



Donna Cameron

Donna Cameron on Paper

Direct film production presents a unique opportunity for close examination of materials, to move beyond surface detail by magnifying them and filtering light through their forms, in search of some essential quality of being. New York-based filmmaker Donna Cameron has engaged in this pursuit using a method she devised, “cinematic paper emulsion,” which she patented in 2001. On photographs and other paper-based materials, she marks areas that are equal in width to a piece of 16mm film. She then lays clear sticky 16mm editing tape over the marked-out portions of the images and peels them off. Excess paper on the sides of the tape is trimmed off and the strips are then printed onto film.¹

Cameron discovered the technique when she decided to attend a university screenwriting course. She recalls:

My instructor did not share my views of what made a good film script, and took to publicly humiliating me by harping loudly on its shortcomings (“You’ll never make a film with that script!”). For a final project, I ripped that script into 16mm size shreds and then projected each one through a Bell and Howell 1920s open wind projector (which I still own). I called my project *A Film Made with a Script*. Of course, *A Film Made with a Script* had a scrappy running time. But—amazingly—in those tiny intervals of screen time I SAW the gesture of TREENESS. I was surprised by those flashes of fibrous light.²

Another breakthrough came when she was printing photos and accidentally left one in its fix bath. When she returned some days later, she found the fixer had gone and that the dried image, peeled away from its paper base, had adhered to the plastic fix pan.

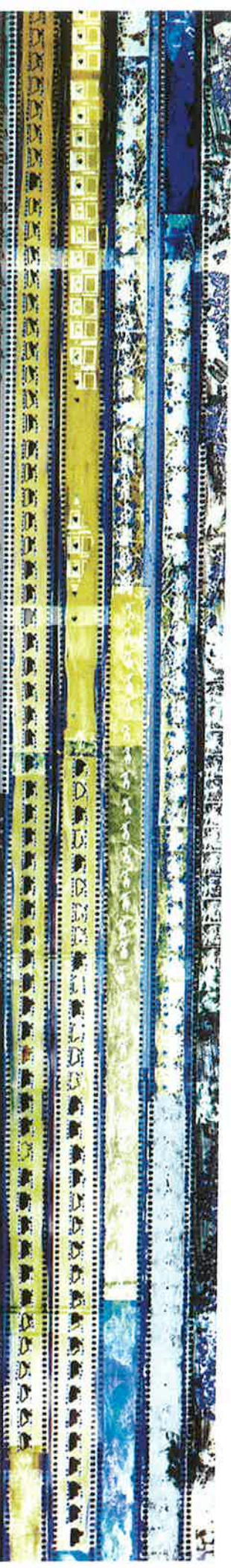
One of her earliest cinematic paper emulsion works is the silent 16mm film *News* (1979), which was made with a variety of art papers and *Newsweek* magazine. Using a stencil, Cameron exploited the true-life aspect ratio of the 16mm frame as a measure and a guide for “lifting” information from the magazine. For example, the title is taken from the footer on every page; “News” is all that fits into the 16mm frame. Cameron writes,

This consistent measuring device holds the disparate materials of the film to one thematic vision. The 16mm stencil provides a gauge edit—35mm or 8mm stencils would never produce the same film. And it’s the stencil that fragments the existing world of the papers, the paper elements are not fractured and broken to fit onto the 16mm gauge. This premise of gauge and viewpoint is consistent in all of my work. The film itself is seeing the world. You are seeing the world the film sees.³

Within the borders of the 16mm film frame, viewers see a date—January 1, 1979—and a few other words, plus some comic book images. Mostly, though, the film displays abstract patterns of pixels from printing and paper fibers. It also contains some drawn-on-film images.

In films such as *New Moon* (1982), *Tyger Tyger* (1990), and *NYC/Joshua Tree* (1991), Cameron also employs photocopying, her own live-action imagery, found footage, ink animation on paper, filtered pigment wash (a combination of pigment, paper pulp, and





liquid), and other techniques.⁴ In 1993, she collaborated with filmmaker Shirley Clarke to create the experimental biographical *Shirley Clarke in our Time*. The seventy-minute film incorporates the cinematic paper emulsion technique into home movies and popular-film footage from when Clarke was growing up.

Cameron sees the cinematic paper emulsion process as part of her work as a photographer. She contends, “the physical sphere manifested in the cycle of my films begins and ends with the photograph. I create special photographs with the idea of making filmstrips from them. The process of photography dictates how to shoot each picture element of the shot. Each still frame is like a DNA structure, which, composited together, provides material for the film frame.”⁵ Her stated goal is to explore “. . . the relationship of image to the frame, and the function of the frame within the framework of inter-media.”⁶ Cameron explores natural objects in close proximity, asking her audiences to see her photographic images in unconventional ways.

Her approach reflects her interest in the structures and origins of images projected on the screen. She writes,

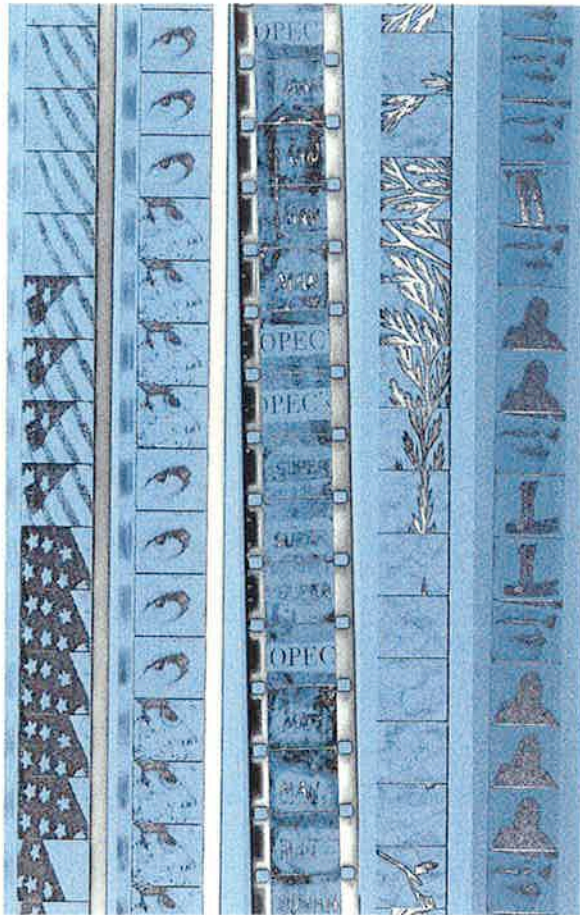
Paper and pigments pass TO THE SCREEN through a photographic membrane. Paper, any paper—from the lowliest generic newsprint to the highest-grade exotic import—contains in its anatomy the history of its origin: the tree, the plant form. On the screen, luminous light embryos grow into dancing flora; gritty fibers speak eloquently of the life of the tree or the grasses from whence they came. The film membrane acts like a sieve, through which light flows, in lush color and with sensual textures.⁷

Maureen Furniss

A Companion Guide to Animation

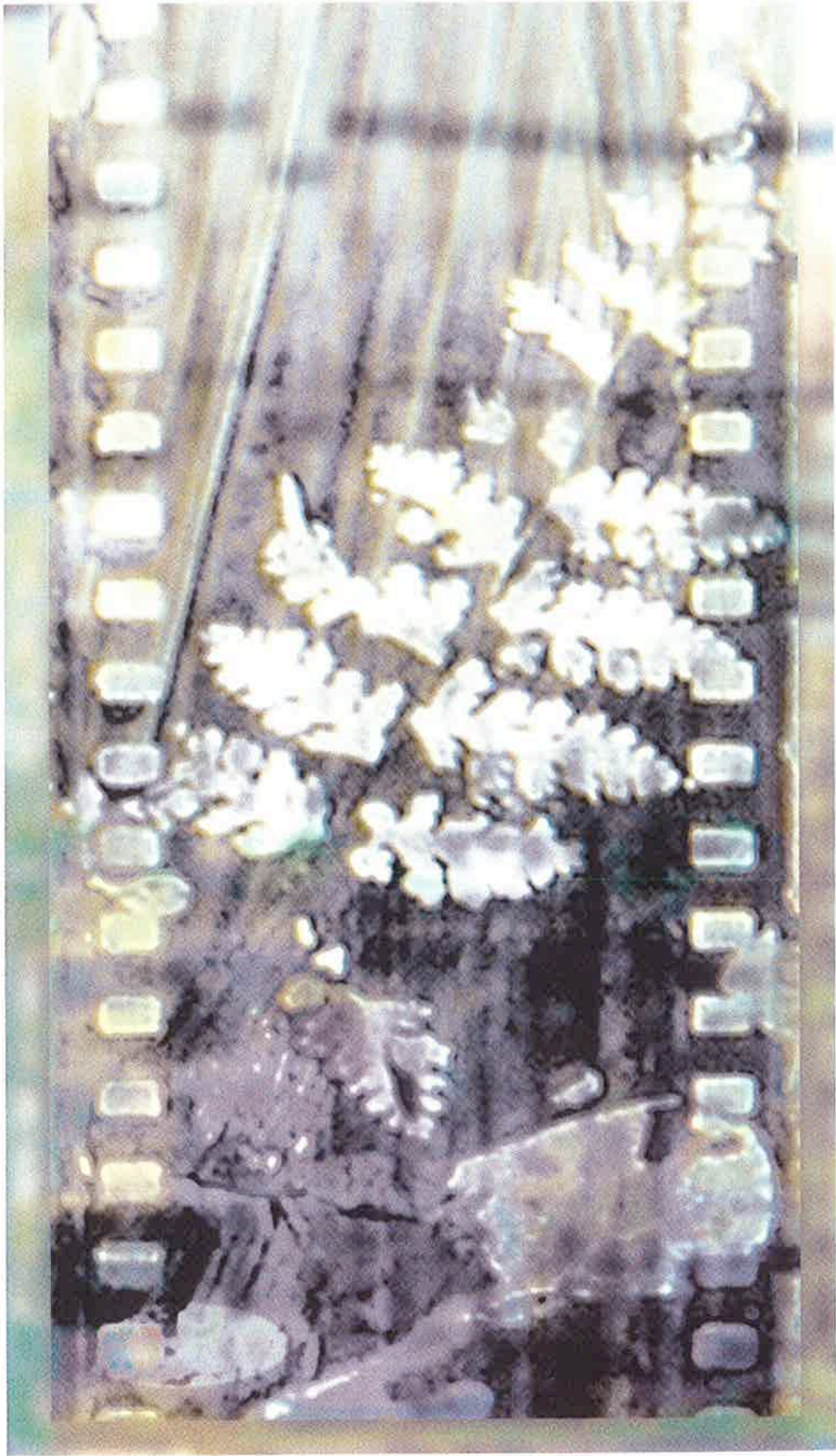
London: Laurence King Publishing, Ltd., 2008

- i Mike Kuchar, *Donna Cameron at Work*, video distributed by The Museum of Modern Art, Circulating Film and Video Library, New York.
- ii Donna Cameron, “Fine Paper Emulsion Painting as Film Object Image: Cinematic Paper Emulsion,” 1989, revised in 2002, courtesy of the artist.
- iii Donna Cameron, email to the author, 6 August 2003.
- iv Cameron defines filtered pigment wash: “the pigment is pressed through sieves above the clear leader, together with miniscule paper pulp, and liquid (water or oil) is simultaneously poured over it. This leaves an interesting impression of the moving liquid as it reaches the film through the sieve and particles of color and paper. The heavier particles stick in place, gravity claims the lighter, less viscous fluid and leaves rivulet imprints as it makes its passage down, toward the earth.” Cameron, email to the author, 7 August 2003.
- v Donna Cameron, “Fine Paper Emulsion Painting as Film Object Image.”
- vi Donna Cameron, “Narrative Resume.” Courtesy of the artist.
- vii Donna Cameron, “Fine Paper Emulsion Painting as Film Object Image.”



News

©1979



Silver Fade, Northfield, Illinois

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Donna, here, has invented her own film stock. This is the kind of thing that needs to be appreciated for what it is. When you can't afford Kodak's inflated prices, what could be more obnoxious than coming up with your own film stock? We should all come up with our own film stock and show Kodak a competitive market soon.

GEORGE KUCHAR, FILM MAKER

For the past (30) years Cameron has been working in paper emulsion...The result is a series of vibrant sensual films reprocessing such familiar imagery as the Brooklyn Bridge or paper money...

KEVIN THOMAS, LOS ANGELES TIMES

Not having the resources to make films didn't stop Donna Cameron—she just invented a new way of doing them.

TONY LUCIA, READING EAGLE

Stills from "Donna Cameron at Work" by Mike Kuchar, 1991
courtesy The Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film and Video Library,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

*"Infinity in a grain of sand,
Eternity in an hour..."*
WILLIAM BLAKE

(FINE PAPER EMULSION PAINTING with FILM)

CINEMATIC PAPER EMULSION

People frequently ask me how I make my paper emulsion films. Realistically speaking, I don't know how. I believe that the living artist is a both a worker and a finely tuned instrument through which art, or poetic thinking, gains entrance into the physical world. An artist can improve the self, perfecting skills and strengthening conscience, creating the best possible conditions for the birth of art. My initial goal is to show up for work each day.

An emulsion, by literary and scientific definition, is a liquid suspension formed and stabilized by an emulsifier (agent). In traditional photography, silver salt or a mixture of silver halides emulsified in a gel or coating on acetate, paper, metal, which can be worked to adhere to any surface, including stone, produces a light-sensitive layer, coating or "emulsion".

The paper emulsion is a fragile membrane bearing a latent image: the projected film. This fibrous carnage of dead trees facilitates the carrying of an evolving light creature in a capsule of earth time.

In my paper emulsion there is no silver gel. It is fashioned from paper fiber, pulp, pigments, dyes, printed matter. It is suspended in an adhesive (sometimes glue, sometimes water, sometimes a mystery chemistry, in which it disintegrates) and is always formed by my hands. It is washed in a light saline bath and then left to calcify in the air. During the processing of a commercially manufactured emulsion, a chemical reaction takes place. In my film art the object, the aqueous film emulsion hardens when left to the air, changing states. This state change produces an object image- the paper emulsion.

The visuals in the cycle of my films begin and end with the photograph. I first create photographs with the idea of making filmstrips from them. The process of my photography determines picture composition. Each frame is composed to work both individually and as part of a complex chain, like a DNA structure, which when composited becomes the single film frame. Smaller graphic elements blend to produce the frames seen during projection. I also paint—not ON film, but WITH film. I paint with film to create intermittent frames that do not physically exist, but which linger in the third eye. These frames appear via the machinery of the cinema, which propels the phenomenon known to science as "persistence of vision".

It is a way of seeing. I really do see this way. When I look at something, I see lengths of field. Horizontal planes don't naturally draw me into a picture. Although I have been educated to "read" an image using the Italian Renaissance dictate of spatial perception, or 3-point perspective, it is, for me, often an acquired rather than a natural way of seeing. Perhaps this is surrealism; maybe it's a dyslexic anomaly. My visual progress is nonetheless poised on a vertical projection which is the result of a displaced stereopticon note in my horizontal line of vision. As a student, I tried to consciously apply this "seeing off center" to my color studies, my drawings, my writing and my films. I began to vertically lay out threads of film, producing graphics on them which





would be read the “right way” for me. To intuit rhythms and cut them into film loops, not always mathematically became an agenda, apparitions. I was intrigued by the loom-like potential of the celluloid replicates which landed crisscross on my cutting room floor. It echoed an American indigenous peoples’ art of notation. Specifically, the reference in my mind was to North American southwest Navajo and Hopi weavings, which have their own graphic language of landscape, space color and form. I felt drawn to this, possibly echoing my own Native American genealogy on my paternal grandmother’s side. Here it was before me- this odd a-synchronization of left-right patterning and threading on an imaginary loom. It was a driving force in my creative process. On the screen, the sensual dance of the paper fibers lured me to further code my environment. This drive to translate my field of vision still haunts me. I am restless, on the edge of my own mind, through all the fields of view of my life.

Paper films might be thought of as light fossils, impressed in a gyro sphere, which the photographic frame paintings reproduced in this book imprint, with selective form. The plane of the film screen is set in the axis of each, a slice of the original sphere, like a cartographic diagram of the globe. They are rendered to be projected into the mind’s void, the imagination. A film critic once remarked to me that my films happened only in the black void of the frame lines of my films. His remark intrigued me because my original films have no frame lines at all, they are not only camera less, they are frameless and occupy 360 degrees in space, like all sculpture. As the film on its reel unwinds in the projector, a spiral course is implied. A sphere is encountered, a new world begins. The paper pulp & fibers keep the gesture of the ‘tree’ and all ‘tree ness’ is sensed. Just as tree branches in a living tree twist, turn, gyrate in the path of a real wind, so the paper film emulsion fibers twist and gyrate from the horizon of their root, which is the implied but nonexistent frame line, and breathe in the light and wind of the projector. It’s the imprint of planet earth, the immortal generic “tree”. The eye sees, the brain finds code in the rapid flow of texture. A memory is sparked, screened.

As a filmmaker I work directly into the paper. A NY curator noted that my paper films were ‘all about the print, in their essence, formality, form and function’. The paper emulsion film is essentially an assemblage. I make the paper. I break it down. I reconstruct it in an adhesive, light sensitive form and lay it in film strips of a specific gauge. I optically print the new construction. In the 1970s & 1980s I step-printed the paper strips. More recently, I have had a lab contact print the original paper footage, which is purely reflective of the original. It’s now a flow of light through the paper emulsion print which will touch the retina of eye. All that I am becomes present. I know cinema in an instant, as a moment.

The images in this book are paper cinema paintings with a voice all their own. They are film composites projected and printed from original frames, by traditional and digital methods on paper, cloth, light boxes, found objects and stones. They exist in archival portfolio form, and are pulled in my studio in Brooklyn, NY and at Duggal Photo Labs in Manhattan. The cinematic paper emulsion film painting, like the screen films, are internationally exhibited and collected. The films are in the collection of and distributed by The Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film and Media Library, and in the Film and Media Archive, MoMA. They have been screened at MoMA and at the Whitney Museum, NY, The Art Institute of Chicago, The San Francisco Cinemateque, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France, and others, worldwide.

Donna Cameron

New York City

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Donna Cameron is one of the most significant new presences in non-narrative cinema, in cameraless cinema, in New York Independent cinema, in American avante-garde cinema, and in poetic meditative cinema. We are mightily enthusiastic about the extraordinary work of Donna Cameron, filmmaker.

LARRY KARDISH,
CURATOR AND DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS,
DEPT. OF FILM & MEDIA, MoMA