Jessica Wynne

By Elisabeth Biondi

Jessica Wynne, Bassam Fayad, Université Paris, 2019. All images courtesy the artist.
It is hard to imagine how one could turn chalkboard depictions of theoretical mathematics into a beautiful photographic project, but Jessica Wynne has done just that. The project was inspired by two circumstances: Wynne has two close friends who are mathematicians at the University of Chicago and whose work intrigued her. And on a trip to Jaipur, India – she is a photography professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology who takes her students on study trips – she and her students visited an Indian school where some of the classes were taught on a rooftop by teachers using chalkboards. She took pictures of those chalkboards, and once she got home she took a closer look at them. They intrigued her, reminding her of the formulas on the chalkboards of her mathematician friends. Her new series began to take shape, and for the next year and a half, Wynne will document the formulas, problems, and thought processes that men and women in various institutions worldwide scrawl on their chalkboards. The book, Do Not Erase, to be published in 2020 by Princeton University Press, will include 100 photographs of these chalkboards.

It may seem antiquated, but to this day, many mathematicians work through their ideas on these boards, returning to them as they work on solutions. The boards show a creative thought process, a narration of concepts and ideas that build over time – some time years – and a view into the world of pure thought. For Wynne, it is a secret language, both mysterious and beautiful, that reflects a quality of creativity not so very different from that of an artist.

Her photographs are documentary, in the sense that she has made straightforward images of an everyday object – chalkboards – whose subject matter is abstract thought, but the end result is a project wholly original in concept. Wynne photographs the boards straight on, in natural lighting, with a large-format camera, and her images can evoke the abstract paintings of Cy Twombly or Brice Marden. Just like handwriting, no two are alike. Some are complex and beautiful, others whimsical or starkly minimal. For me, they bring back memories of my early school years. I can hear the squeaky sound of chalk on the board and the sponge wiping it clean. Back then, I had to comprehend what was in front of me. Now, I can just admire the mysterious inscriptions.