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Roberto Alfano – A Matter of Light

📍 SPAZIOC21 📅 24/04/2025 – 21/06/2025



Roberto Alfano - A Matter of Light

Informazioni Evento

🏛️ Luogo	SPAZIOC21 Palazzo Brami, via Emilia San Pietro 21, Reggio Emilia, Italia (Clicca qui per la mappa)
📅 Date	Dal 24/04/2025 al 21/06/2025 Tue-Sat 10-13 e 15-18
👤 Artisti	Roberto Alfano
🏷️ Generi	arte contemporanea, personale

Comunicato stampa

In recent years, Roberto Alfano's research has primarily focused on enhancing the creative process within artistic practice, with an intention of indefiniteness seen as a symbol of freedom of expression.

In "A MATTER OF LIGHT: Studio sulla materia luminosa (Vol. 1)," Alfano renews his intentions by hybridizing darkroom photographic printing techniques with painting, creating a new dimension of research that broadens the expressive possibilities within his artistic practice.

The presentation of this journey represents the first chapter of an ongoing work that focuses on research and experimentation, also understood in their alchemical sense, from a persistent perspective that harkens back to the early photographic experiments of the 19th century.

With this exhibition, SPAZIO21 reaffirms its role as a design laboratory where photography—understood as a medium—recovers its experimental dimension and metalinguistic qualities.

Accompanying texts for the exhibition by Vittorio Parisi and Laura Gasparini. The exhibition is enhanced by the release of a limited edition publication created in collaboration with Luca Zoccola.

Technical partner: Bellinifoto.

Text by Vittorio Parisi

"A galaxy in the gel of the universe"

In his 1989 essay "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," Canadian photographer Jeff Wall reflects on the impending development of digital technologies that would soon alter "the historical consciousness of the medium." According to Wall, this alteration stems from what we might call a paradigm shift in photography, where the "liquid intelligence" of its origins—represented by the essential use of water and emulsions in the analog process—suddenly becomes "dry" through electronics. This paradigm shift is both historical and ontological because, in the transition from analog to digital—and thus from emulsion to sensor, from photosensitive material to pixel, from droplet to glitch—the essence of photography has changed from its original vocation.

As American art historian Kaja Silverman argues in her work "The Miracle of Analogy," the photographic image originates as "an analogy, rather than a representation or a reference." In other words, the photographic image does not exist to represent or designate any referent; it is not us who "take," "make," or "capture" it, but rather it emerges from the world and reveals something about it to us. It is "an image that arrives from the future and lands in the present." If this primacy of analogy is lost in the transition to digital, it is because "analogy is also the fluid in which [the image] develops": it is through that fluid that the light captured by the shutter transfers onto the material and takes on a discernible form, allowing the world to emerge and re-introduce itself.

Roberto Alfano is a painter. Like every painter, his work consists concretely of manipulating fluids and fixing them onto a surface in order to bring forth something from the world and to the world. Although the outcome of two different mediums and processes, the essence of painting shares with that of photography the principle of analogy: both a photograph and a painting are analogical in that they resemble the world from which they originate, while at the same time allowing us to transcend that same slice of the world, revealing its infinite meanings and connections in analogous forms.

But what happens when, with an alchemist's spark, the painter decides to set aside his chosen fluids and manipulate those of photography instead? What occurs when it is not pigments, but light—what Roberto Alfano prefers to call "luminous matter"—that becomes the ally of the painter in escorting an image from the future to the present?

The works that comprise "A Matter of Light" are the result of this liquid alliance between painting and photography, through which the latter returns to what Wall refers to as the "archaic nature of water, of liquid chemical agents," which "connects photography to its past, to time."

Whether they are black-and-white or color works, in large or small formats, the images that emerge from these studies come from a world that is both created and immortalized. Like in "traditional" photography, they indeed preserve the luminous memory of the time and place where Roberto Alfano acted on the photosensitive paper. However, the difference lies in the fact that this memory has been redirected by the artist towards forms and motifs typical of his imagination and style: from atomized bodies to survivors of an after-party, from growling dogs to crying children, from windows to gates, from meteors to galaxies.

Refined over the past three years, the technique employed by Alfano allows for the delivery of a pure liquid movement, rich in light, on the photographic support, existing simultaneously as both a pictorial and photographic act.

Text by Laura Gasparini

"The colors without name: a brief historical overview up to Roberto Alfano's experiments". The image gradually takes shape in the darkness of a large room that, for the occasion, has been transformed into a photographic laboratory. First, the outlines appear, almost like a drawing; then, the areas of light and shadow, and finally, the details. This is how the photographic image emerges, taking its final form thanks to the skilled manipulation of the author, who exposes or underexposes certain parts of the image to achieve the desired contrast, carefully controls the development process, refines the tonal values, and finally fixes it with sodium thiosulfate. It is an image, a drawing created with photosensitive materials, that evokes both the magic of photography and the power of imagination. The aesthetics of photography are expressed not only through the mechanical instruments—such as the camera and optics—but also through the different types of photographic paper and the expert craftsmanship of the photographer.

Henry Fox Talbot presented the invention of the negative/positive photographic process in 1841 at the Royal Society in London. Talbot had previously used the camera lucida, a device equipped with a prism that projects a scene onto a sheet of paper, allowing the user to trace it with a pencil. In this case, the syntax depended on the artist's hand—whether more or less skilled—and the texture of the paper surface. He later experimented with the same reproduction method using the camera obscura.

In 1844, reflecting on the images produced by the pinhole camera or the optics of the camera obscura, Talbot wrote in *A Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art of Photography* (1844): "[...]this led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of the images produced by nature's painting, which the camera's lens projects onto paper at its focal point: enchanted images, creations of an instant, destined to disappear just as quickly." Talbot emphasized the importance of form, contour, and the defining lines of an image. What this new reproduction technique could not yet do, however, was accurately reproduce color. With photography, Talbot demonstrated that photographic images were a perfect imprint of reality", created not by an artist's hand but directly by nature's own pencil. This idea led him to produce the first-ever photobook, *The Pencil on Nature* (1844–46), featuring 24 photographic plates accompanied by his commentary. What is extraordinary, at least in the writer's view, is how Talbot had already, by 1841, identified and described key aesthetic values of the photographic process- not just the richness of detail, the precise contours of subjects, and the clarity of form, but also the ability 'to manipulate and control' the actions of developing and fixing chemicals to achieve different tonal effects. These tones translated the colors of nature into black and white.

To fully grasp the significance of Talbot's discovery—or rather, his invention—particularly in terms of the aesthetics of his photographic process on paper, we must take a step back in time. At the end of the 18th century, drawing became a speculative activity, a fundamental tool for knowledge, and it was enriched with new techniques. Not only the mark itself but also the paper—specifically, the uncoated white paper (unlike today's industrially bleached paper)—became a key element in the grammar and syntax of artistic language. This aesthetic would later characterize photography on paper. The blank sheet, thanks to its format, was crucial in defining the boundaries of figuration and, later, of the photographic image.

Talbot also analyzed the role of light and how its intensity affected the aesthetic outcome of an image: "An image, stripped of the ideas that accompany it and considered only in its essential nature, is nothing more than a sequence or variation of brighter lights projected onto one area of paper, and deeper shadows on another. Now, light, where it is present, can exert an action, and this, under certain conditions, is sufficient to cause changes in material bodies [...] on the paper. In that case, there must surely be some effect bearing a general resemblance to the cause that produced it, so that the varied scene of light and shadow could leave behind its image or imprint, more intense or weaker in different areas of the paper depending on the strength or weakness of the light that acted there."

The "effect" is the element in which different tonal values suggest a sensation or thought, even when using only a roughly sketched drawing, as seen in certain paintings. The technique of effect was a widely appreciated aesthetic concept in both French and English culture. Success depended on the ability to focus attention on the subject, often reinforced by drawing and detail. In academic settings, the technique of effect was also linked to that of the sketch and the *ébauche* (preliminary study), both of which could be easily achieved using Talbot's process.

The matte-surfaced paper, sensitized with a silver nitrate solution and then exposed to sunlight, produced images with more or less intense reddish-brown tones. To modify this tonality, chemical toning processes were applied, such as gold or selenium toning, which resulted in a brown-purple coloration. The tonal richness was influenced by numerous variables: the paper sizing, different dilutions in fixing and washing, and the length of exposure and toning time. Poor fixing, whether due to insufficient duration or the use of exhausted hyposulfite, tended to cause fading and a mauve coloration—a hue highly appreciated in the fashion world during the Victorian era. Photographs fixed with potassium bromide, on the other hand, developed a yellowish tone in the highlights and whites. Other photographic prints displayed slate-gray tones in the shadows, grays, and blacks, while in the lighter areas, they turned gray-green or yellow-brown.

explored the chromatic possibilities of film and photographic paper, using photosensitive material to "precipitate" (in the artist's words) our experiences and perceptions into 'unnamed colors' characteristic of photographic paper.

One artist who has delved into the materiality of photography and grasped its aesthetic allure is Alison Rossiter. After years behind the camera, she abandoned it, fascinated by the study of 19th-century photographic papers from the MoMA collections in New York. Recognizing the potential of that aesthetic and language, she began acquiring expired photographic paper, experimenting with its tones and nuances, inspired by American Abstract Expressionism, where pure color emerges through form rather than, for example, the brushstroke. In her experiments, Rossiter (2020) explored oxidation effects, varying light exposures, and different fixing times. Time itself becomes the creator of these images, she asserts, revealing its presence through the allure of unnamed colors.

Among the many experimental approaches to photosensitive materials, an essential contribution is Picasso's light painting experiments from 1949. These are extraordinary and fascinating examples of how the artist used light. In a dark room, Picasso created thirty light drawings using a small lamp, while his friend, photographer Gjon Mili, captured them with his camera. What is striking is not only the experimental technique but also the freedom of movement expressed in space—a spontaneous act, unconstrained by aesthetic rules, tools, or technical limitations. These drawings, made with light and in space, have come down to us thanks to photosensitive materials, recorded by the camera, and later made visible to a wider audience.

Roberto Alfano's research, presented in the exhibition *A Matter of Light*, draws from many of these aesthetic inspirations, developing new experiments with photosensitive material that open up unexplored creative paths. After all, in photography, as Walter Benjamin clearly states:

"The decisive element in photography remains the photographer's relationship with their technique."

A technique refined through experimentation, subverted processes, and even errors—ultimately leading to a unique and unmistakable form of artistic expression.

Bio

Roberto Alfano, Lodi, 1981. His interest for art began in the first half of the nineties, when he was first captivated by the graffiti writing scene. In time this interest would develop into an obsessive passion for drawing and painting.

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Beside his productions and exhibitions, the artist has specialized in leading experiential-artistic laboratories addressing groups of people with disabilities or living social and psycho-physical distress.

Lately Roberto Alfano's research is focused on underlining the value of the creative process in the artistic practice as being a symbol of freedom of expression.

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