time

13 October 2018 – 24 February 2019





Abstract artwork with text, possibly a description or artist's statement, mounted on the wall.





## *Everything has its time.*

Sue Cramer

*The physical process of making a photograph is exhausting and stimulating, so I lose track of time. What might seem like two hours is actually five.<sup>1</sup>*

In a world filled with screen-based and photoshopped images, Danica Chappell explores the rich potential of non-digital photography. Her vibrant abstract photographs have been created without a camera, using methods that expand our common understanding of photographic practice.

Chappell is one of a new wave of contemporary artists reviving cameraless techniques like the photogram, the lineage of which reaches back to the very origins of photography, and to the artists of the twentieth-century avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Bypassing mechanical methods of capturing an image, she spends long hours in her darkroom, where she immerses herself in a hands-on activity of making, and in a rethinking of photography itself. She describes the darkroom activity from which her work emerges as an intensely physical, time-based performance, 'a tactile engagement between the body, processes and materials'.<sup>3</sup>

While images made with a camera are most often pictures or documents of the world, cameraless photographs are frequently abstract. Chappell refers to hers as 'spatio-temporal abstractions' and as 'constructed compositions', suggesting how her arrangements of form, colour, shadow and light have been built-up in successive stages layer by layer and moment by moment over days, sometimes weeks. Chappell speaks of the elasticity of her processes, her desire to 'stretch' photography beyond its usual conventions, to push against the limits of its definition. Often she repeats and inverts her procedures, deftly manipulating scale and tonality, and shifting between positive and negative substrates. Or she might rotate the angle of her photo-sensitive material, altering its relation to the light source, while sequentially concealing, then disclosing, different parts of it to light. Her luminal sources can range from the lamp in her enlarger—she sometimes simultaneously uses two of these projector-like devices—to a flash or small torch. At every point in the process she seeks to make her medium 'give', to stretch its possibilities a little further.

Time, an element fundamental to all photography, is a specific and primary subject of Chappell's work. Time is also elastic, speeding-up or slowing down according to our state of mind, our circumstances and perception. Streams of both time and light run throughout the spatial realms that Chappell's images convey. She views time as a tangible material with properties of 'physical thickness'.<sup>4</sup> This poetic idea is suggested through the dense visual textures she creates and in her use of multiples exposures within a single image so that temporal layers co-exist and interweave. Actions and procedures enacted by the artist over several hours or days in the darkroom are simultaneously present; their visible trace is evidence of the photograph's making, its coming into being.

6 Encompassing both careful pre-planning and the workings of chance, Chappell's wide-ranging approach is not easy to sum-up or label. The works in her most recent series *Thickness of Time* (2018) are in essence multi-layered photograms, a technique that uses the most primary elements of photography. Photogram images are made when an object or piece of material is placed onto any light-sensitive surface, usually photographic paper, and then exposed to light. The method was extensively explored by Bauhaus artist and teacher László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), a preeminent figure within twentieth-century modernism, and hugely admired by Chappell, who has an article on his photograms permanently pinned to her studio wall.<sup>5</sup> While she draws inspiration from the history of photography, Chappell also sees her approach to composition—her haptic interaction with materials and processes—as having a deep relationship with painting.

It is difficult to visually decipher the temporal sequences enmeshed within these images, yet their fractured forms and spatial ambiguities are compelling to the eye. The airy play of overlapping shadows alludes to deep space, while assertive, sharp-edged fragments seem to sit right at the surface. Irregular boundaries butt up against one another, but don't quite align. Oddly shaped pieces—some strangely familiar though hard to identify—appear to float within the energised fields that Chappell has evoked. Her method of piecing together smaller sections to build larger compositions creates a sense of disjunction or rupture. This has the effect of highlighting the work's hand-made qualities, as against the seamless perfection it is possible to achieve by digitally altering an image. Each of her photographs is entirely unique, a one-off entity—unlike photographs made by cameras, which can easily be replicated, whether from an analogue negative or digital file.

While most of the photographs in this exhibition are displayed flat to the wall, *Thickness of Time #9* is attached to, but at an angle from the wall, its weight supported by a painted steel armature. A larger work, *Thickness of Time #7* is suspended diametrically across the room. Dropping freely from the ceiling toward the floor, its vertical format











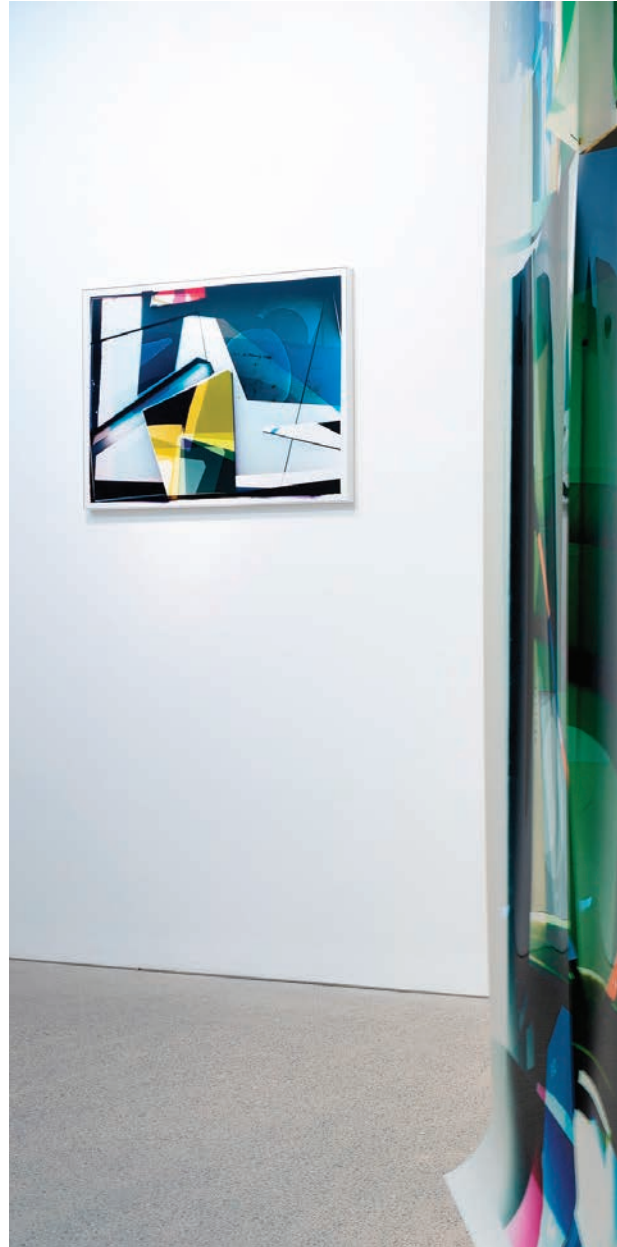
is reminiscent of a banner. These 'photographs as objects' activate the gallery space; visitors physically encounter and walk around them, viewing the work from front and back, contrary to most photographs, which are meant to be looked at from only one side.

Chappell has chosen Duratran as the surface support for these two works, a sleek and semi-transparent material that inherently alludes to eye-catching light-box advertisements, of the type seen in department stores, shopping malls or at bus shelters. Heightening our sense of the photographs' physicality, she cuts geometric shapes into the black material that is attached to their reverse side, creating wayward pieces that curl and bend toward to the viewer. Ambient light in the room activates both sides of the Duratran, adding a 'real' dimension, and a further layer, to the illusionistic play of shadow and light that is intrinsic to her images.

Colour is vital to Chappell's work, 'it is as thick and tangible and slippery as time ... I use it as a material for construction'<sup>6</sup>, she says. Colour is an index of time; darker shades tend to signal longer periods of exposure; lighter tones can indicate shorter durations of exposure. Her attentive modulation of this key constituent is complex and physical. 'In conjunction with other elements, colour activates the body and the viewing of the work', she observes. Chappell's consideration of her palette is similar to that of a painter. 'Are the colours in harmony, or ghastly and jarring', she might ask herself? 'Can they be blended softly, and what happens to perception against a hard edge of colour?'<sup>7</sup> For her, the intersection of time and colour is 'the place where photography meets painting'.<sup>8</sup>

The incidental objects Chappell discloses to light during the photogram stages of her work impart their own hue—like a blue piece of plastic, a red fragment from a shattered car light, a white Perspex washer, or brown cardboard off-cut. She also skillfully manipulates tinted filters to blend contrasting tones. An object that in daylight appears yellow can take on a different cast in the darkroom, altered both by the use of filters and the intensity or duration of its exposure to light. Though the items of everyday detritus used by Chappell become scarcely recognisable within her abstract configurations, they offer a traceable link to the physical world. Chappell says, 'I am constantly questioning the existence of a "thing" through what that object and/or material affords my practice, by way of reforming it compositionally and materially'.<sup>9</sup> In relation to this, curator Anne O'Hehir describes the artist's works as 'tied to reality through process', and as 'a phenomenological study of the world'.<sup>10</sup>

Chappell sometimes uses the term 'expressive darkroom' in connection with her practice.<sup>11</sup> It is a lyrical description that in a literal sense might apply to her small Melbourne studio, but which more broadly describes her performative and exploratory approach, her lively and insistent 'stretching' of photography. In our hectic, fast-paced society where no-one it seems ever has enough time, Chappell's radiant abstractions invite us to slow right down and fully absorb the abundant visual discoveries they hold within them.





## Endnotes

- 1 Danica Chappell, email to the author, 30 July 2018.
- 2 This history up to the present day is authoritatively explored by Geoffrey Batchen in *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, and Prestel, Munich, Germany, 2016.
- 3 Danica Chappell, email to the author, 30 July 2018.
- 4 Danica Chappell, in conversation with the author, 21 June 2018.
- 5 Sylvie Pénichon, Krista Lough and Pail Messier, 'An Objective Revaluation of Photograms' by László Moholy-Nagy, in *Leonardo*, vol. 50, no.3, pp. 292–95, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 2017.
- 6 Unpublished artist's text, *c) is for colour*, 19 September 2018, unpaginated.
- 7 Unpublished artist's text, *c) is for colour*.
- 8 Danica Chappell, email to the author, 5 October 2018.
- 9 Cited by Anne O'Hehir in 'Fellow Travellers', *Photofile*, no. 100, December 2017, p. 92.
- 10 Anne O'Hehir in 'Fellow Travellers', p. 92.
- 11 For example, *Chromogenic Analogue Darkroom: 'Expressive Darkroom'*, is the title of an unpublished diagram, dated 11 July 2018 Chappell drew to describe her methods relating to colour.

## List of works

*Thickness of Time No. 1* 2018  
chromogenic photograph  
118.5 x 84 cm

*Thickness of Time No. 2* 2018  
chromogenic photograph  
169.5 x 128 cm

*Thickness of Time No. 5* 2018  
chromogenic photograph  
162.5 x 128 cm

*Thickness of Time No. 7* 2018  
chromogenic photograph, steel  
4 parts, 350 x 200 cm (overall)

*Thickness of Time No. 8* 2018  
chromogenic photograph  
2 parts, 128 x 170 cm (overall)

*Thickness of Time No. 9* 2018  
chromogenic photograph  
115 x 40 x 40 cm

## Artist acknowledgements

Danica Chappell acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the custodians of the land on which Heide Museum of Modern Art stands, paying respect to their Elders past and present.

*Thickness of Time* is part of an ongoing project supported by an Australia Council Arts Project for Individuals grant. This exhibition was also made possible with the assistance of Colour Factory, with thanks to Phill, Gary and Shane.

Many thanks to Sue Cramer for her enthusiastic engagement throughout the development of the exhibition and her perceptive essay 'Everything has its Time'. I am grateful also to have had the opportunity to work with the dynamic features of the Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer Project Gallery. Thank you to Bernadette Alibrando for her Art Talk and astute observations on the expressive darkroom, Julia Powles and the Heide team for problem-solving a smooth installation, Heide volunteers and guides for visiting the darkroom, Sabine Hartman and Nina Schönig for assisting my research at the Bauhaus Archiv, and to Ryan Ward at United Measures and John Kyrlylenko Laundromat for fabrication.

Immeasurable thanks also to Damian Morgan for his unwavering encouragement.



## Curator acknowledgements

Sue Cramer would like to thank Danica Chappell for her dedication to this project, and for her creation of such inspiring new works.

## Biography

Danica Chappell was born in 1972 in Ballarat, Victoria and is now based in Melbourne. She studied at the Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne graduating in 2005 with a Master of Fine Arts (by Research) and in 2012 with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours). Selected solo exhibitions include *That's Our Shadow On The Moon*, CAVES, Melbourne, 2015; *Nudge Into Form*, Walker Street Gallery, Melbourne; *Adjoining Plane*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, all 2014; *Double Dark*, Rubicon ARI, Melbourne in 2013; *Sight Line*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne; 2011; *Rest (A Work in Progress)*, Pavilion, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, Edinburgh, 2009; *Two Tin Cans And A Piece of String*, BUS Projects, Melbourne, 2008; and *Crop & Fringe*, De Aanschouw, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2007.

Selected group exhibitions include *2018 Bowness Photography Prize* (finalist), Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; Melbourne Art Fair (with Bartley + Company Art); *Runes: Photography and Decipherment*, Center for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; *This Wild Song*, Australian High Commission, Singapore; *Antipodean Emanations: Cameraless Photographs from Australia and New Zealand*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, all in 2018; *Materialist Photographs*, Jarvis Dooney, Berlin, Germany; *Curtain Call*, Stills Gallery, Sydney; Kunstraum Neukölln, Art Spaces Neukölln, Berlin; *An Elegy to Apertures*, Center for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, all 2017; *New Matter: Recent Forms of Photography*, Art Gallery New South Wales, Sydney; *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand; *Contemporary Cameraless Photography*, Bartley + Company Art, Wellington, New Zealand; *Double Agent*, Long Division Gallery, School House Studios, Melbourne, all 2016; *Cutting Edge: 21st Century Photography*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; *The Alchemists*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; *Kaleidorama*, Stills Gallery, Sydney, all 2015; *Private Sphere and Understanding Spaces*, Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany, both in 2011; and *Fork*, Foundation B.A.D.; *International Artists Exhibit*, Duende, both Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2007.

Chappell attended the Summer School at the Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany in 2011, and undertook research in the Bauhaus Archive, Berlin in 2017. She has had residencies at the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, Scotland; Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum & Arts Centre, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, Scotland in 2009, and at Foundation B.A.D, Rotterdam, Netherlands in 2006–7. She has been a finalist in the William and Winifred Bowness Photography award in 2007, 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2018. Chappell's work is included in the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; Artbank, Melbourne and in private collections in Australia and Europe.



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Curated by Sue Cramer

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All images:  
Installation view  
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This exhibition has been supported by the Bequest of Erica McGilchrist, an artist and activist who advanced the standing of women's art throughout her lifetime.

Heide Museum of Modern Art acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the land upon which Heide stands, paying respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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