

FOTO **REVIEW**



BEGINNINGS

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From MANIFESTO, Pg. 38. Photograph by Nancy Olivier

FOTO **RE**

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EXPLORATION OF THE HIDDEN

ALINA CHIRILA
TEXT BY: LISA O'CONNELL



Alina Chirila is not a reader of manuals.

"I don't like them. It kills the impulse. You're done with it, before you even begin.

Born and raised in Romania, Chirila was in Grade 4 when the revolution came. There was, as she states, "change and not change." Economic conditions being what they were she wore her mother's uniform throughout her school years. "Communist. Non-communist. Same dress." She smiles some as she takes another bite of the meal we share. There is no bullshit or pretense about this woman, or her work. She is self-educated in photography and was not exposed to the artform as a child, "I had no camera until I could afford to get one".

As we chatted, I recalled the first time I saw her work. It was featured along with 50 others in a local festival. Not sure what to submit she deferred to supposedly more experienced male photographers. They chose a striking black and white of a staircase in shadow. It was technically strong but lacking in feeling and emotion. Ultimately, she found it "boring." This need to play, to explore, to just "do" led her to chemigrams.

Established in the 1950s by Belgian artist Pierre Cordier, chemigrams are created by forcing a chemical reaction between photographic paper and photographic chemistry. Simply put, you take light sensitive paper, put stuff on it and watch what happens. Chemigrams are an adventure, embarking on this path solidifies knowledge of darkroom materials and practice but critically it challenges the participant to create, push and play.

Resists are used to stop the development between the paper and chemistry. A resist can hold back the chemical effects of developer and fixer on black and white photo paper for a time. Paper put into developer that has been exposed to normal room light for varying periods of time will turn black, except where a resist blocks the chemical reaction. The parts of the paper protected by the resist continue to change color from the room light exposure, and suddenly there is the possibility of black, white, and colors in-between on normally monochrome paper. With a back and forth from developer to fixer or fixer to developer, the resist begins to dissolve, and with time this dissolution can be coaxed into creating beautiful, intricate patterns. There is no end to experimentation with this process.



"IT HAPPENS VERY FAST. EVERY TIME IT'S DIFFERENT.
EVERY TIME IT'S CHANGING. IT'S ALIVE."

Her favourite resists are organic, fatty oils. "They're harder to control and give unpredictable results." Chirila begins by considering how best she can alter the paper. "How best to abuse it? What I like best about this process is that you get to play. This is so important. There are so many protocols in everything else".

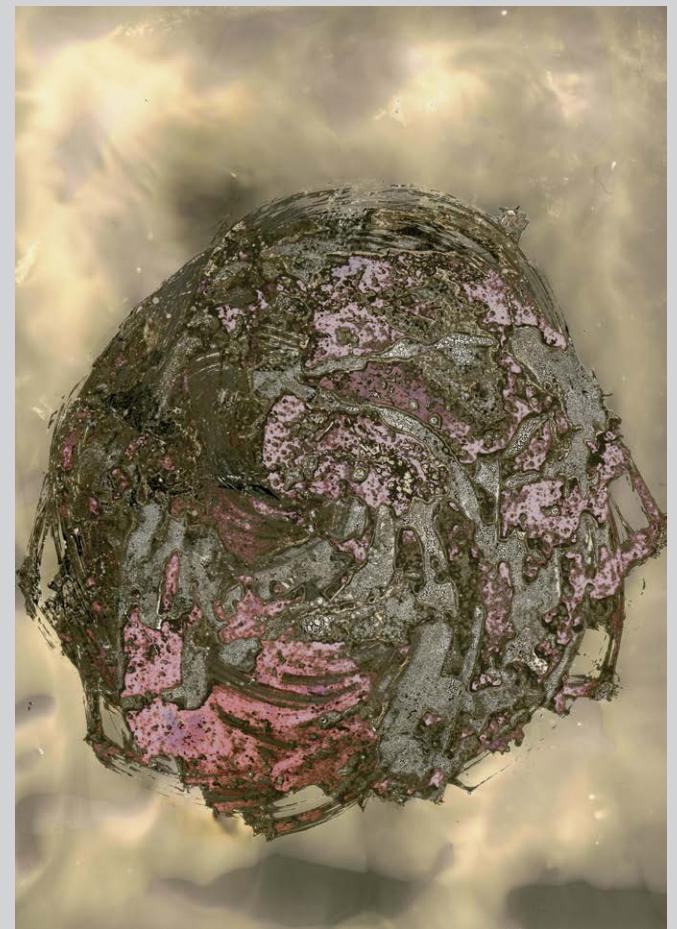
She delights that this process bends all the rules. "You contaminate – you do all the bad things and no one cares and you get something out of it." She says that what she likes about this process is that there are no mistakes. "Every mistake is part of the process – it's never the same twice – it's not about perfection."

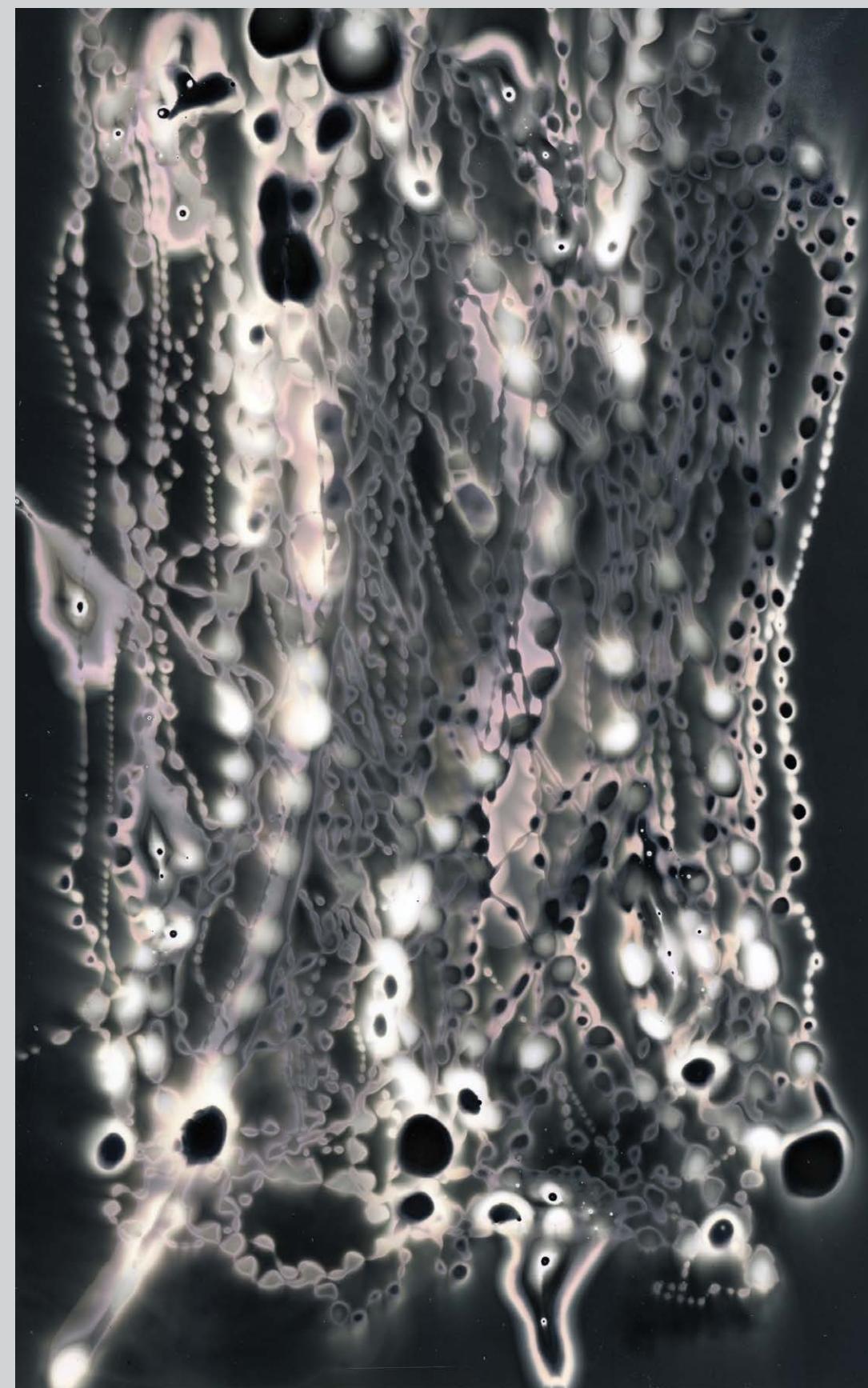
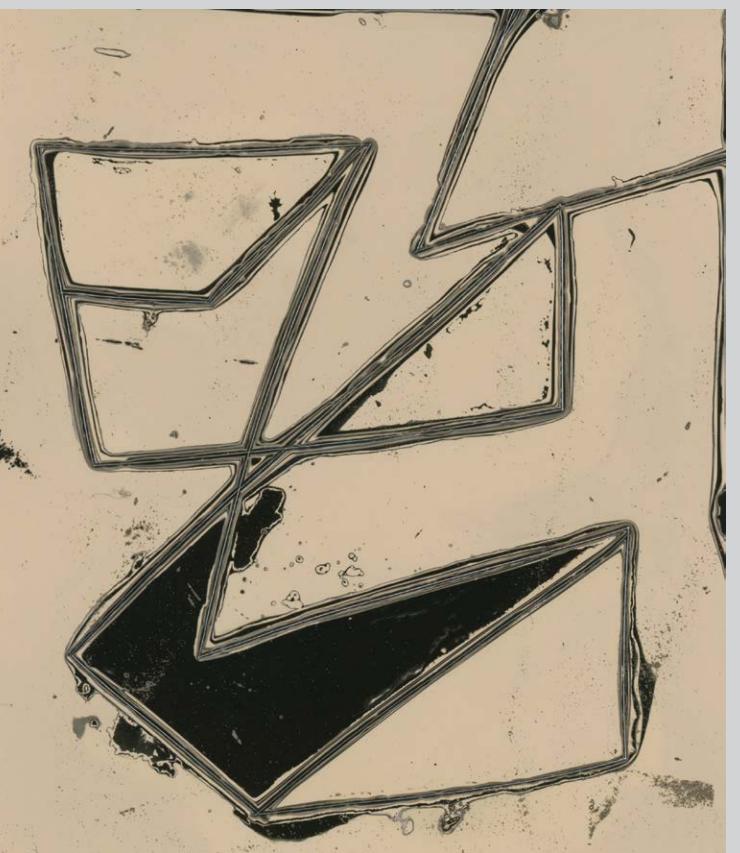
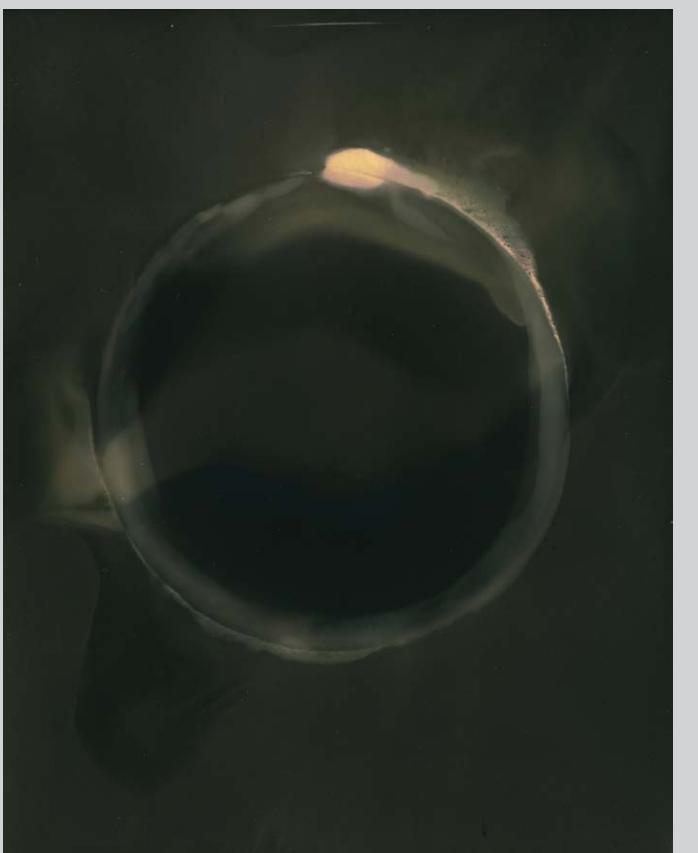
"First time I tried it, I went into my kitchen to see what would resist. I went into my kitchen to see what would work. Cooking oil, honey, a gift of homemade molasses from Appalachia. Anything organic. Then I went more complicated and I used older nail polish and lipsticks from the '50's. I wanted some cracks. I smeared the paper."

All this happens within her galley kitchen, two cats wielding their way along, as she balances two to three trays with stuff all around. She takes the paper from one bath to another. "It happens very fast. Every time it's different. Every time it's changing. It's alive."

Her favourite chemigram is one made with sorghum molasses. It's part of a series made with organic resists - oils, butters, honey and darkroom chemistry. As she explains, "The molasses disintegrated on the paper and created a living matter effect, it could be something from the depth of the sea or rain drops caught in the spiderweb. I wanted to make something very different than the other images I've created, sharp photographic prints, straight lines and cuts. I made very few decisions and left the substances to react and the molasses to melt slowly."

This process can take days and results in images that are unexpected and that she can't explain. "I can put cat food on it and it's still all good."





This feeds in to her general philosophies: Her academic training and day job as a therapist where she states “there is no absolute truth – there is only truth in the moment.” On inspiration: “I need to create the conditions to allow myself to have that curiosity, excitement and pleasure”. On the impulse to create: “It’s an internal state within myself and I need time to be with it. I need distance to think about it – days sometimes. It’s an immersive practice and I am never bored with it.”

Cats, trays and galley kitchen aside, what’s next? “I want to investigate new ways to do photography, tintypes, cyanotypes – I want to see what happens– in the moment.”

“No more stairs, huh?”, I ask.

She smiles and nods.



“EVERY MISTAKE IS PART OF THE PROCESS – IT’S NEVER THE SAME TWICE – IT’S NOT ABOUT PERFECTION”



{words worth books}

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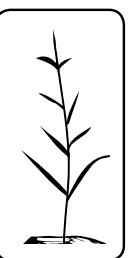
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