

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Beauty and innovation meet at water's edge

Meghann Riepenhoff makes such strikingly attractive abstract works that they scare me. They scare me the way conversations with pretty people do: You're trying to focus on what is being said but, for obvious reasons, ardent looking can get in the way.

Riepenhoff's exhibition, "Littoral Drift," at San Francisco Camerawork (through Feb. 3) is grandly conceived,

Littoral Drift: Meghann Riepenhoff: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Feb. 3. San Francisco Camerawork, 1011 Market St., S.F. (415) 487-1011. www.sfcamerawork.org.

conceptually solid and photographically experimental. To reach that conclusion, one has to look past its cosmetic at-

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Meghann Riepenhoff combines cyanotype sheets into an enormous 18-foot-wide image in this work from the exhibition "Littoral Drift."

Meghann Riepenhoff



Meghann Riepenhoff images

Meghann Riepenhoff's "Littoral Drift #50 (Mono Lake, Mono County, CA 07.05.14, Four Waves, Poured)."

Photos from the leading edge

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tractions.

The most engaging pieces are large in scale — certainly for photo works — ranging to 18 feet wide. Bold contrasts of the deepest midnight blues, crepuscular golds and foamy whites churn and cascade across the picture plane, or break and crash like king-tide waves.

The reference to the sea is not coincidental. Riepenhoff makes these works at the water's edge, where sand and rocks, the tide's ebb and flow, even the chemistry of the saltwater are all elements of their making. As she reveals in the excellent small catalog that accompanies the show, homemade cyanotype solutions — the stuff blueprints are

made of — are painted on large sheets of heavy paper, then directly exposed to the sun, beach and waves.

The resulting cameraless images, or photograms, relate to a broad art history: to William Henry Fox Talbot's crudely alluring "photogenic drawing" experiments at the very beginning of photography; to cyanotype tracings of ferns and algae by one of the medium's founding women, Anna Atkins; to the early 1970s work of Michelle Stuart, who impressed and rubbed sheets of drawing paper and tiles of clay with natural materials, the better to link an image of nature with its natural source.

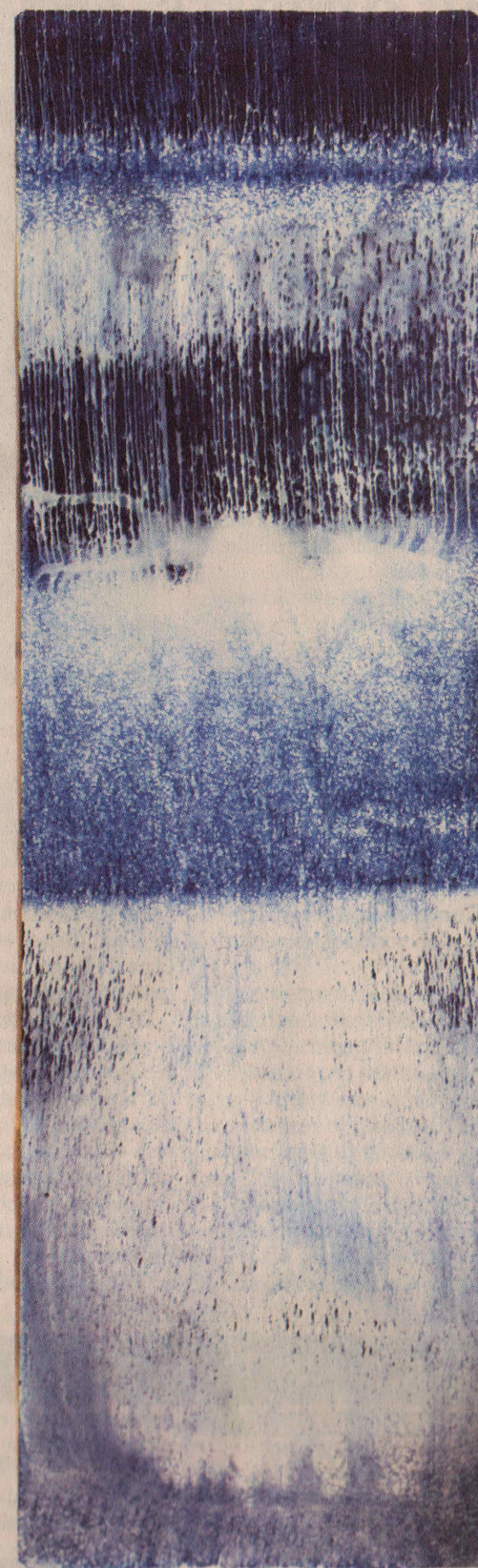
Riepenhoff's process doesn't end with a pic-

ture, as finished as these works may appear to be. Because the sensitized sheets are not chemically fixed, the action of light has a subtle but continuing effect on them. In bright light, they will darken, only to recover when no longer exposed. A large book of bound sheets lies open at the center of the gallery, below a bright skylight. As with the works on the wall, different parts of the book's pages have been painted with varying components of the two-solution cyanotype formula. Over the course of the exhibition, as the pages are turned by gallery attendants, the book will change and grow in complexity and color. Other works are hung near the gallery windows, where the action

of the sunlight will be most apparent.

Far from mere science projects — and in spite of their visual seductiveness — the book and the photograph here lose their status as trustworthy metaphors. What they show us is not what they are about. They deal with a different kind of fact, more mutable yet more authentic: a littoral edge drifting between land and sea, but neither one nor the other; an unstable place between fixed and fading, constant yet subject to continual revision.

Charles Desmarais is *The San Francisco Chronicle's* art critic. E-mail: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: [Artguy1](https://twitter.com/Artguy1)



This cyanotype from Riepenhoff's "Littoral Drift" exhibition measures 12 feet by 42 inches.