

---

## This Photographer Finds Beauty in Accidental Abstractions on Expired Photo Paper

In her work — championed by New York's Yossi Milo Gallery — Alison Rossiter turns trash into treasure.

*by Hilarie M. Sheets | April 5, 2020*

The 21st-century rise of digital photography has had people dismantling their darkrooms and getting rid of obsolete printing materials, including light-sensitive paper. But one photographer's trash is another's treasure. Since 2007, Alison Rossiter has compulsively collected packages of expired papers, predominantly on eBay, and revealed the accidental

compositions wrought on them by atmospheric pollution, mold, fingerprints and stains.

Some of her camera-less results are included in "[Substance of Density 1918–1948](#)" on view by appointment only at [Yossi Milo Gallery](#), in New York's Chelsea (and slated to open to the public when restrictions stemming from the health crisis are lifted). Many of these astonishingly beautiful abstractions, in a nuanced range of tones from white to black, call to mind paintings by such artists as Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Sean Scully. For this show, Rossiter has used papers dating to the end of World War I through World War II and on to the creation of Israel as an independent state. In her poetic conceptualization, as she sees it, something of this particular time in history has left its shadow on these papers. The works in the show are accompanied by a time line of events that happened during these years, which, Rossiter suggests, "is enough to place you in those decades, and then you can bring your own imagination."

The exhibition is part of Rossiter's ongoing project to develop sheets from some 2,000 packages of paper she's collected, dating to the 1890s through the 20th century. Examples from the earliest two decades were recently displayed at, and acquired by, the New York Public Library, which is co-publishing them this spring with the gallery and Radius Books in the monograph *Compendium 1898–1919*. Radius also published her first compilation from the project, *Expired Paper*, which *Aperture* named as one of the 10 best photo books of 2017.

For some of the pieces she made using the 1930s Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours paper — including Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1930s, processed 2020 — Rossiter dipped only the lower section in developer, creating the suggestion of a horizon line.

"Alison collects the discarded, going back into history, and celebrates the physicality of her materials," says Yossi Milo, the gallery's eponymous founder, noting that her photographs are sought out by collectors of all stripes, as well as by curators from such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art, in New York; the National Gallery, in Washington, D.C.; and the Art Institute of Chicago. "Each of her unique works is a record and witness of the wear and tear of time."

Rossiter, who was born in Mississippi in 1953 and studied photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology, discovered the potential of expired papers by chance 13 years ago. Buying old film online for photograms she was making, she received a box of paper from 1946 thrown in with her shipment. As a test, she ran a sheet from the center of the stack through darkroom chemicals. "If it was a good paper, it would

turn out to be a white sheet at the end, meaning there was no exposure,” Rossiter says. Instead, because of the sheet’s deteriorating emulsion, the process produced what looked like graphite rubbed over a rough surface. It had the ethereal quality of a Vija Celmins drawing of a night sky, and for Rossiter, it was a like a bolt of lightning.

“Alison collects the discarded, going back into history, and celebrates the physicality of her materials.”

“From what I saw, my hunch was that failure of the emulsion could be happening in every single package of old paper,” says Rossiter, who had spent two years volunteering in the Met’s photography conservation department. She has since

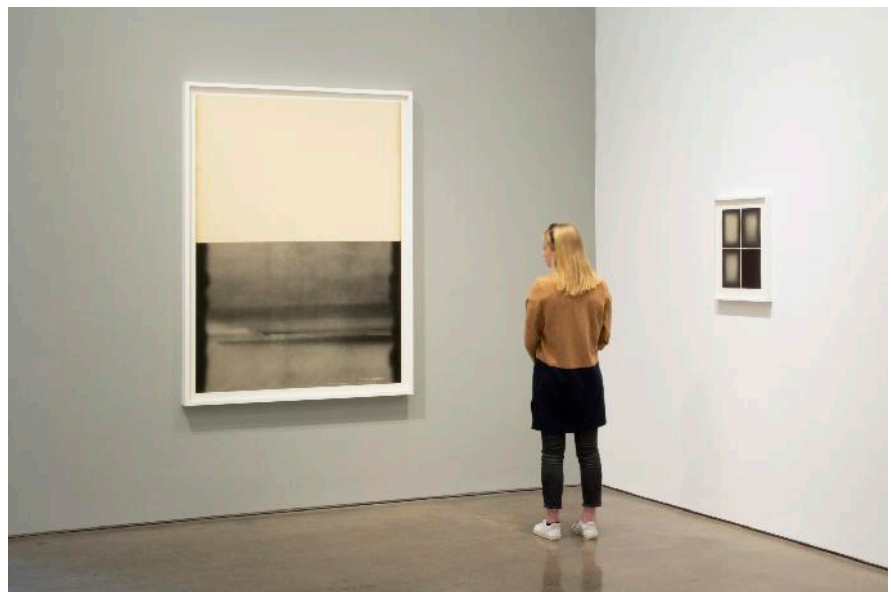
dedicated her darkroom practice to uncovering the small miracles embedded in these materials, while always leaving some paper in each package to keep it “alive,” as she puts it, for future study by conservators. “It’s a history of the industry,” she says.

*Density 1922* (2019) — titled, like all the works in the show, with the expiration date on the package of paper used — consists of a large off-white and a smaller black sheet positioned next to each other, the former containing a tilted rectangle of a brighter white the size of the black sheet. The work resulted from Rossiter’s observation in the dark room that the smaller sheet, a test print that had lain at an angle for almost a century on the stack of paper, had created an image on the top sheet akin to Kazimir Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918). She put the larger sheet in fixer, to maintain the whites, and developed the test print, which came out black because of the air that had seeped into the package over time.

For another grouping — which used papers from 1919 to 1923, the early years of the Bauhaus — Rossiter assembled a geometric patchwork of five rectangles in shades of black and white. “It looks like it could have been somebody’s homework project at the Bauhaus,” she says, noting the sooty smudges on one sheet. “Somebody took the thing out of the package and put it back for some reason. I come along, and it’s like forensic fingerprinting. It’s a communion of sorts, photographer to photographer, printer to printer.”

Rossiter doesn’t typically set out to echo modern and contemporary artists, but she likes the dialogue that often occurs organically. She remembers being inspired by a show at Matthew Marks of Ellsworth Kelly’s small black-and-white paper works from the 1950s. “I thought, this is exactly what I’m seeing in my papers,” she says. “Ellsworth Kelly has given me permission to put my little prints together and call that a piece of art.”

Although she considers most of her works to be found images and puts the whole sheet used for each in either developer or fixer, Rossiter



makes deliberate marks on some, especially when the paper is particularly special. Several pieces in the show are made from a wide roll of 1930s Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours, which was designed to look like velvet. The paper was passed down from one Belgian photographer to another, who saw Rossiter's work and contacted her with a gift of half his roll.

For two 68-by-53-inch works, Rossiter wet the whole sheet with water but dipped just the lower sections in developer, thus creating implied horizon lines. In each, the bare creamy paper of the upper section reads as sky while the inky washes streaking across the lower half suggest an ethereal landscape at dusk. Those streaks reveal that the paper was unfurled and briefly exposed to daylight at some point in its history.

“Because I know the rarity of the paper and the fact that a man in Belgium sent it to me because he liked what I was doing with papers, this is hugely thrilling,” Rossiter says of the story embedded in these pieces. “It is the most exciting thing that has ever happened in this entire project for me.”



<https://www.1stdibs.com/introspective-magazine/alison-rossiter/>