

Alison Rossiter, a 68-year-old American, is a photographer. But she doesn't use a camera; she doesn't use a lens; she doesn't shoot landscapes or portraits. She does not view photography as a representation of the world and does not submit to the rules of the camera. Since the age of 17, she has chosen to work inside the darkroom, on the interaction between light and photosensitive paper (for example with a light pencil). But, with the growing predominance of digital photography, it had become increasingly difficult for her to find suitable papers for her work. So Alison Rossiter started buying lots of photosensitive papers on eBay.

In 2007, within one of these acquisitions, she received a package of photo paper with a long past expiration date of 1946. Any typical photographer would have thrown the package in the trash. More curious and more daring than average (and probably also because of her training, which was more technical than artistic, and hence her attention focused on the materiality of photography and photographic material itself), Alison Rossiter decided to use this expired, presumed "dead" paper. But, instead of "taking a photo," that is, drawing a negative image on this paper, she simply placed the paper directly in the developer tray and in the fixer bath, nothing else. To her surprise, abstract shapes then appeared on the paper: geometric designs due to the temporal degradation of silver salts and gelatin, to ambient humidity, to mold and to the light having penetrated inside the package which was not sealed completely.

After this fascinating discovery of a latent image, Alison Rossiter began to purchase hundreds of packages of black and white photosensitive paper of various brands. The oldest had expired in 1898, more than a century ago. She devised a precise protocol to be followed in the darkroom, without ever "taking a photo": the results of this well-defined process have always been unpredictable.

This oversized, beautifully printed book features the Compendium Series, thirteen life-size assemblages of the earliest papers on which Alison Rossiter worked, papers that "expired" between 1898 ("Nepera Chemical Company, Velox Carbon, May 12, 1898") and 1919 ("Eastman Kodak Company, AZO, October 1, 1919"), between, as the handwritten frontispiece points out, the discovery of radium by the Curies and the Conference of Versailles. Each Compendium, all produced in 2018, initially appears on a page that unfolds, bringing out these ochre, brown, yellow tones, sometimes iridescent, sometimes moiré, sometimes marbled, then a detail is enlarged on the following double page: we dive into the material, into the texture of the paper. The Compendium Series is in the permanent collection of the New York Public Library (which co-published the book); also featured are assembly diagrams and packaging, the only brightly colored elements, as well as a "timeline."

This book follows *Expired Paper* from the same publishers in 2017, a more complete book on her work ([my review in Portuguese](#)). In 2020, Alison Rossiter had an [exhibition](#) at the New York gallery [Yossi Milo](#).

At first glance, Alison Rossiter's work seems magical, a kind of alchemical work: a transformation of matter, the appearance of an image in the depths of chemical paper unrelated to visual reality. We can think of the works of other "magician" photographers, such as [Pierre Cordier](#) and his "chemigrams," or [Nino Migliori](#) and his "[oxidations](#)." But Rossiter's work is also an archeology, recovering vestiges of the past, resuscitating a submerged history, doing forensic work on the history of paper, establishing a connection with the people who, handling this same paper fifty years ago, left their mark there.

In this sense, it is, from my point of view, first of all a work on time and on death. In the title of each work, the first date is precisely that of the paper's death ("expiration"), the second is that of its resurrection, the moment when the artist brings the expired paper back to life. It is not an anachronistic work; it is a work against time, against the inevitable degradation, that of paper and that of man, therefore against death.

It is also, of course, a reflection around the death of photography, because for her (and many others) the advent of digital photography represents the death of classic, analog photography, that of the negative and of the dark room, that of silver salts and chemicals. Digital photography is no longer the interaction of light with the variables of sensitive paper, but merely an electronic process, without aura, without magic. In a small book evoking the work of Alison Rossiter, entitled *The Death of Photography*, [Darius Himes](#)—who was one of the founders of Radius Books, the publishing house which published this book—concluded his text thus: "Perhaps the photography we have known will return to its beginnings: a rare, magical craft clung to by a cluster of devoted men and women who hover between the arts and sciences."

For Alison Rossiter, [seen in Arles](#) and then [interviewed](#), the process is more important than the subject of the photograph: what matters is not what the photograph shows, but how the photograph is produced. And, in her extreme case, the photograph depicts nothing; it is an image of nothing, a material, physical testimony of its creation alone. It's not the photograph of something; it's a thing in itself. She is concerned not with the representation of the world, but with the essence of photography, with its immanence. It is an approach contrary to almost all the theory of photography (apart from Vilém Flusser's *Philosophy of Photography*), denying the theory of the index by Rosalind Krauss and Philippe Dubois, having nothing to do with Roland Barthes' vision of photography. And, worse still, there is no author, no artist, no photographer, just a facilitator: the images make themselves. The death of the author.