

ART SY

# Why Contemporary Photographers Are Rejecting the Camera

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Fabiola Menchelli, *Triangle*, 2025. Courtesy of Marshall Gallery.



Alison Rossiter  
*Expired 1919*, 2023  
Yossi Milo Gallery

Throughout the 18th century, scientists experimented with light-sensitive materials in order to reproduce patterns and images from the real world. German physicist Johann Heinrich Schulze temporarily imprinted the shapes of letters onto a glass bottle, thanks to an alchemical process involving silver nitrate, chalk, and the sun. English physicist Thomas Wedgwood applied silver nitrate to leather and paper and similarly failed to “fix” any permanent composition. Throughout such early attempts at photography, the focus was not on the camera, but on chemistry and permanence.

It's easy to forget about the medium's scientific origins and challenges, especially in the digital age. Yet a number of modern and contemporary photographers keep these historical experiments alive as they try their own hands at aesthetic alchemy. As the public's trust in photography as a replica of reality erodes due to AI and digital editing, these photographers emphasize the value of photography as a creative tool, rather than a

record. Following last fall's "Man Ray: When Objects Dream" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a slew of new exhibitions are popping up focusing on the enduring popularity of camera-less photography.

"Artists who work in camera-less modes are often drawn to the medium's ability to foreground process and materiality," Natasha Egan, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, told Artsy. "By removing or altering the camera, they engage photography at its most elemental—light, time, surface—while also questioning ideas of authorship, representation, and control."

The museum's current show, "MoCP at Fifty: Collecting Through the Decades," on view through May 16th, features photograms by historical artist Bertha E. Jaques, who placed botanical specimens on light-sensitive paper, "reflecting an interest in the direct, indexical trace of the natural world and the ability of light to register form without the mediation of a camera," Egan said.

## Photographers embrace democracy of the medium

Other artists experiment with surprising materials when creating their photographic works. Alison Rossiter, who recently closed her solo show "Semblance" at Yossi Milo Gallery, celebrates expired photo paper throughout her practice. After years of working in traditional black-and-white photography, she started making photograms in 1984, using domestic cleaning product bottles. In 2003, she began "drawing" with pen lights on photo paper.



Alison Rossiter  
*E. Crumiere, Ardex, manufactured ca. 1930s, processed 2023, 2025*  
Yossi Milo Gallery

Rossiter's practice took a significant turn in 2007, when she experimented with Eastman Kodak Kodabromide E3 photo paper, which had a use-by date of 1946. "The results were so startling that I began a relentless search for old photographic papers to see what time had done to these light-sensitive materials," she said.

Rossiter now collects and processes photographic papers from every decade of the twentieth century. She mounts these papers in frames and further honors them as she researches what happened at the moments of their production and expiration. Rossiter's practice has allowed her to "stumble into both abstract photography and the history of photographic industrial production," she said. "My unique prints are abstract records of time," she said.