

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

LIZ DESCHENES

selected texts & press

LIZ DESCHENES

“Liz Deschenes is a photographer who, in the best modernist tradition, pushes against the basic terms by which photography is conventionally defined: instantaneity, veracity, fixity, or reproducibility,” writes curator and critic Matthew Witkovsky. Indeed, Deschenes uses durational photogramatic exposure to create unique, shifting surfaces that frequently function as sculptural or architectural rather than photographic objects. Deschenes stages the technical components of photography, both contemporary and anachronistic, while reflecting, compressing, and assessing the architectural settings that surround them, through her mirrors’ simultaneous repopulation and evacuation of these spaces.

In her earlier work, Deschenes utilized landscape images as an entry point to address self-reflexive concepts of the medium. Her *Elevations* series utilized the rich and dense dye transfer color printing reminiscent of the golden age of Technicolor films, a process discontinued by Kodak in 1993. The project staged the seven standard colors developed by cartographers to represent ranges of the earth’s elevation to produce a gradation of corresponding monochrome photographs. Deschenes’ *Blue* and *Green Screens* foregrounded the invisible screens typically used as the invisible basis for special effects and absent background imagery. In her *Moiré* series, Deschenes photographed a sheet of perforated paper filtering the light coming through a window, and superimposed the ensuing negative with a duplicate on an enlarger to create an abstract, moiré pattern image. The result is an optically oscillating, dazzling body of work grounded in the manipulation of a single negative.

In her recent work, Deschenes exposes photographic paper to the night sky, develops it, and fixes the photogram with silver toner, creating misty silver surfaces brindled with slight changes in hue – affected either by exposure to ambient light, or the hand-application of the toner itself. After the photogramatic process creates these unique and varied surfaces, the works are mounted on aluminum or Dibond. Some of these photograms remain unframed and tend to oxidize over time, further problematizing the role of the photograph as fixed image on surface. Instead, purged of representational content, the photograph functions as an object that records how it has been, and continues to be, acted upon. The series originated with *Tilt/Swing*, an installation of six such “silver mirror” panels arranged in a 360-degree floor-to-ceiling configuration at Miguel Abreu Gallery, based on a diagram that 20th Century architect, designer, and artist Herbert Bayer drew to accompany his essay *The Fundamentals of Exhibition Design*. In her second iteration of the *Tilt/Swing* installation, the photographic panels were fully exposed to daylight, and brought to black in the development stage. Deschenes’s subsequent individual silver and black mirror works stage the same time-based photographic processes in an energetic rather than taxidermic language, allowing variations in framing and size to act in myriad ways upon the surrounding conditions of display.

Rates (Frames per Second), Deschenes’ 2018 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, furthered her inquiry into the history of image production techniques and the conditions of viewing developed in previous series. The seminal installation took the proto-cinematic experiments of 19th-century scientist and chronophotographer Étienne-Jules Marey as its point of departure, and was comprised of four equally wide, monumental multi-part works that span the length of entire gallery walls. The viewer was immediately engaged in a rhythmic progression through space, as he or she passed by a succession of thin strips of silver-toned photograms positioned at a constant interval from one another. The phenomenological experience produced by this rigorous sequencing of space is akin to a physical impression of time passing, of the body’s movement being captured in formation. The installation’s second half was comprised of slightly concave photograms that refer to Marey’s diagrams, which recorded human steps with the use of photosensitive paper. In line with Marey’s approach, Deschenes’ works are not stand-ins for experience like pictorial photography, but instead point to the material conditions of their production and display.

In her most recent 2024 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, *Gravity’s Pull*, Deschenes presents a stronger turn towards the effects of screen imagery on sensation and consciousness. The installation in the main gallery comprised of a series of ceiling mounted prints on Gorilla glass, a preferred alkali-aluminosilicate material of the screen universe stabilized into position by a rough band of stainless steel. These works simultaneously demonstrated a mode of connection to the first category of the photographic and a progressive distancing itself towards the realms of sculpture and

architecture. As screen images, they present the artist's initial attempt at capturing the world which gives way to the possibility of its alteration. These screens, being rendered opaque and suspended mid-distance between the floor and ceiling, were liberated from the surface of their native photographic domain into three-dimensional space. At the front of the gallery were placed two nearly identical black glass works that were opposite to one another. Their convex surface operated as an enlarged Claude glass, the visual device used by connoisseurs of landscape since the 18th-century. By turning one's back on the scene to observe the framed view through the tinted mirror, it allowed its viewers to add the picturesque aesthetic of a subtle gradation of tones. In these two parts of the exhibition, there was an expansion into the dimension of time, being pulled at once towards the past by the operation of the pre-photographic lens and being pushed towards the future by the color pixels floating in space. Panels having no established recto and verso, the viewer could oscillate between them as if through time, rendering possible the intimate zones of human experience.

Liz Deschenes (b. 1966, Boston) lives and works in New York. She received a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1988. Institutional solo exhibitions of her work have been held at the George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY (2025); ICA Boston (2016); MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA (2015); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2014); and Secession, Vienna (2012). Recent major two-person and group exhibitions include Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes: Persistence of Vision at Gropius Bau, Berlin (2026); Nineteenth-Century Photography Now, The Getty, Los Angeles (2024); Put It This Way: (Re)visions of the Hirshhorn Collection, Washington, D.C. (2023); Geneva Biennale: Sculpture Garden, Switzerland (2022); Une seconde d'éternité, Pinault Collection, Bourse de Commerce, Paris (2022); Shifting the Silence, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2022); True Pictures? Contemporary Photography from Canada and the US, Sprengel Museum, Hanover (2021); The Inconstant World, ICA Los Angeles (2021); Material Meanings: Selection from the Constance R. Caplan Collection, Art Institute of Chicago, (2020); and Luogo e Segni, Pinault Collection – Punta della Dogana, Venice (2019), among others. Previously, her work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp, Belgium; Museum of Modern Art, New York; International Center for Photography, New York; Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Aspen Art Museum; Tate Liverpool; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Deschenes' work is held in the permanent collections of Centre Pompidou, Paris; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Art Institute of Chicago; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; ICA/Boston; Pinault Collection, Paris; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Aishti Foundation, Beirut; CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Milwaukee Art Museum; Princeton University Art Museum; Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and The Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City. In 2014, Deschenes was the recipient of the Rappaport Prize. Artist books and monographs include Registration (Paris: Three Star Books, 2022); Liz Deschenes (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016); and Liz Deschenes, Secession (Vienna: Secession, Berlin: Revolver, 2012).

e-flux Criticism

Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes's "Persistence of Vision"

Dominic Eichler



View of Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes's "Persistence of Vision" at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2026. © Gropius Bau. Photo by Luca Girardini.

Gropius Bau, Berlin

March 19–June 28, 2026

Peter Hujar's singular black-and-white photographs invite us to surrender to intense encounters. It scarcely matters whether his subject is the embalmed bodies in Palermo's Capuchin catacombs or Manhattan's East Village 1970s artistic scene. Lovers, including Paul Thek and David Wojnarowicz, take their place alongside farmyard animals and Skippy the Boa Constrictor. The image of *Candy Darling on Her Death Bed II* (1973) is seared into the collective cultural memory.

The quietly engrossing two-person exhibition at Gropius Bau contains 120 of Hujar's prints, providing a rich cross-section of his oeuvre. These works alone would be reason enough to see the exhibition. Its experimental, intergenerational format, however, pairs Hujar with Liz Deschenes (it is both artists' first major exhibition in Berlin) to meditate on the nature of photography as a medium, beyond its biographical aspects. It is primarily on this conceptual level that it makes sense to couple Hujar's once overlooked, now canonized photographs with Deschenes's non-representational, structuralist

photographic sculptures and wall pieces. From the outset, the non-alphabetical listing of the names and the forward slash in the title suggest that this will be a deliberately unconventional pairing.

The rooms form a horseshoe sequence, meaning that viewers must retrace their steps and reencounter works at new angles. I was captivated by this unlikely show, even in the Gropius Bau's unforgiving, denuded late nineteenth-century spaces. Deschenes's panel photogram series, including *Untitled (1881)* (2025), each exposed in moonlight to produce murky, silvery mirrors awash with chemical shadows, are here paired with Hujar's nightscapes. In another room, two cast-glass poles by Deschenes, both titled *Retaining* (2025), mounted in fittings and leaning against the wall, are elegant formal companions to Hujar's images of men hanging out together on the derelict Hudson River piers, suggesting both support and inclination.



View of Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes's "Persistence of Vision" at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2026. © Gropius Bau. Photo by Luca Girardini.

Elsewhere, Deschenes's work deploying patented hi-tech smartphone screen glass, including *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Violet 80)* (2025), is displayed in front of a window through which fascist-era architecture can be seen. The next room features a series of Hujar's achingly personal portraits of Paul Thek. Larger forces are implicitly at stake.

To contemporary eyes, Hujar's images might seem self-evidently potent. The small recognition he achieved in his own lifetime might be attributed in part to the artist's own tendency, as his friend Fran Lebowitz remarked, to "[hang] up on every important photography dealer in the Western world."¹ In a poetic twist, the qualities that once counted against his acceptance by the art

community—his traditional technique, commercial and fashion photography background, and artistic cruising in Manhattan's demimonde—now anchor his legacy. The involved yet alienated, first-person nature of Hujar's work resonates today, yet to encounter his work posthumously is, inevitably, to reckon to some extent with death, entropy, fragility and loss, and the arbitrary nature of survival. The works shown here capture the heartbeat of a bohemian generation, many lost to HIV/AIDS, and a gritty Manhattan since erased by gentrification.

Central to the exhibition is the decision to show Hujar's work in a manner redolent of the artist's last exhibition before he died in 1987, held the previous year at Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York: framed, mostly square-format images in a grid on two rows, and including examples from different series mixed together. Although the cheap clip frames have been swapped out for neutral white wooden frames (the Frank O'Hara poem that was scrawled around the top of the wall, leftover from a previous show, was also omitted). This is not the first time that Hujar's work has been exhibited in this way, but here it emphasizes its dialogue with art history and conceptual breadth.



Liz Deschenes, *Untitled (Claude Glass I)*, 2023. Glass with wood artist frame. © Courtesy of Liz Deschenes and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo by Stephen Faught.

The risk of this staged coupling is that it might seem arbitrary, and the promised dialogue about the medium itself ("light, chemistry and time," as the institution's website puts it) be wishful thinking.² The two artists have highly distinctive approaches to making. Here, however, Hujar's narratives of radical lives do not overpower Deschenes's ambient techno-materialism. Meanwhile, Deschenes's works, such as *Untitled (Claude Glass)* (2023), inspired by a pocket mirror popularized by eighteenth-century landscape painters, point to the paradoxical insights that can be gained by reducing visual information. Placed next to each other, Hujar looked more analytical and sculptural, and Deschenes more lyrical: both asked viewers to reverberate in their lush grays.

Notes

¹ "Peter Hujar," MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/artists/7159-peter-hujar>.

² "Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes: Persistence of Vision," Gropius Bau, <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropius-bau/programm/2026/ausstellungen/peter-hujar-liz-deschenes>.

Art in America

Printer Perfect

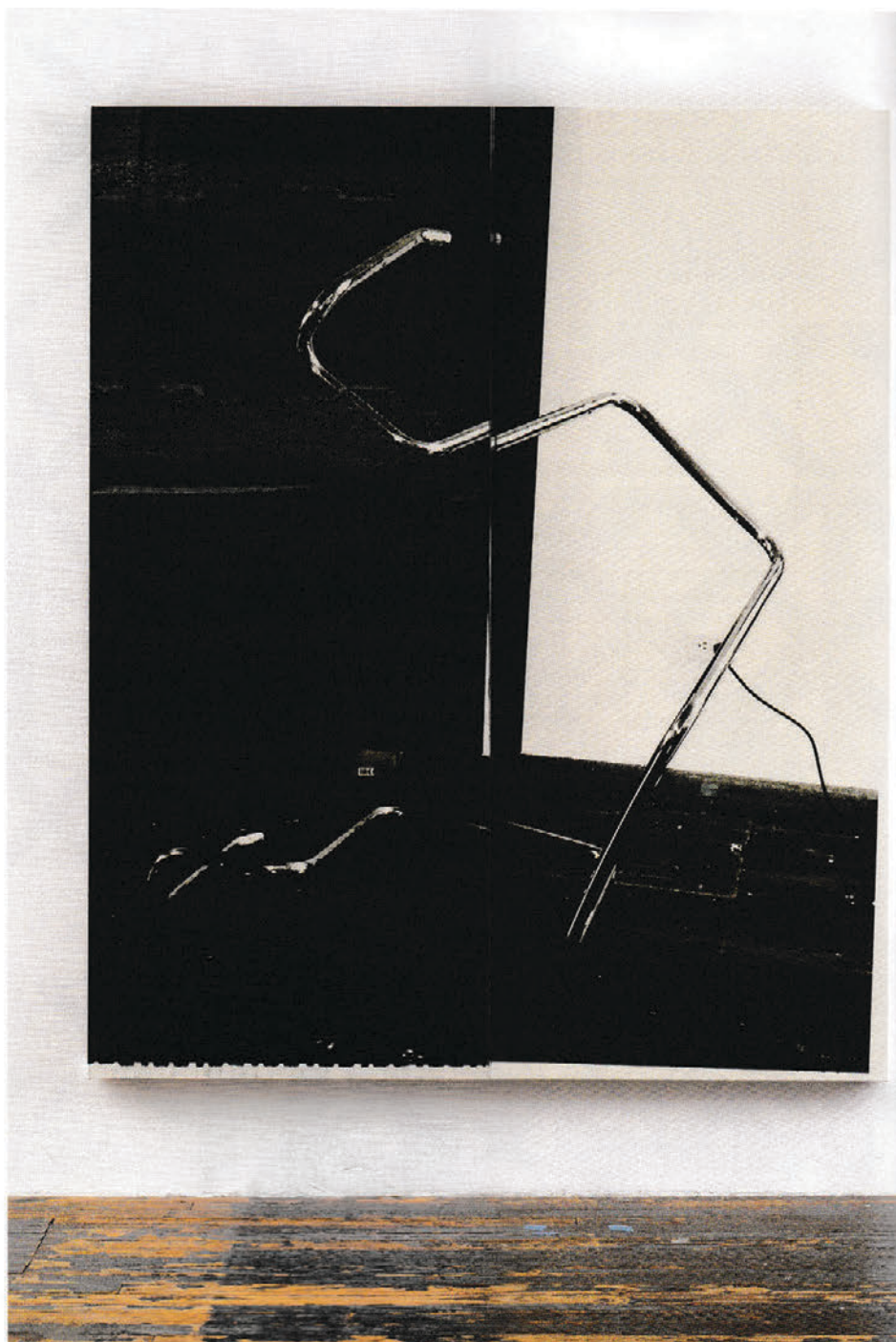
Advances in digital printing are changing what kind of art object a photograph can be.

by James Welling

I

n the late 1980s, I noticed photography's transition from analog to digital in small ways in printed media. I saw it in typography in the *East Village Eye* that was elongated on a computer, and in the artificially sharpened images that occasionally cropped up in the *New York Times*. But only after the turn of the millennium did the powerful, digital prepress tools we know today—ultra-high-resolution scanners, imagesetters, and inkjet printers—become widely available to photographers in their darkrooms and studios.

Observing the transition in 2005, Richard Benson, a photographer and dean of the Yale School of Art, singled out mimicry as "... one of the miracles of digitization." He wrote that digital imagery "has the power, when used with the proper tools, to take on the character of almost anything else," adding that "files of binary numbers can generate music, display text, and even lay down ink- or dye-based color photographs." Quickly though, generations of photographers took advantage of the tools newly at their fingertips to other ends, creating images that went far beyond Benson's mimicry. Advances in digital printing, such as introducing pigments to make inkjet prints more permanent, enabled works that went beyond—imperceptibly or dramatically—what was possible in the analog darkroom. Quickly but quietly, new printers changed what a photograph could be, even blurring the line between image and art object.



Wade Guyton: *Untitled*, 2020.

Like many photographers, I was never formally trained. Fifty years ago, I learned from technical books and by talking to other photographers as I made work. Because I had learned on the fly, when digital arrived, getting a handle on this new technology had a familiar learning curve. Everyone was feeling their way around, reading whatever they could, and talking to anyone who might know a little more than they did about digital. There were always conflicting opinions about how to do everything from scanning to printing to Photoshop in the early 2000s, and to some extent today.

With no unitary path forward, there were six ways to Sunday; a lot of delightful experimentation ensued.

In 1995 I started using an Iris printer in my own work. An Iris printer – a large-format inkjet printer introduced by Intel in 1985 – prints an image on a spinning sheet of paper affixed to a plexiglass drum, inscribing the image in ink line-by-line as it moves across the paper. A few years after I made my first Iris prints, I noticed photographs printed with a new device, the Lambda digital printer. This game-changing exposure device, introduced in 1994, combines analog

and digital processes: A rapidly moving laser beam exposes light sensitive paper to create precisely controlled color – and later, black-and-white – prints.

I first saw the transformative power of the digital enlarger in Anne Collier's early 2000 photographs of book spreads and album

Dawoud Bey: Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse), 2018.





Shannon Ebner: *Subtidal Ears*, 2023–25 (left), and *Radial Sand Track*, 2025 (right).

covers, photographed head-on against stark white backdrops. Collier's photographs required these white surfaces to be rendered in perfectly neutral tones, that is, without warm or cool color casts, to convey the quiddity of her subjects. Anyone who has attempted to print a photograph of a blank white wall using an analog color enlarger will know that this sort of neutral tonality is nearly impossible to maintain. The whites shift either toward cyan or magenta, and after multiple test exposures, eye fatigue is inevitable. The digital device creates an entirely new type of color print in which the most subtle color hues are fixed, as they are in Collier's exquisitely accurate neutrals.

Dawoud Bey also used a similar laser-based machine to make his series of landscape photographs, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" (2017). Bey's gelatin silver prints in this magisterial series, shot during daylight but printed to replicate deep twilight, trace the imagined journey of an enslaved person northward through Ohio, to arrive at the tree-lined margin of Lake Erie. The photographs are printed quite dark, and Bey has referenced the Acheronian prints of Roy DeCarava as an influence. What floored me when I saw "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

was the precise separation and legibility of the darkest tones in Bey's prints. In a traditional darkroom, printing values so close in range while keeping them still distinct would have been nearly impossible, especially across the series' many individual images. Using the digital print process, Bey controlled the entire lower end of tonal registry to illuminate his rigorous vision.

While Collier and Bey craft their images with the laser devices, other artists, such as Wade Guyton and Isabel Gouveia, use glitchy printers to introduce visual disturbances in their prints. Guyton became known for making extra-wide inkjet "paintings" by

printing on folded canvas that he forced through his 44-inch Epson printer. The stern grayscale typographic content of these early works, paired with Guyton's off-road approach to inkjet printing, produces an intensely material viewing experience. Isabel Gouveia, meanwhile, prints lyrical botanical portrayals on her badly behaving smaller-format Canon printer that she then scans and collages together to create long scrolls of imagery. Richly colored and romantic, Gouveia's images suggest the unending plenitude of natural forms. Somewhat unexpectedly, as photography was becoming more digital, it was also becoming more material.

Digital technology hasn't rendered the darkroom completely obsolete. Rather, scanning and inkjet printing have catalyzed new printing possibilities through analog-digital hybrids. In the mid-1990s, photographers began printing high-resolution negatives on their inkjet printers for use in the analog darkroom. In 2015 Jeff Whetstone harnessed this hybrid digital/analog workflow to create "Crossing the Delaware," a 20-foot-long gelatin silver print. To do this, Whetstone gathered a slew of his analog and digital photographs of the Lower Trenton Bridge and converted them

Scanning and inkjet printing have catalyzed new printing possibilities through analog-digital hybrids.

to inkjet negatives. He then taped dozens of these digital negatives together to form an enormous collage that he contact-printed on a 40-inch roll of photographic paper. The print is not only Herculean in scale, but impressively even: Whetstone took advantage of the precise control that digital negatives offer to produce consistent light and dark values.

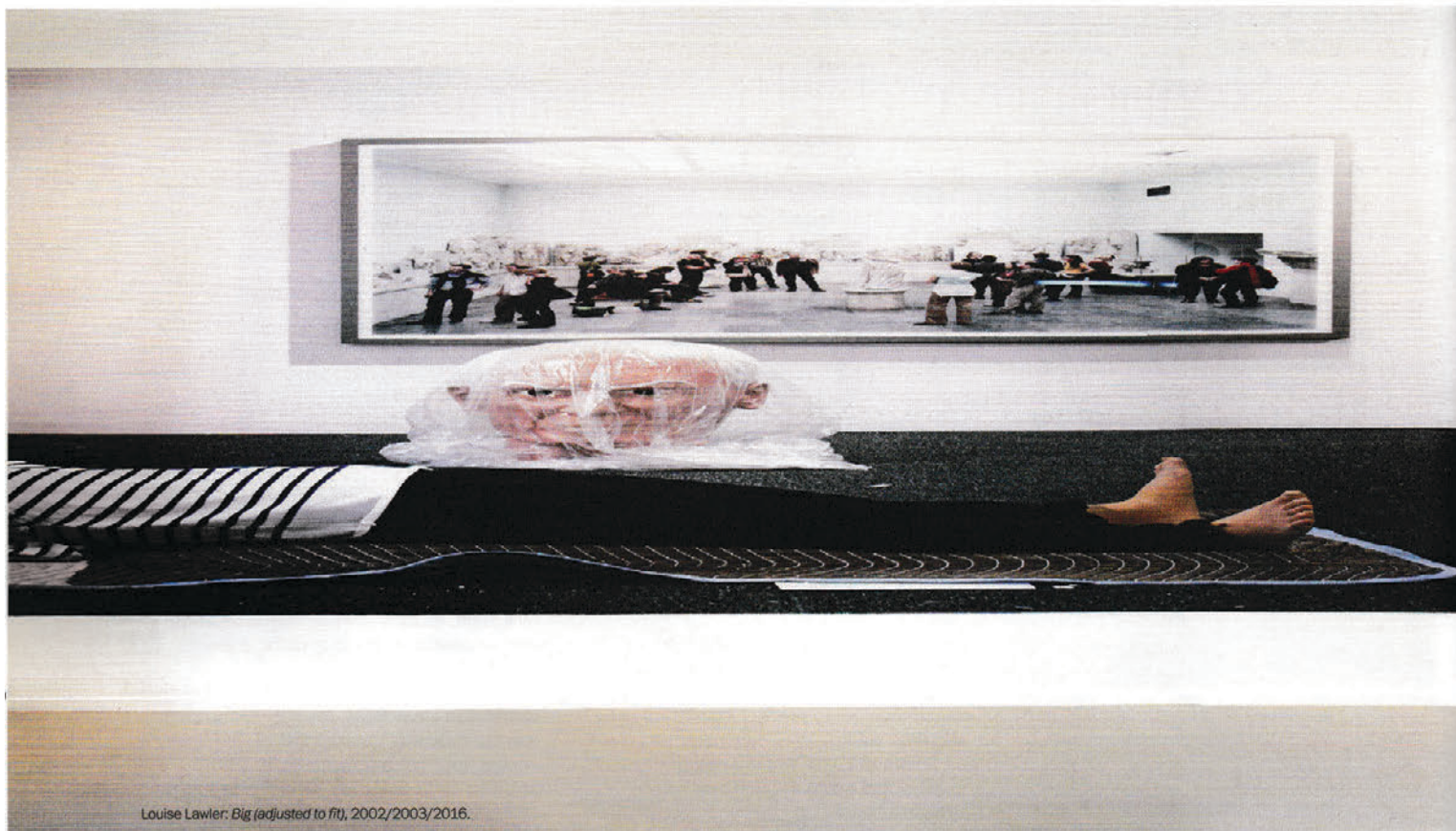
Shannon Ebner works resolutely in black and white—which may seem straightforward enough, but before 2006, no inkjet printer could produce a consistently neutral black-and-white print. In that year, Epson introduced a package of hardware and software that could finally generate a black-and-white print that looked, well, black

and white. When I first saw Ebner's tough grayscale prints, I realized that for Ebner and other photographers, such as Mark Armijo McKnight, black-and-white digital printing was becoming, as the expression goes, "the new black."

Before the advent of full-frame digital SLR cameras in about 2005, the flatbed scanner was the only way to make digital files large enough for high-res prints. So, in 2001, Brandon Lattu made his 30-inch prints using an Epson scanner, recording all six sides of multicolored boxes of food products, crackers, cereals, and teas. In Photoshop, Lattu joined the edges of the scans to form 3D-seeming representations. Lattu's final move was to adjust the transparency of each product so

Brandon Lattu: *Selected Products*, 2001 (left), and *Rejected Products*, 2002 (right).

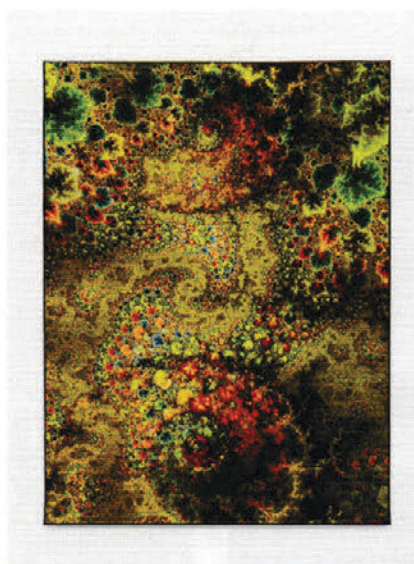




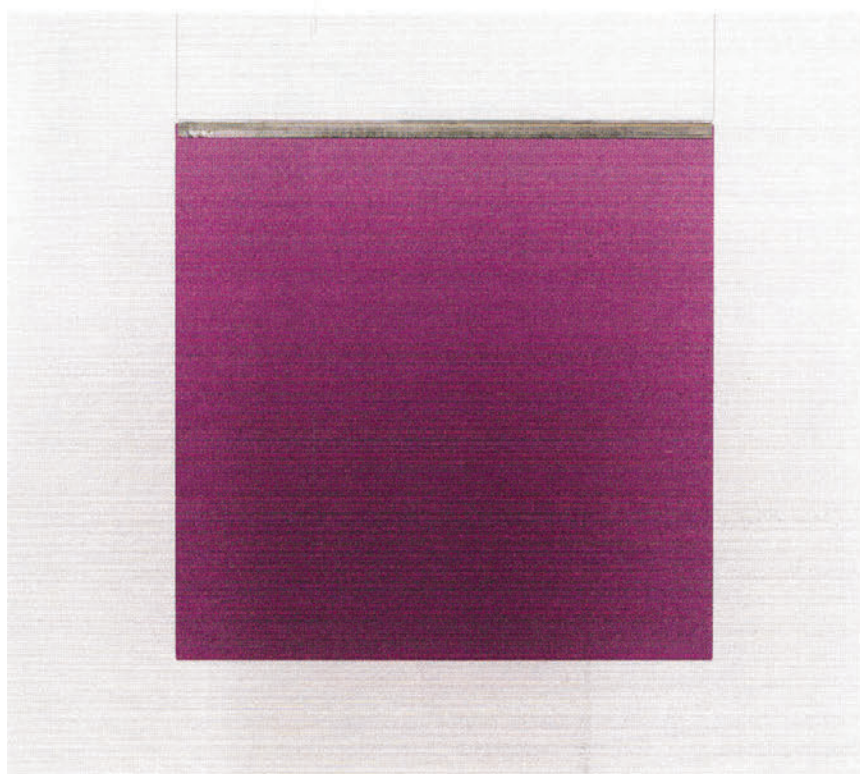
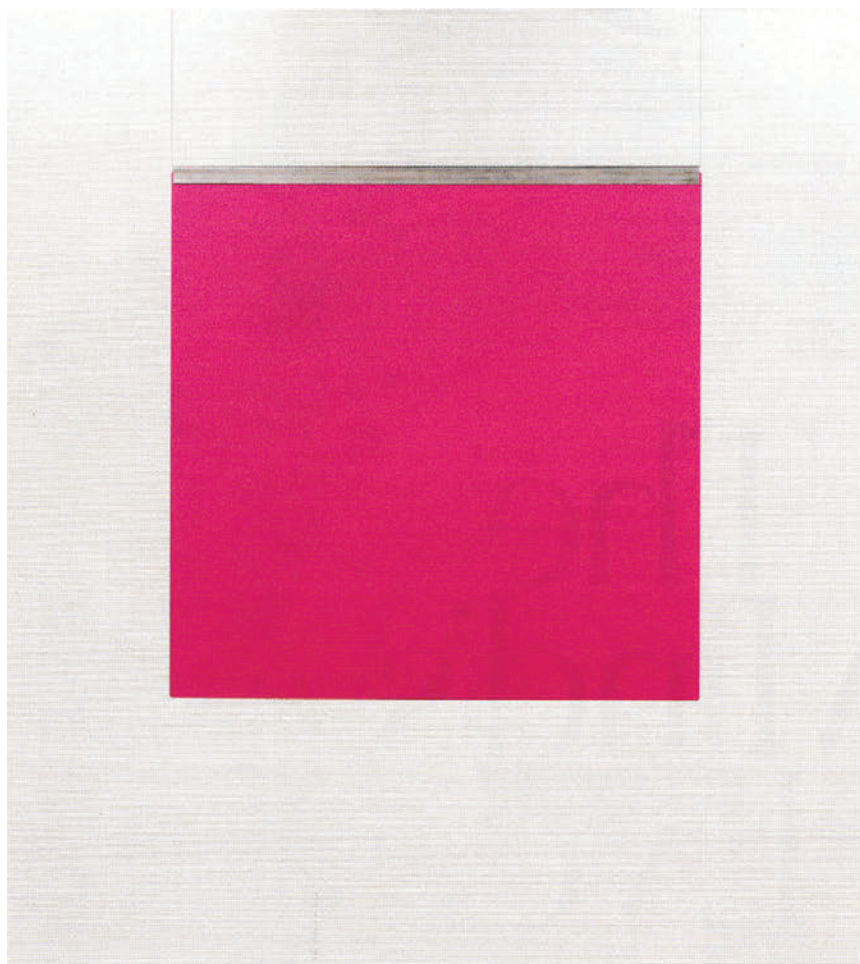
Louise Lawler: *Big (adjusted to fit)*, 2002/2003/2016.

that the boxes looked as if they were made in multicolored plexiglas.

The possibilities, size-wise, have increased dramatically. Louise Lawler's "(adjusted to fit)," series, begun in 2011, requires that industrial inkjet printers be employed to "adjust" the size of her photograph to cover the entirety of the wall it will occupy. Instructions for installing the work involve typing the dimensions into Photoshop and then specifying that the image be "unconstrained." This creates what is called a ratio distortion: The image covers the entire wall, but gets stretched or squished. Lawler is not specific about the type of printer to use, leaving open the opportunity to re-create the work far into the future as the technology evolves. One "(adjusted to fit)" work was recently "wall papered" over the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art. This immersive and architecturally scaled photograph still manages to capture Lawler's witty institutional critique vibe: A sculpture of Picasso's head glares at the viewer in front



Thomas Ruff: *d.o.pe.01*, 2022 (left), and *d.o.pe.04 I*, 2022 (right).



Liz Deschenes: *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Red 100)*, 2023 (top), and *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Violet 90)*, 2023 (bottom).



Print insert: Louise Lawler: *Before/During/After (Green)*, 2024/2025.

of an impossibly stretched photograph by Thomas Struth of Berlin's Pergamon Museum.

Wall murals like Lawler's require behemoth industrial printers. But now, everyday consumers can use this technology to order a custom-made carpet, or a birthday cake with a digital snapshot printed on it. For Thomas Ruff's 2022 "d.o.pe." series—the initials refer to Aldous Huxley's 1954 autobiographical *Doors of Perception*—the artist ordered gigantic inkjet tapestries emblazoned with his digitally created fractal dragons. The deep-pile surface of each carpet burns with chromatic intensity. Ruff, who in his 2009 inkjet "Zycles" created large abstract images with three-dimensional rendering software of algorithms based on cycloids, is fascinated by mathematics and by the most advanced research into visual phenomena. Yet despite his interest in the present, the textiles and extreme imagery in "d.o.pe." feel surprisingly retro, and recall the craze for all things fractal that washed over visual culture in the 1980s.

Industrial printing technologies now permit artists to put an image on almost any surface. Liz Deschenes took advantage of this for her 2023 series using the newest technology: UV inkjet printing. The UV process is so named because the inks are mixed with a glue that hardens, much like a gel manicure, under the bright light of an ultraviolet lamp that trails the print head. Instant dry allows Deschenes to seamlessly attach her pastel-colored monochrome inks to medium-size square sheets of Gorilla glass. Deschenes has long aspired to create dimensional photographs. Moves like this go far beyond digital's analog mimicry to generate work that is neither photographic nor anything but. ●

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Liz Deschenes

Miguel Abreu Gallery | Eldridge Street

By David Colman



View of "Liz Deschenes: Gravity's Pull," 2023–24. From left: *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Violet 90)*, 2023; *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Indigo 75)*, 2023; *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Red 90)*, 2023; *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Orange 90)*, 2023. Photo: Stephen Faught.

f In researching one aspect of "Gravity's Pull," Liz Deschenes's excellent show
f of photo-adjacent conceptual glassware at Miguel Abreu Gallery, I happened
t upon a funny coincidence. According to the Google Ngram Viewer—a
f language-analysis tool that graphs the frequency of various word usages over
e time—the terms *rose-colored glasses* and *Claude glass* both appeared in the
e written record of English around 1829–30, just a few years after the very
first photograph.

You may not yet be fascinated, but *vade mecum*: A Claude glass was a black mirror made of polished volcanic obsidian that, two hundred years ago, was used by artists and genteel tourists to lend landscapes softer, simpler tones (recalling the softer, simpler times of painter Claude Lorraine, after whom it's named). But Claude glass was also used metaphorically; for instance, to say that a person looked at life through a Claude glass was to suggest that they contemplated existence in uncomplicated, idealized terms.

So while it was easy to appreciate the obvious Minimalist qualities of the two minimalizing Claude glasses in Deschenes's show (she hung them facing each other in an empty room as a kind of glossy-black *mise en abyme*), it's important to realize that this technology was considered romantic even in the Romantic era, like one of Instagram's nostalgic filters that offer cutting-edge sentimentality. Yet the pairing was just a nosegay of this notion, as Deschenes has always ratcheted up the tension between the aesthetic (our paper yesteryears) and the technical (our steel tomorrows), and "Gravity's Pull" might have been her most carefully taut manifestation of that yet.

From the Claude glass antechamber, the show proceeded down a single-file allée comprising panes of industrial smartphone glass gracefully suspended from the ceiling, each one a different pale hue. But once the main space was entered, Deschenes's meta-yet-physical glasses multiplied like a hall of mirrors, circling into a double-layered swirl of chromatic splendor that invited the viewer to look around and take in all of the cross combos of color. It was a pleasing, dizzying, and liberating experience that felt less like the usual standing-there-and-being-made-to-admire-art ordeal and more like being plopped into a kaleidoscopic Farrow & Ball paint-chip spiral to pick out a new palette for every room in your life—a gold standard of aesthetic experience.

That said, this was nothing like a fantasy sequence in a reality house-makeover program. The show's adamant precision and careful, spare configuration were a great part of its pleasure, too. Each pane, roughly twenty-nine inches square, was hung exactly midway between the floor and ceiling, elevated several inches above standard eye level.

As both a longtime practitioner and student of high-end photo craft, Deschenes can obsessively geek out over the super-exact science, histories, and readings of photography like no one else. So you can bet your Agfa that the artist was knowingly referencing the wide spectrum of colored gels you can put over a lens when shooting black-and-white film to enhance contrasts, landscapes, skin tones, and, by extension, all the layers and filters that software and apps such as Photoshop and Instagram provide to us.

But Deschenes is also interested in optics and the way we see. The effect is as if she's playing with theatrical gels that turn spotlights various colors, winking at the tinted machinations of artists such as James Turrell or offering a variety of lenses to perk up this miserable life: *Be mindful with mauve! Get motivated with melon!* All the science, all the romance. The artist's crossing of careful precision with a giddy rainbow of hues and referents made for a rare achievement, one that left me delighted, sensually and cerebrally.

PNIC

VARIETY

Facebook, Instagram Hit by Outage: Thousands of Users Reported Problems Including Getting Logged...
Out

PNIC **RollingStone**

'They Play Nice': Inside the Tensions and Tumult at
'Queer Eye'

VARIETY

Facebook, Instagram Hit by Outage: Thousands of
24's Rainbow Movie Promoted in Getting Logged...
amid Some Fearing Actual Civil War

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NCAA March Madness Music

VARIETY

Danzen Boon on How

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in December

By **Roberta Smith**, Martha Schwendener, Walker Mimms, Travis Diehl and Max Lakin

Published Dec. 1, 2023 Updated Dec. 7, 2023, 1:04 p.m. ET

Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Check out Eric N. Mack's fabric assemblages or Trey Abdella's category-defying works in Chelsea; Liz Deschenes' minimalist landscapes on the Lower East Side; John Wesley's pastel cartoons on the Upper East Side; and Daniel Arnold's photographs in Chinatown.

LOWER EAST SIDE

Liz Deschenes

Through Dec. 23. Miguel Abreu, 88 Eldridge Street, 212-995-1774, miguelabreugallery.com.



Installation view of Liz Deschenes' show "Gravity's Pull" at Miguel Abreu Gallery. Liz Deschenes, via Miguel Abreu Gallery Photo by Stephen Faught

Liz Deschenes' luminous exhibition "[Gravity's Pull](#)" is about photography — although, as you might expect of Deschenes, traditional images are nowhere in sight. Instead, she mines optical devices from earlier centuries that changed the way we view the world. This show focuses on two such instruments: colored filters and the "[Claude glass](#)" (named after the French pastoral-landscape painter [Claude Lorrain](#)), a palm-size convex mirror of polished black obsidian that artists and tourists would take into landscapes, turning their backs on the view to admire the simplified reflection.

Glass — the scratch-resistant surface used for iPhone screens — are printed in hues inspired by early color filters and suspended throughout the space, creating a modern minimalist landscape.

The conceptual payoff here is as rich as the visual one. History is filled with technological devices that have been ridiculed even as they coincided with profound cultural shifts. Anecdotes of 18th-century tourists stumbling around with their Claude glasses are not so different from 21st-century selfie mishaps. The Claude glass and colored filters, however, appeared when the bucolic landscapes seen in paintings were being replaced by factories and mines. Similarly, we know smartphones are not innocent devices: They're as insidious and powerful as gravity's pull. In this sense Deschenes' work functions like a Claude glass, offering a beautifully rational vision, with art and technical apparatuses once again mediating our experience of the world. MARTHA SCHWENDENER



Art | In Conversation

Liz Deschenes with Jean Dykstra



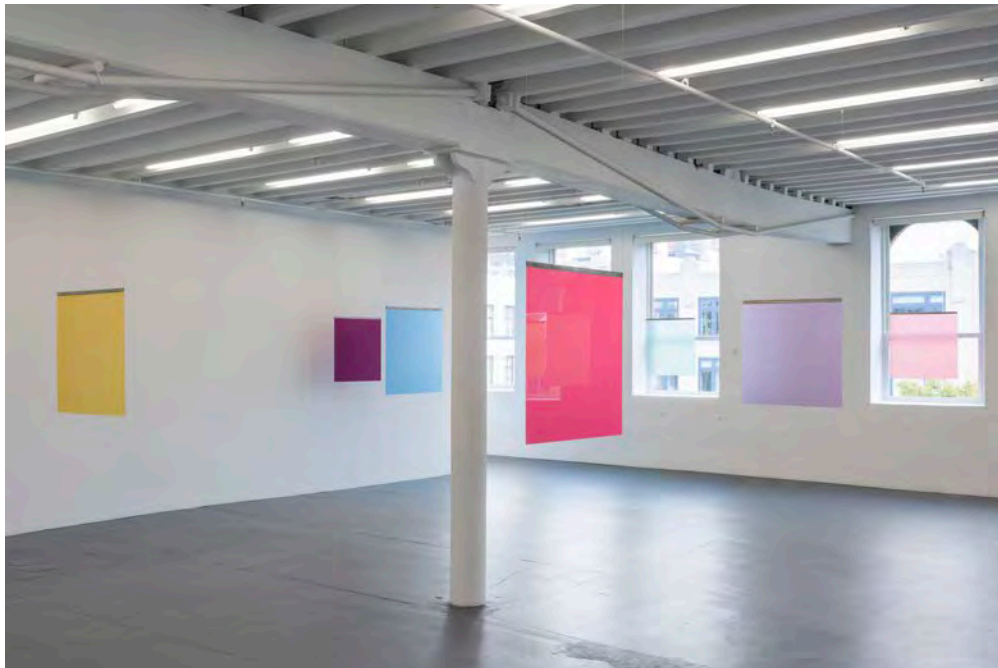
Portrait of Liz Deschenes. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Miguel Abreu Gallery

Gravity's Pull

November 4 – December 23, 2023

Back in 2000, Liz Deschenes curated a show at the Andrew Kreps Gallery called *Photography about Photography*, which included thirteen artists and outlined her approach to the medium. That approach might be described as: rigorous, unorthodox, engaged with the materiality of her work as well as with the architecture in which it is shown, and deeply invested in the medium and history of photography (though she rarely uses a camera). Her show at Miguel Abreu Gallery, for instance, references an object called a black mirror, also known as a Claude glass (because it was associated with the seventeenth-century landscape painter Claude Lorrain), which reduced and simplified the range of colors in the landscapes being painted. In previous series of works, Deschenes has referenced the zoetrope as well as the work of Étienne-Jules Marey and his photographic experiments recording movement. She is keenly interested in the conditions of display and the mechanics of viewing: how we experience her works visually but also physically, bodily. Deschenes began her career as an artist in the 1990s—she graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1988—a time when narrative photography was the dominant mode, and she has stayed the course with her experiments in abstraction and in conceptual photo-based artworks that have consistently challenged—and expanded—the definition of photography.



Installation view: *Gravity's Pull* at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Jean Dykstra (Rail): Hi Liz, am I reaching you in New York?

Liz Deschenes: Yes, I'm in New York right now. I taught at Columbia last night, doing group critiques, and I'm getting ready for the exhibition *Gravity's Pull*, at Miguel Abreu Gallery, in November.

Rail: Tell me a little bit about the upcoming show.

Deschenes: A lot of the work that I've done refers to some of the apparatuses of viewing. And now I'm going back, once again, to before photography was even invented. There are two devices that I'm looking at: one is the black mirror, which is often called a Claude glass. The attribution is to seventeenth-century landscape painter Claude Lorrain, but no historian can even figure out if Claude Lorrain himself actually used them. But the people who made work in his lineage most certainly did use them, and even Matisse used them in a later period.

Rail: What is a black mirror?

Deschenes: At the time when they used them—and they started using them in the 1600s—it was a small, black convex mirror, which was made out of polished obsidian stone—highly, highly polished. And the idea, as far as I understand it, is that a landscape painter would go into a landscape, and there's so much information in terms of color and tonal range, and when they would look at these convex mirrors, it would reduce the palette so that it could be sort of narrowed down. I've been talking to painters about it, and painters are like: why would anybody want to narrow down the palette?

Rail: Right!

Deschenes: But if you read what Matisse wrote about it, he was working in the forests of Fontainebleau, and it was a way for painters to sort of describe what they saw without being overwhelmed. Arnauld Maillet quotes Matisse in his book, *The Claude Glass*, as saying, "One of the properties of this black mirror is that it suppresses all sensations of color, like a vermillion red that, when one looks at it with the mirror, always seems to come from somewhere beyond the surface of the image; it's a trumpet blast in the landscape; it didn't suit me." And then I've heard from glass artists that they went out of fashion because they were sort of associated with the occult.

Rail: Wow, really?

Deschenes: Yeah, and then it was not permitted. I know a lot more about how they were using them in the landscape to reduce the possibilities—it was a way to understand what they were seeing. And to be able to bring it back to the studio, because if you were making paintings, you'd have to bring these drawings back. Photography was also invented in the late 1830s.

Rail: Right.

Deschenes: That's one apparatus I'm referring to. The other one is also attributed to Claude Lorrain. And once again, nobody knows if he actually utilized them, but they're colored filters, which is kind of amazing in the 1600s. People were using colored filters in the landscape. So say they want to recreate a winter scene, but it's not winter, they would hold up a cool blue filter. If

you ever look at Claude Lorrain's skies, you can see that some of them are extraordinary in their hues and saturations. If a landscape wasn't warm enough, they'd use amber or yellow filters for viewing. This is sort of an oversimplification, but you're projecting onto the landscape what you want it to be, versus what it actually is.

Rail: It's so cinematic, too, like the idea of day for night....

Deschenes: Absolutely. And all of these elements are ones that I've thought about, but now I'm really looking at the beginnings of the way we think about imaging right now. I look at people's social media accounts, and they're like, "unfiltered." And I'm like, no, everything's filtered, whether you realize it or not.

Rail: On the most basic level, everything is filtered. Even if you don't change anything,

Deschenes: Exactly. And then, on the not-basic level, from AI imaging onward, there are obviously so many layers to it. So those are the bookends of what I'm thinking about. How do I make this material, because all these devices were small-ish—you know, you could put it in your pocket. People were falling in the landscape as they were looking through these filters because they were so taken by them. And we know how many people have gone to lengths to capture something for their social media accounts, and to what end?

Rail: Trying to take a selfie and falling off a cliff.

Deschenes: Yeah, I mean, people have died for their pictures. So how do I make it physical for now? I want a physical manifestation of the virtual—so I've looked at screens quite a bit. I started looking at glass, and Corning makes the glass for most of our cell phones and computers, a really thin glass they call Gorilla Glass.

Rail: I didn't know Corning made all those screens.

Deschenes: So I was like: what would happen if I got Corning, or a Corning affiliate, to make these materials? What if they did it at a size that's not cellphone size or computer size? So I came up with a size that I wanted, and I'm making over twenty 29-by-29-inch pieces of glass that I'm UV printing on. And I'm UV printing some of the colors that are associated with the Claude filters. So there's some yellows and some ambers, blues, forest green, and rose and they're all monochromes. And you probably know this, monochromes have been present in my work since the beginning, and everybody thinks monochromes in photography are really easy to make, and you know what? They're not.



Liz Deschenes, *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Orange 75)*, (detail) 2023. UV cured inkjet on Gorilla Glass, stainless steel. 29 1/4 x 29 inches (74.3 x 73.7 cm). Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Rail: No, I know.

Deschenes: So I'm super excited about these, and they are not going to be installed on the walls—they have a front and a back. They're going to be hanging in the gallery, and they're going to be creating a new, for lack of a better term, a new architecture, or a new way of traversing through the gallery.

Rail: So they're going to be hanging, not in frames on the floor, like you've done before?

Deschenes: Yeah, exactly. I've had the work sit on the floor in frames with steel plates to secure them, but these are going to be hanging from the ceiling with really simple hanging devices. I'm excited about what we've been working on.

Rail: So as a viewer, when I'm walking through the gallery, will I be walking through them and in between them?

Deschenes: At some moments, yes.

Rail: Oh, cool.

Deschenes: Yeah, you'll move between the front and the back. And where the gallery has that wall end before the windows, the glass pieces will extend to the windows and will be hung in front of the windows. You would think that these would act like filters, right? That you'd be able to see everything through them. But I purposely came up with a print procedure in which you get the color going through, but the information that you see through them is actually not that visible. Say there's a building on the other side of the window—the building's actually not legible. And that was purposeful, because I want to talk about screens, and all the information that we receive from them—that you have this illusion of accessibility and legibility, but there's actually a lot of opacity.



Liz Deschenes, *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Orange 75)*, 2023. UV cured inkjet on Gorilla Glass, stainless steel. 29 1/4 x 29 inches (74.3 x 73.7 cm). Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Rail: That's really interesting, the whole idea of screens, and their role in our lives.

Deschenes: Yeah. And then, I'm working with some glass fabricators, and we're trying to make large-scale black mirrors.

Rail: Oh really?

Deschenes: I'm not sure where they would even go in the gallery right now. They might be in a separate room. But the black mirror is there whether it takes a physical form in the exhibition or not. People didn't necessarily use these apparatuses concurrently, but they certainly came to being around the same time.

Rail: The same time as the filters?.

Deschenes: Yes. So whether the black mirror is physically there or not, it's conceptually there. And then—so many of the ideas are about, as I said, projecting what's desired versus what's actually there.

Rail: It's so interesting how your work is at once very removed from the camera, but at the same time, so steeped in the history of photography and photographic apparatuses.

Deschenes: When I started doing the cameraless work, I thought, architecturally, of the spaces as being the camera. I'm hoping that the installation that I do at the gallery—that space is really challenging—so how do you alter that space in a way that keeps it comprehensive? I'm hoping that through the installation I talk about that imposition, about what artists imposed upon landscapes in previous generations—and I use landscape broadly.

Rail: You mean the way artists of any stripe have imposed their own point of view onto landscapes and their own artistic apparatus onto the way we see landscapes? And again, landscapes being used in a broad way?

Deschenes: Yeah. And maybe a better term than landscapes is environment. And then it just so happened that people started working outside and bringing it back to the studio. That was obviously a new phenomenon and representation.

Rail: I saw your previous show at Miguel Abreu—*Rates (Frames per Second)* in 2018. One of the things I loved about the show was that not only did you have to engage with the works on a visual level, but you had to engage with them on a physical level, too. It had to do with seeing, but also with experiencing the works bodily, and seeing yourself seeing them. There were so many layers, and it seems like that's part of what you're aiming at, the way you engage with the architecture of a space. There's a similar physicality in the current show, in which works are going to be hanging, and viewers are going to be walking in between the works.

Deschenes: It's a really important component to me. And I didn't mention this, but I'm only printing on one side of the glass, and that ends up being the more matte side. And then the other side of the glass is obviously highly reflective. And the glass is hyper thin, it's just like ... 1.1 millimeters, which is just crazy thin. So I'm also hoping that these objects are going to be unfamiliar to people.

Rail: That brings me to one of the questions I was thinking about: I read an interview in which you said you would just as soon eliminate all wall labels from your exhibitions because you don't want to overdetermine how people interpret them, which I totally understand. And at the same time, I wonder, there are so many layers to your work and so many rich references. How important is it to you that someone who's looking at your work grasps any of those aspects?

Deschenes: I actually gave a lecture at Art Center in LA last fall, and towards the end, I got this sort of snarky question/comment about, like, how do you expect any viewer to apprehend all of it? My response to it was I really want work that has a multitude of entry points. And somebody from the audience—it was kind of amazing when this happened —this graduate student goes: John Baldessari used to say that any given audience has much larger capacities of comprehending than then they're given credit for, right?

Rail: Oh, what a great answer.

Deschenes: Yeah it was amazing. Particularly since we were in LA and given Baldessari's history of teaching there. I guess that's my answer, that people can ascertain information in all sorts of ways. There are so many different ways to learn, right? I was one of those kids who maybe learned through color, or, you know, I was really interested in maps, and so I was a visual learner. Other people, like my mother—she was a tactile learner.

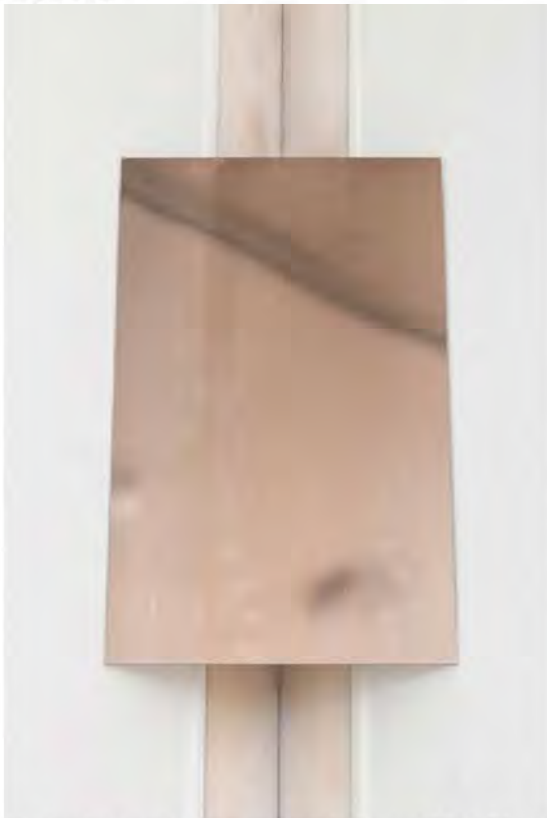


Installation view: *Liz Deschenes*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2016. © Liz Deschenes. Courtesy the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Charles Mayer.

Rail: And sometimes, you wonder how much time a viewer is spending just reading the wall labels versus looking at the work itself and formulating an idea. When a work of art is a little mysterious or not obvious, it demands a bit more of the viewer. You want to stand there and figure out what you're looking at and figure out what you think about it, or how you feel about it.

Deschenes: I totally concur. And that's what I said to this comment at the art center after this student was so smart to bring up Baldessari. Don't we want the bar to be high? I feel like so many of our encounters are dumbing down. Shouldn't we aspire to more?

Rail: Well, apparently, societally, we don't... But one of the things I've really enjoyed about seeing your work in certain exhibitions is the provocative or unexpected way it's been installed. I'm thinking of the Anna Atkins exhibition at the New York Public Library—*Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works*—where your work was sort of tucked up in these little out of the way corners. For me, it felt like a happy discovery when I spotted your pieces. Can you talk a little bit about that?



Liz Deschenes, *Front Cover, Back Cover*, 2018. Silver-toned black and white photograms. Two parts, each: 19 11/16 x 11 13/16 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Deschenes: It's so nice that you bring that up, because that was really hard for me to do, knowing that so many people were not going to see the works. But if you're going to be in conversation with somebody like Anna Atkins, historically, it's about her being known and unknown. She was an incredibly accomplished artist, and I still think she hasn't gotten the full consideration she deserves.

Rail: Right, I agree.

Deschenes: So what I did with that installation, I think, points to the fact that she wasn't seen. And that was important to me. I wanted to point to how she had been obscured. I mean, you probably know this, but she sent Fox Talbot her books, and that was before he had made any of his books. I'm not saying he made his books because Atkins sent him hers, but that's



Liz Deschenes, *Front Cover, Back Cover*, 2018. Silver-toned black and white photograms. Two parts, each: 19 11/16 x 11 13/16 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Rail: I agree.

Deschenes: So it actually is genuinely public.

Rail: I want to go back a bit, because another aspect of your work that interests me is the way you're pushing the definition of what a photograph is. And I was wondering if you could talk about the show that you curated in 2000 for the Andrew Kreps Gallery, *Photography about Photography*, because it seemed like it outlined some of your ideas about the medium.

Deschenes: That's so great that you're asking me about that, because that particular show was out of frustration, because in 2000, the dialogue in photography was so narrative oriented. And I felt like a lot was being lost, or just not addressed. I think there was a frustration that my work wasn't part of a dialogue, and all these other artists that I was interested in were working in ways that were not really considered as a group, but as individual gestures. There were all these people who were thinking about the materiality of photography along with the histories of photography—from James Welling to Uta Barth—I wanted to look at the shared agendas of these artists.

Rail: You studied at RISD as an undergrad, is that right?

Deschenes: Yes, as an undergrad, I studied photography at RISD. It was pretty traditional.

Rail: I was wondering if, for you, there was ever a move away from narrative photography, or was that something that never interested you?

Deschenes: The work was landscapes, and when you were a photo student at RISD, you had to do more than one exhibition for your thesis year, and I did two radically different exhibitions. Already then I was considering how viewing impacts your experience of the work. And that wasn't a calculated thing. I remember one of the venues I was given—somebody's work was going to be installed near mine, and it was sort of loud. And I was making really small prints and I knew the work around me was going to impede upon that. So then I was like: Oh! you know, you don't have to use what you're given. You can shift it, and you can change it. So even when I was a student, there was the idea that exhibition spaces are not neutral, right? They can be reconfigured or configured—they can be malleable. I built walls in order to better serve the viewing of the work.

Rail: That leads me to ask about *Tilt/Swing*, because that certainly engages with the exhibition space in a really interesting way and showing the work in a way that's unorthodox and makes the viewer think about how they're looking at the work and where they are physically in relation to the work.

Deschenes: That's actually part of how I started thinking about installing this show and not having work be on the walls. You know, it obviously comes from a drawing that Herbert Bayer did when he was teaching at the Bauhaus, that never got realized. And it was never intended for photography; it would have been paintings that would have been included. So I was always fascinated by that particular drawing and how to bring that to life and change it. I took some liberties with it. In Herbert Bayer's drawing, somebody wouldn't view the work right in the middle of the work. But with *Tilt/Swing*, I wanted people to be there in the work or outside of the work. It's amazing that he went to such lengths to come up with such an amazing design and then put a viewing platform in the work.

So some of these things are really subtle, but—hopefully—you can change the way people view work or understand the work, and they'll bring that experience to other exhibitions or even back out onto the street. Emily Dickinson says it really well, she says if you change one small thing, you change everything. And I'm glad you brought up the floor pieces. Viewers might think: "They're supposed to be on the wall!"

Rail: Right. It sort of dislodges something in your brain a little bit, because you have to rethink everything.

Deschenes: Yeah, dislodge is nice. That's a good term to think about what some of the strategies have been.

Rail: A lot of the work that you do, it's intended to oxidize and to change over time.

Deschenes: Yeah. That's totally right. And that's in opposition to the blue prints, which for the most part I'm making with UV, or dye-sublimation prints that are supposed to last a really, really long time. So you have this one thing that's not supposed to change, in relation to this other thing, like silver, which is so volatile. I am fixing them—they're fixed and they're washed. And they're mounted. So they go through all the procedures one would go through to have a traditional black and white print.

Rail: I wanted to go back to the screens a little bit—the blue screens that you did that were based on a conservation card, is it called the Blue Wool scale?

Deschenes: Yeah, it is. I was actually in the Museum of Modern Art's conservation department one day, and they were doing these tests on material that I'd given them that was in *Tilt/Swing*. I had no idea that they could accelerate the aging of the materials so that they can show what it's going to be, I don't know how many years out. If I can, when I'm visiting institutions, I always want to see the conservation department. That, to me, is where the genius of most institutions lies. So I was leaving there one day, and I saw this card on the wall, and it had eight different versions of blue, and I asked Lee Ann Daffner, who is one of MoMA's photo conservators, about it. And she explained that when they have work on view that has pigment, they have to know how much color is fading. And I had no idea that they did this. And she was like: so there's one in the gallery, and there's one in a drawer. And then, after three months or six months or whatever, we compare the two to see how much color has faded, and then we make decisions on that, based on how many times a work can be shown and for how long.

Rail: But to some extent, chance and unpredictability are part of your work, right?

Deschenes: Yeah. And sometimes that results in things that—I did an exhibition in London a few years ago in a gallery space that had been Wolfgang Tillmans's studio. They were tearing down the building, and I showed work of mine, some of which hadn't been seen in a while, or had been in storage, or had been returned by collectors that had altered over time. And that was something that I was really interested in seeing—what happened to this piece that I showed and it's been in storage for the last twelve or thirteen years. Some of the discoveries are really great. And some of them are less, shall we say, compelling.

Rail: I'm sure this doesn't happen often, but occasionally people will return work that they've bought, because the works have changed?



Liz Deschenes, *Untitled (Gorilla Glass Indigo 90)*, 2023. UV cured inkjet on Gorilla Glass, stainless steel. 29 1/4 x 29 inches (74.3 x 73.7 cm). Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Deschenes: Yes!

Rail: Which I think is so funny, because that's baked into the work... the fact that it will change.

Deschenes: I think the galleries even have a disclaimer, you know. But this is where it goes back to photography, right? The expectations that people have for the medium of photography are just so unrealistic, right? Like photographic materials change—even the digital ones, like all the people who can't figure out how to migrate files. And I haven't been able to figure this out, even though I've thought about it for a really long time: Why do people have unrealistic expectations for photography? It's supposed to be uber archival, and this and that, but no, it has a span, and that span to me is really intriguing, because it sort of flies in the face of these unrealistic expectations.

Rail: Maybe it has something to do with the history of the medium, and it being produced by a mechanical device that led people to think it would be more fixed, more permanent.

Deschenes: That's really apt actually, I think the mechanical beginnings could be a really big part of it. And maybe we have the same issue right now that the machine can supersede the hand.

Rail: Maybe that's the same reason that there's this belief that photography depicts some truth, which has never really been the case, because as we said at the beginning, the filters are there in some way.

Deschenes: Yeah, photography gets a lot imposed on it, but everything is obviously a translation.

Contributor

Jean Dykstra

Jean Dykstra is a photography critic and the editor of *photograph magazine*.

Mirror with a Memory

Eva Respini

1

In the competitive race to claim photography's invention, the Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre developed a technique that he announced in 1839 and named after himself: the daguerreotype.¹ The advent of a fixed, accurate likeness of a person or landscape must surely have been an astonishing and thrilling sensation for anyone encountering it for the first time. Complicating the experience, in the reflective silver-plated copper surfaces one could see oneself seeing—a unique, though challenging, viewing condition that prompted the poet and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes to famously call daguerreotypes "mirrors with memories."² These photographs were fragile and difficult to reproduce, and despite their great popularity, other technologies were developed and announced. The later refinement of the photographic negative as invented by the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot paved the way for photography as we know it, prized because of its aptitude for reproduction and description. It is precisely this aspect of the medium, however, that Liz Deschenes dispenses with in her provocative, engaging, and striking work. She looks to the history of photography not with a spirit of nostalgia, but one of critical examination and invention.

Like the daguerreotypes of 175 years ago, Deschenes's photographs must be encountered in the flesh to be truly seen. Defying traditional photographic representation throughout her various bodies of work—mirrored surfaces, brightly hued monochromes, highly polished black façades, and carefully designed installations of hybrid photo-sculptures—Deschenes addresses and complicates the very act of perception. Unlike most photographs, her works are unique and virtually impossible to reproduce. In a world where we digest hundreds of images at a quick glance, mostly on a screen, Deschenes's works demand to be seen, or rather experienced, in person, proposing seeing as a physical act. She employs the language of sculpture, architecture,

and exhibition design to consider the apparatus of viewing art, inviting viewers to slow down, circle her work, see their reflections in it, and become attuned to the architecture that surrounds it and them.

The reference to photography as mirror has been employed repeatedly since the medium's inception. In 1978, photography curator John Szarkowski organized the exhibition *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in which he posited two distinct categories for photographs: the mirror—the subjective exploration of an artist's ideas—and the window—the artist's descriptive observations of the world. It goes without saying that Szarkowski's binary opposition is divisive, and in the case of many artists, over-reductive. This is especially true for Deschenes, who questions and resists all power structures, including binaries, that confine works of art. Photography is frequently reduced to polarized classifications—color versus black-and-white, landscape versus portrait, analogue versus digital, representation versus abstraction—but in fact the medium has always been fluid and hybrid, resistant to typologizing.

The one constant throughout the medium's history has been technological innovation. While refusing to submit to the rules of photographic convention, Deschenes demonstrates her extensive knowledge of photography's evolving history. Her work is characterized not by a single technology, method, process, or subject, but rather by a sustained engagement with the fundamental materials of photography (light, chemistry, and time) and the mechanics of viewing. Responding to the conditions of production, she calibrates her works to the site as a way to underscore and nuance the spectator's relationship to space, sometimes encouraging new visual encounters and at other times responding to and disrupting the architectural surround.

2

Deschenes's work presents a compelling visual and physical experience that calls for no prerequisite reading. However, her web of references to the histories of art, film, architecture, design, and technology suggests many paths for accessing the work. Like any survey devoted to a working artist, this catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies is an unfinished, and thus provisional, account of a flourishing career. This essay is organized chronologically, with an emphasis on the dominant themes in Deschenes's work—reflection, opticality, and the nature of production and viewership. These subjects are considered in tandem with the artist's techniques, including analogue printing, camera-less photography, and site-specific sculptural installation, which are inextricably linked to its meaning.

Although visual pleasure is a key aspect of Deschenes's art, her larger purpose is to revise the very notion of what a photograph is by, as art historian and critic Johanna Burton writes, "willfully



Fig. 1
Corita Kent (b. Fort Dodge, Iowa; 1918–1986)
Boston Gas Tank (Rainbow Tank), 1971
Paint on steel and aluminum
140 x 152 feet (42 x 46 m)



Fig. 2
Liz Deschenes, *Men's Bathhouse #2*, 1998 (work print)

redirecting the viewer."³ With their lush beauty, alchemical signatures, and rigorous methodologies, Deschenes's photographs adamantly broadcast the volatile and expressive capacities of the medium, coercing the attention of the inquisitive visitor.

3

To grasp the complexity of Deschenes's work, it is worth visiting her formative cultural and artistic influences. Deschenes grew up on Boston's South Shore, a homogeneous and largely conservative community. Although she has made New York City her home, her place of origin and its familial bonds remain a strong point of contact for her. She has referenced her roots in several works, including *Quincy / Braintree*, 2004 (p. 65).⁴ Among Boston's landmarks, none is more recognizable than the large gas tank featuring a brightly colored dripped-paint design conceived by artist, activist, educator, and nun Corita Kent (fig. 1). Situated prominently on the Dorchester waterfront a few miles from Deschenes's hometown, Kent's transformative intervention would have undoubtedly been a point of fascination for the young artist. The landmark is a site of controversy—some claim it features a hidden profile of Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh. Though the reading appears to be far-fetched, the notion of a message encrypted within a colorful, apparently abstract design is certainly relevant to Deschenes, whose own arresting, color-saturated, nonfigurative work also contains within it various registers of meanings and readings.

Interested in art from an early age, Deschenes enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the mid-1980s with a plan to study painting or architecture. She instead took classes in the photography department founded by Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, both

trained in the Bauhaus tradition. The conservative pedagogical model and predominance of male faculty led Deschenes to seek out other contexts in which she could get involved in AIDS activism, queer politics, and feminism. During the heated culture wars of the 1990s, she explored ideas about the power of representation in relation to identity, gender, and the body, while also stressing the limits in photography.⁵ A black-and-white photographic project of bathhouses on Cape Cod's historical seashore (fig. 2) articulates such concerns. Devoid of people, these spare pictures at first glance appear to be straightforward documentation, but on closer study reveal themselves to be a nuanced consideration of architecture's role in conditioning gender. While her current work has rarely been considered in light of her convictions, the ethos of Deschenes's formative years—one of critique and resistance—has remained pervasive throughout her production.

Deschenes's thesis presentation was another early determinant experience. Undergraduates in photography at RISD were required to present their final project in two galleries: the Woods-Gerry student space and the photography department's Red Eye Gallery. Most of her peers presented the same selection of work at both locations (photography is, after all, a reproducible medium), but Deschenes created two separate exhibitions, building a mazelike parcours wall configuration for one space, the first manifestation of her engagement with architecture and site-specificity.⁶ The artist has continued to explore the dual-venue format, most recently for her 2013 exhibition *Bracket*, hosted simultaneously at the Campoli Presti galleries in Paris and London. The approach addresses the slippery nature of photography, underscoring its capacity for multiplicity and temporality (a resistance to the notion of photography freezing a single moment in time, a challenge that is also apparent in Deschenes's preference for multiples—diptychs, triptychs, and quadripartite works abound in her oeuvre).



Fig. 3
Louise Lawler (b. Bronxville, New York, 1947)
Untitled, 1988
Silver dye bleach print with text
26 1/2 x 32 3/4 inches (67.3 x 83.2 cm)
The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women

4

As a young artist, Deschenes worked as a technician in photography labs, honing her expertise in analogue and chemical printing processes. She also spent years documenting artworks—becoming adept at describing an expressive object in space—a practice that no doubt influenced the carefully tuned methods of display that are her signature today. In light of this expertise, and the fact that it is difficult to reproduce her own work, the artist points us to mediation as part of the crux of the work. An influential touchstone for Deschenes is Louise Lawler's analytical project in which she photographs other artists' work—in museums, galleries, auction houses, and collector's homes—to intimate that art's meaning is altered by its presentation and attendant circumstances (fig. 3). Deschenes takes this idea further by creating conditions of production and display that are themselves in flux.

Deschenes launched her investigation of the shifting conditions of photographic production with *Elevation #1–#7*, 1997–2003 (pp. 94–95), a key work whose arrangement, although now fixed, has changed over time. A set of seven monochrome dye transfer prints whose color gradient ranges from green to brown, *Elevation* was first displayed in a vertical configuration alongside landscape photographs that Deschenes had made in Beppu, Japan, known for its natural hot springs (fig. 4). The colors are related to those of a topographical map, in which green denotes high elevation and brown, sea level. Although the monochromes are now divorced from their referents—the titles and horizontal configuration are the only remaining links with the landscapes—they have a symbolic redolence on account of the powerful associations of color.

The dye transfer process is a laborious, exacting, and expensive chemical photographic printing process in which spectrally brilliant color is achieved through three-color separations, each controlling a layer of dye. So far, its saturated colors have been impossible to

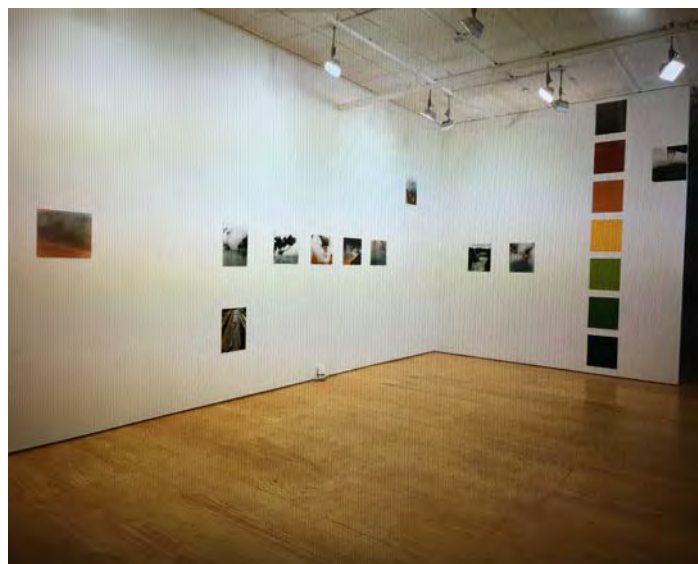


Fig. 4
Installation view, *Below Sea Level*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 1999

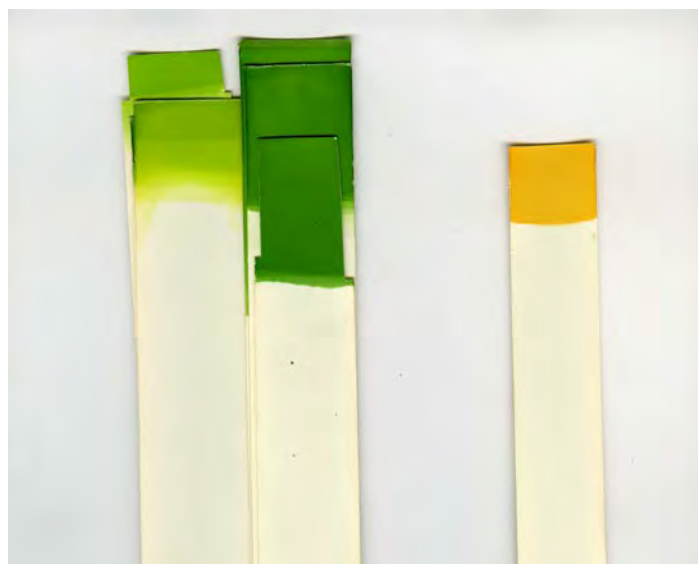


Fig. 5
Dyed paper strips, studies for *Elevation #1–#7*, c. 1997

create by means of any other photographic technology, either analogue or digital. Discontinued by Kodak in 1994, the process was already obsolete when Deschenes began working with it. Deschenes dyed strips of paper and had her master printer match the prints to those colors (fig. 5). By resurrecting dye transfer, Deschenes signals that technological shifts have always defined the medium, and critically investigates what has been gained and lost along the way. The artist's use of outmoded technology speaks not only to the changing conditions of images, but also to our shifting relationships to images. As our world fills with images, Deschenes's work reminds us of the enduring potential for sensual and aesthetic pleasure in photography.

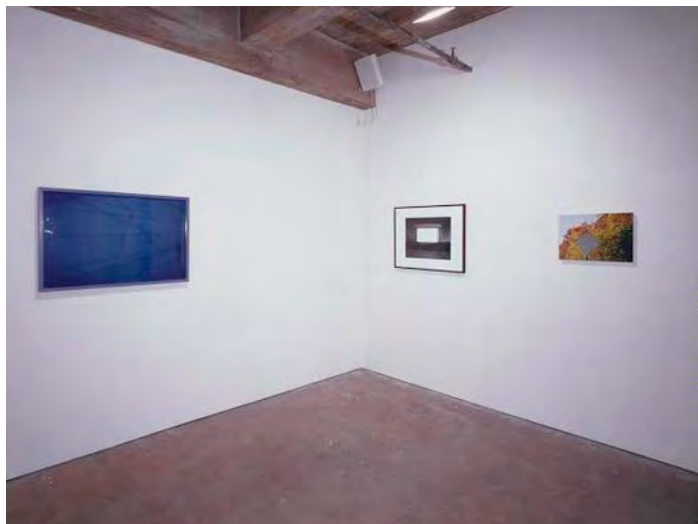


Fig. 6
Installation view, *Photography about Photography*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2000, showing works (left to right) by Louise Lawler, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Rachel Harrison



Fig. 7
Florence Henri (b. New York; 1893–1982)
Self-Portrait, 1928
Gelatin silver print
11 7/8 x 9 3/8 inches (30 x 23.8 cm)

5

After completing *Elevation*, Deschenes went on to create a broader dialogue with self-reflexive art practices by organizing the 2000 exhibition *Photography about Photography* at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York (fig. 6). Presented at a time when many photographers—including Gregory Crewdson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Andreas Gursky, and Jeff Wall—were exploring narrative and cinematic constructs, Deschenes's exhibition was innovative in identifying artists who were instead experimenting with photography's properties. Featuring the work of Uta Barth, Rachel Harrison, Louise Lawler, Thomas Ruff, James Welling, and others, the exhibition drew on the legacy of non-representational photography, often perceived as an "alternate" to the dominant understanding of the photograph as index. This history includes the originary nineteenth-century experiments of Daguerre and Fox Talbot, the modernist legacies of László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and their often-overlooked contemporaries Florence Henri (fig. 7) and Lucia Moholy, as well as the photographic projects of conceptual artists such as Jan Dibbets (fig. 8) and Robert Smithson. In 2015, Deschenes reprised her curatorial effort to highlight artists who are expanding the conventional parameters of photography by organizing *Artists' Choice: An Expanded Field of Photography*. Held at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams in conjunction with a presentation of her own work, the exhibition featured the work of Dana Hoey, Miranda Lichtenstein, and Sara VanDerBeek, among others.

Recent years have witnessed a boom of interest in so-called abstract photography,⁷ and Deschenes's work is at the forefront of the conversation. Unfortunately, the impulse of critics and curators to celebrate an "alternative" to traditional photography has perpetuated a medium-specific discourse that has limited the reading of Deschenes's art, overlooking its affirmation of the inherently hybrid, pluralistic, and mutable nature of photography. As an educator, she explains the medium's fluidity by introducing disregarded figures (often women) and so-called "alternate" histories into her teaching. Her active involvement with other artists in both her curatorial and creative work embodies her attitude toward photography, underscoring her insistence on understanding the medium in pluralistic ways. Since photography's invention, it has been considered "other"—outside the established traditions of painting and sculpture (and even a threat to the former). For many artists, especially women, using photography—a medium with a relatively short history, unbound by the traditions of the academy—provided a freedom from the often-crushing history of older mediums. In this light, Deschenes's engagement with and advocacy of the myriad possibilities of the medium of photography through teaching and curating further attests to the importance she gives to openness and flexibility in discursive engagement. We must consider Deschenes's work alongside her advocacy of understanding the medium in an expanded sense.



Fig. 8
 Jan Dibbets (b. Weert, Netherlands, 1941)
Perspective Correction—My Studio II, 3: Square with Cross on Floor, 1969
 Gelatin silver print on canvas
 43 3/8 x 43 3/8 inches (110 x 110 cm)

6

In 2001, Deschenes attended the National Association of Broadcasters convention in Las Vegas, an annual event that showcases that industry's new technologies. The visit inspired her series *Green Screen Process*, 2001 (and the later *Blue Screen Process*, 2001–02), focused on the backdrops commonly used in television and film production as a matrix for special effects. Now ubiquitous in the digital realm, this technology is typically invisible to viewers (the exception being the occasional glimpse of a green background during televised weather reports). Bringing the backdrop to the foreground, Deschenes uses it to probe the significance of color in contemporary culture.

Green Screen #1, #2, and #3 (pp. 110–11) divest the screen of its promotional role in the convention hall booth. *Green Screen #4* (pp. 106–07), a 15-foot-long monochrome photograph mounted to Duratrans (a material used for commercial photographic displays), is both photograph and backdrop, a stand-in for the thing it depicts. With its chromatic intensity and imposing physicality, the work forms a dramatic contrast to the idea of the source screen as an invisible portal into an imaginary world—a play on the idea of the photograph as window. For another iteration, *Green Screen #7* (p. 101), the artist scanned a green screen and photographed the pixelated image off the monitor to create a hybrid analogue/digital picture. As in much of Deschenes's oeuvre, in this series colors keyed to provide specialized information have come to occupy symbolic registers. As Deschenes notes, screen technologies “have changed the way we view color.”⁸ The screen becomes a vehicle for the projection of the desires of a culture subsumed by the fabrication of fiction.

When screen technology was first developed in the 1930s, for film, the backdrops were blue. With the advent of digital techniques (specifically chroma key), green became the dominant backdrop color in movies, television, and video games. Creating a greater

contrast with the skin tones of the actors in front of it, green better composites darker ranges than blue can. Consequently, the move to green screens and digital technology accommodated the increased presence of African-American actors, musicians, athletes, and public figures in television and film. With this body of work, Deschenes subtly comments on the changing perception of race and its relation to the history of film and photographic technologies.⁹

7

The most basic photographic technique is the photogram—an indexical image made by exposing sensitized paper to light, strategically obstructing its passage by placing objects on the sheet. In 2003, Deschenes produced her first photograms, which became the foundation for the camera-less images for which she is known: see *Tilt / Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)*, 2009; *Stereographs*, 2012; and *Gallery 7*, 2014. Her first photograms, simply titled *Photographs* (pp. 38–39), are mirror-like surfaces that depict no imagery at all in the usual sense. In an ad hoc studio she created on the terrace of an apartment she rented near the aptly named Calle del Espejo (Mirror Street) in Madrid, Deschenes exposed sheets of black-and-white photographic paper to moonlight and then fixed and toned them by hand with a mixture of chemicals, including ammonium hydroxide and silver. The hands-on process takes hours, sometimes days, to complete, and chance and performance are inherent in its results. The photograms react to the atmospheric conditions during their making—the surface effects vary if the outside temperature drops, the humidity changes, a cloud obscures the moon, or the artist takes a few moments longer to fix the photograph. Due to these variable conditions, each photogram is unique.



Fig. 9
Man Ray (b. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 1890–1976)
Dust Breeding, 1920, printed c. 1967
Gelatin silver print
9 5/8 x 12 inches (24.4 x 30.5 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Photography in the Fine Arts Gift, 1969

Deschenes now makes her photograms outdoors in Vermont (she has taught at Bennington College since 2006), continually pushing the limits and conditions of production, exposing paper to both moonlight and sunlight, and considerably increasing the scale of the prints. Sometimes described as elusive, her photograms are anything but in terms of their fabrication. They literally absorb the materials of their creation—space, time, and the environment—making them the most direct capture of the world possible.

At first glimpse, Deschenes's photograms may look like uniform mirrors, but in fact they are highly individual, each surface showing drips, scratches, pockmarks, fingerprints, and brushstrokes. The effect conjures the gestural domains of painting as well as the photography/painting hybrids practiced by artists such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. Deschenes's surfaces also evoke the built-up materiality of Man Ray's iconic *Dust Breeding* (Duchamp's *Large Glass with Dust Notes*), 1920 (fig. 9), which recorded, over the course of a long exposure, the accumulation of dust atop Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), 1915–23. Like *Dust Breeding*, Deschenes's long-exposure photograms capture the process of their production. The chance operations she sets into motion replicate photography's essential unpredictability. With their unique alchemical signatures, her photograms resist photography's claim to easy and infinite reproducibility, and due to their commanding physical presence, they propose a celebration of the medium's status on a par with painting and sculpture.

Because of their chemical make-up (specifically, unstable silver), Deschenes's photograms oxidize over time, a process beyond the artist's control that will continue, in theory, forever. The photograms exist in a perpetual state of change for other reasons as well.

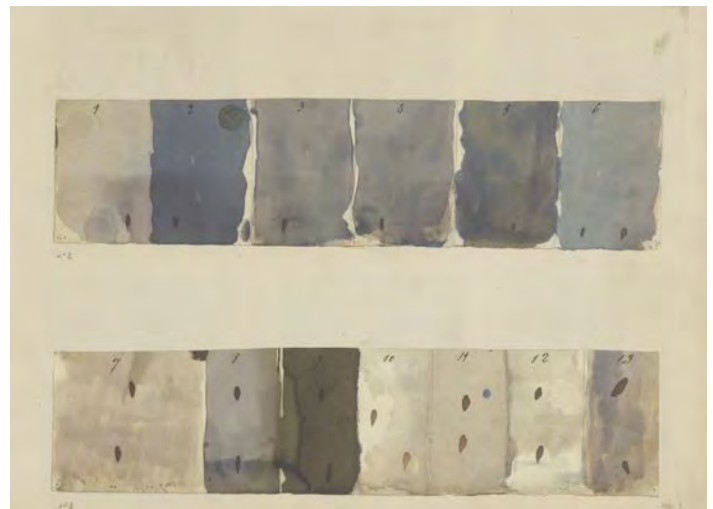


Fig. 10
Hippolyte Bayard's (b. Breteuil-sur-Noye, France; 1801–1887)
direct positive photographs mounted on notebook page dated January 1839.
Collection Société Française de Photographie, Paris

Because their mirrored surfaces reflect the people and architecture that surround them, no two installations will ever be the same. "The viewer activates the work," remarks the artist, "and becomes an integral part of a temporal, unrecorded representation."¹⁰ Photography is no longer simply a moment frozen in time.

The title *Photographs* situates Deschenes's photograms within the history of photography. The chemical-soaked papers of the first photographs (sometimes called light drawings) were indices of the process of their making, as seen, for instance, in Hippolyte Bayard's tests and notebooks (fig. 10). In the 1920s, a decade when film and photography technologies were being revolutionized, Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and others experimented with camera-less processes to propose new ways of seeing. Moholy-Nagy sought to create a syntax for photography using the elemental properties of the medium (light and chemicals), declaring in his 1927 treatise *Photography Is Design with Light*: "The main instrument of the photographic process is not the camera but the photosensitive layer; the specific rules and methods of photography accord with how the layer responds to lighting effects produced by different materials according to their light or dark, smooth, or rough characteristics."¹¹ Moholy-Nagy in his light compositions (fig. 11) considers what art historian George Baker terms "photography's particular conditions of representability," an idea that resonates with Deschenes's art.¹²

While Deschenes's photograms must be considered within the legacy of camera-less pictures, the ways that conceptual artists used photography in the 1960s and '70s are also pertinent. Consider Robert Smithson's photographs *Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, published alongside his essay "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" in the September 1969 issue of *Artforum* (fig. 12). No stranger to

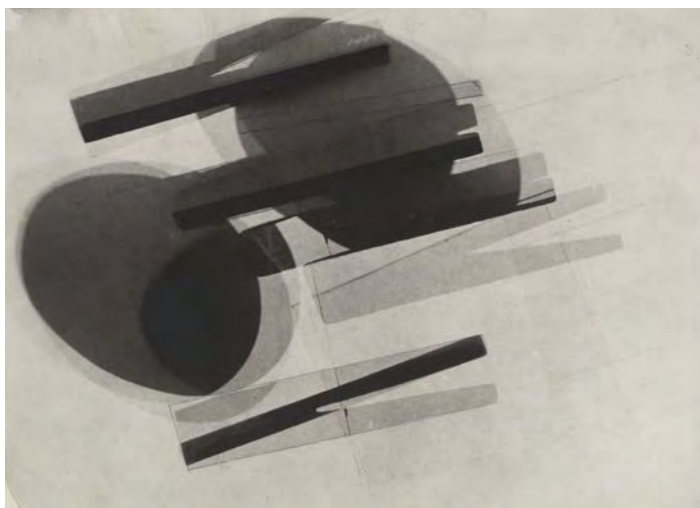


Fig. 11
László Moholy-Nagy (b. Bácsborsód, Hungary; 1895–1946)
Untitled, 1923–25
Gelatin silver print, 6 5/8 x 9 1/8 inches (16.8 x 23.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Anonymous gift



Fig. 12
Cover of September 1969 issue of *Artforum*
showing Robert Smithson's (b. Passaic, New Jersey; 1938–1973) *First Mirror Displacement*,
c. 1969

mirrors, Smithson used them to create ephemeral sculptures that were to be experienced solely through the photographic lens. Placing 12-inch-square mirrors in sites across the Yucatán that reflected and refracted the surrounding land, sky, and sun, he created a work that is at once fleeting and durational. Smithson wrote: “The mirror itself is not subject to duration, because it is an ongoing abstraction that is always available and timeless. The reflections, on the other hand, are fleeting instances that evade measure.”¹³ These ideas of entropy and duration are echoed in Deschenes’s thinking about the condition of reflectivity and performativity in her photograms—what she calls a “mercurial viewing experience,” one that is continually open to shifting conditions and that offers a new temporal model.¹⁴ She emphasizes that her introduction of the mirror is prompted by its optical capacities rather than any reference to the “mirrors and windows” divide: “I wanted to put the mirror right back into photography, not as a metaphor, but as a thing itself.”¹⁵

8

Deschenes continued her inquiry into the conditions of viewing in a series of photographs titled *Moiré*, exhibited in 2007 at Miguel Abreu Gallery on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Photographing a perforated sheet of paper against a window in black-and-white with an 8-by-10 camera, she made duplicate negatives and layered both in an enlarger to create prints that have a visually disorienting allover pattern. As the eye travels over the picture, the dot pattern vibrates and dances, blurring and coming into focus, seemingly never fixed. The *Moirés* (pp. 23–35) are straightforward in their making yet elusive in their effect. The title of the exhibition—*Registration*—points to the process whose neglect produces the density and opacity that result when two identical transparent negatives imperfectly overlap. As no two of the twenty-five *Moirés* are alike, they generate apparently infinite visual activity.

To produce the *Moirés*, Deschenes printed the black-and-white negatives on color paper, using slightly too much cyan, which creates a red afterimage of the pulsating pattern. The *Moirés* were paired with *Red Transfer*, 1997 (pp. 96–97), a diptych of seemingly identical monochromatic dye transfer prints that, on close inspection, are subtly different in hue. Dye transfers are the result of a perfect alignment of matrices—a counterpoint to the misregistration of the *Moirés*. The pairing of these two bodies of work probes the nature of how we see, ultimately affirming vision as physical act.

While the *Moiré* images are non-referential, they are laden with meaning, alluding to both contemporary visual experience and the historical language of photography exemplified by Fox Talbot’s photographic engraving print *Three Sheets of Gauze, Crossed Obliquely*,

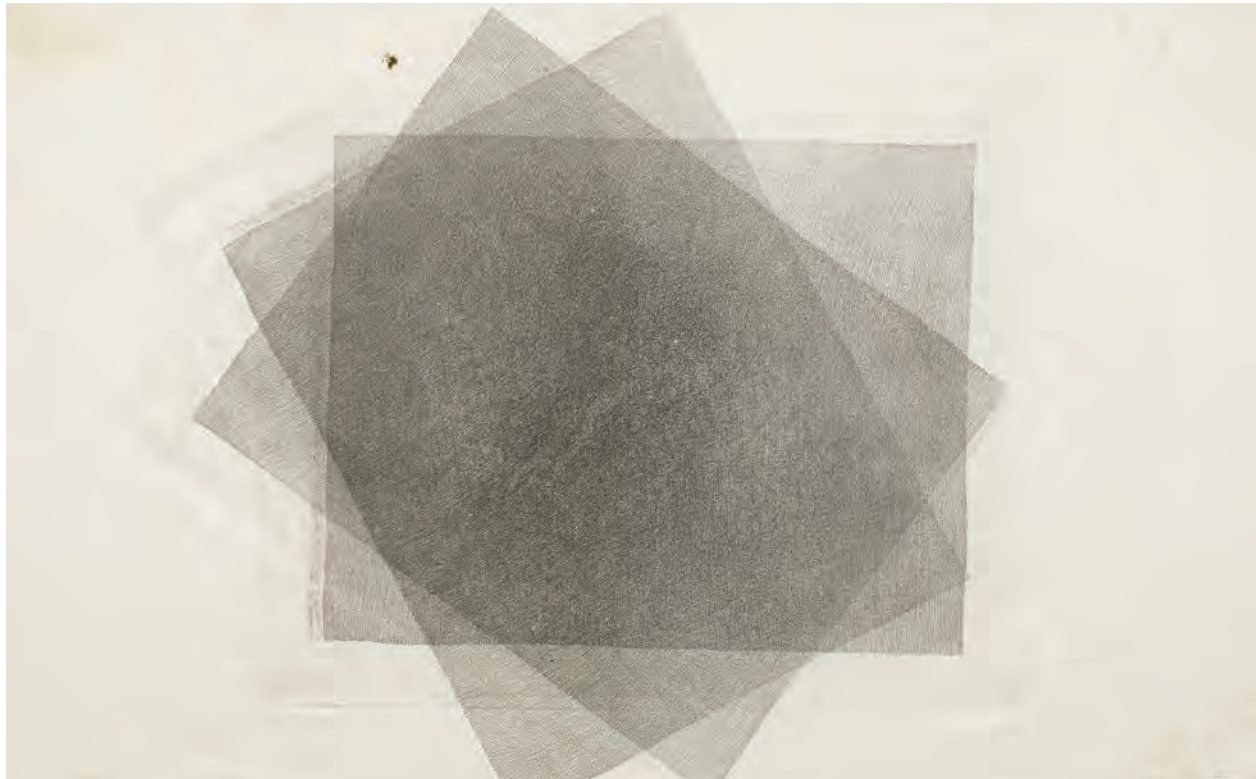


Fig. 13
William Henry Fox Talbot (b. Dorset, United Kingdom; 1800–1877)
Three Sheets of Gauze, Crossed Obliquely, 1852–57
Photographic engraving
5 1/4 x 5 inches (13.3 x 12.7 cm)
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

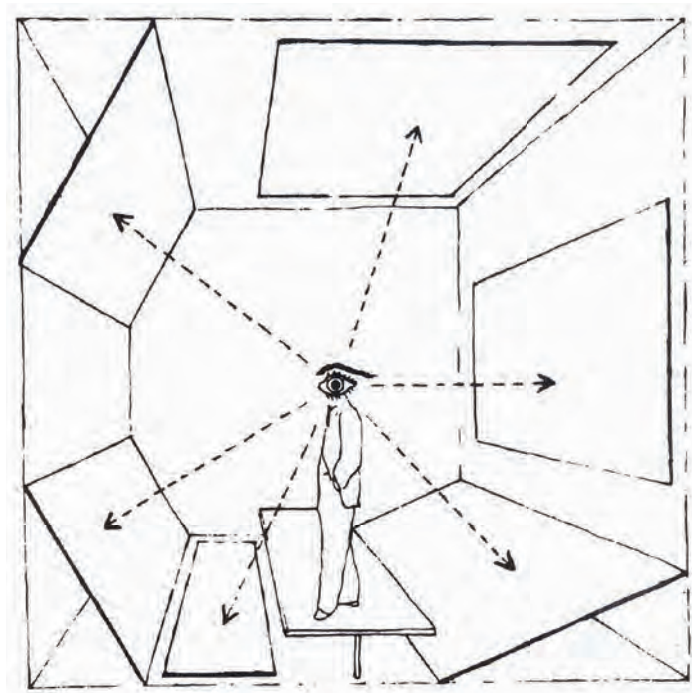


Fig. 14
Herbert Bayer's (b. Haag am Hausruck, Austria; 1900–1985)
Diagram of 360° Field of Vision, 1935

1852–57 (fig. 13). Today, a moiré pattern is an undesired effect—it happens when one scans a halftone image, on TV when a person is wearing a busy pattern, or when a TV screen is photographed with a digital camera. In a world where screens are ubiquitous, moiré patterns are a fact of contemporary visual life. As in her earlier green screen works, Deschenes in the *Moirés* makes visible what is typically unseen, undesirable, or considered an error.

9

Deschenes furthers photography's sculptural capacities and interaction with the body in *Tilt / Swing*, a work that dramatically shifts the traditional relationship between viewer and photograph. The piece was inspired by (and critical of) an unrealized exhibition design conceived by the Bauhaus artist, architect, and designer Herbert Bayer in 1935 (fig. 14), which interested Deschenes because it redirected emphasis from the subjectivity of the artist to that of the viewer. She did away with the raised viewing platform Bayer had designed and replaced the paintings with six mirrored photograms arranged in a 360-degree configuration; mounted and displayed without frames, they resemble highly polished mirrors. Whereas Bayer's schema is said to be "an inclusive picture of all [viewpoint] possibilities,"¹⁶ Deschenes's installation results in fragmented and fleeting reflections of the spectator and surrounding environment, an effect that, as curator Matthew Witkovsky notes, "scatters and deflects subjectivity while providing an inimitable encounter for the viewing self."¹⁷

Tilt / Swing appropriates the language of architectural photography: "tilt" refers to the rotation of the lens relative to the image plane, and "swing" (or "shift") refers to the vertical movement of the lens parallel to the image plane. The title also suggests an analogy between

Fig. 15
Performance view by Peter Moore of Joan Jonas's (b. New York, 1936) *Mirror Piece II*, 1970,
Emanu-El YMHA, New York

the gallery and a camera. When viewers encounter the installation, their bodies tilt and swing, and shift and strain, resulting in an angling and manipulation of vision, the body, and, by extension, experience.

The reference to Bayer is explicit in *Tilt / Swing*, but it is also worth considering the implicit heritage of conceptual and performance artists, such as Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Tilt / Swing* is distinctly performative—from the physical feats required to produce the photograms to the installation's activation by the viewer. Jonas explored the subjectivity and psychology of spectatorship in her landmark performance work *Mirror Piece*, 1969 (fig. 15). The considerations of display, exhibition, and reflection in Deschenes's work are closely related to ideas of identity, the body, and the politics of representation proposed by *Mirror Piece*. Though Jonas (and peers such as Gina Pane, Adrian Piper, and Hannah Wilke) operated on a more overtly political platform, their example is nonetheless apparent in Deschenes's employment of the mirror as object and subject, as well as in her underlying concern with the representation of the body literally reflected in the work.

10

In her series *Shift / Rise*, Deschenes continued to explore the language of camera movements and the sculptural possibilities of photography, installing photograms—in mirrored silver, polished black, or ghostly white—as vertical panels straddling the corners of rooms. While allusion could be made to Smithson's corner mirror sculptures, Deschenes here makes a pedestrian reference to photography—hers are a three-dimensional articulation of the triangular tabs that keep photographs in place in albums. The black photograms are produced the same way as the silver ones, except that the artist exposes the color photographic



Fig. 16
Robert Morris (b. Kansas City, Missouri, 1931)
Untitled (Corner Piece), 1964
Painted plywood
78 x 108 inches (198.2 x 274.3 cm)
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Panza Collection, 1991

paper to sunlight. The result is a “mistake” that traditional photographers would avoid at all costs. The resulting prints, mounted unframed, are highly polished black monochromes that conjure the black mirrors used by landscape painters in the pre-photographic era.

Shift / Rise was first exhibited in 2010 at the Brussels gallery Sutton Lane (now Campoli Presti), where the highly reflective black mirrors contrasted with the gallery's decorative architectural details and the natural light that flooded the space (pp. 54–55). This incongruence was reprised the next year in an exhibition in Berlin at the gallery Klosterfelde, where Deschenes presented pristine white photograms in a fin-de-siècle building (pg. 57). Her work is always highly responsive to the site in question, acknowledging its historical, architectural, and phenomenological particularities. In that regard, it must be understood in sculptural as well as photographic terms, specifically the legacy of site-specific minimalist sculpture, the prime example being Robert Morris's polyhedral sculpture *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, 1964, whose form specifies the Green Gallery in New York where it was first shown (fig. 16). Though Deschenes's work is often created with sensitivity to place, it can be installed in numerous configurations in order to accommodate the shifting and open-ended possibilities of both image making and context.

Shift / Rise highlights the radical difference between mechanical and human vision—the monocular versus the binocular. Like *Tilt / Swing*, it activates the interaction of bodies and objects in space, replacing the movements of a camera with those of the viewer. Each visitor, of course, is different, and will move through the space uniquely, at a singular pace, sometimes alone, at other times accompanied. Like all of Deschenes's work, *Shift / Rise* affirms that the phenomenology of seeing is informed by personal experience and subjectivity, and will change with each new iteration of the work.

Fig. 17
 Peter Kubelka (b. Vienna, Austria, 1934)
Arnulf Rainer (still), 1960
 16mm film (black-and-white)
 6:30 min.

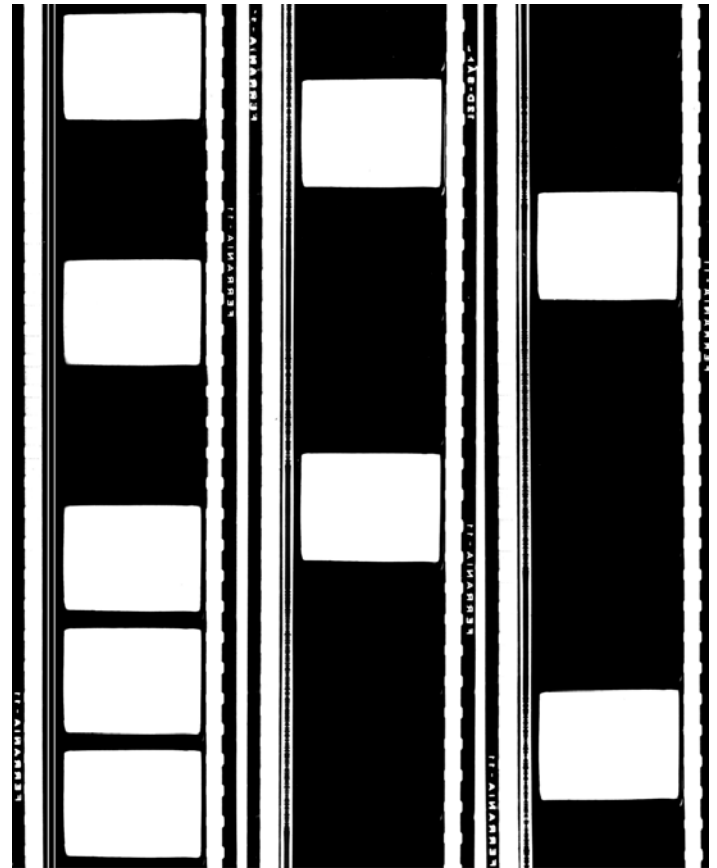
11

The mechanics of seeing are explored to different effect in Deschenes's 2012–13 exhibition *Stereographs* at the Secession in Vienna. For this project, she produced four elongated silver photograms, 7 feet by 5 inches, installed so as to create a protruding corner shape—a nod to the bellows of a large-format camera. The works reference both nineteenth-century stereoscopy and linear perspective. Stereoscopes, a popular late nineteenth-century parlor entertainment, simulate human vision by presenting two nearly identical pictures a certain distance from each other, which when viewed through a handheld device are optically fused by the mind to form a three-dimensional image. This illusion of spatiality is mimicked in Deschenes's installation, which essentially turned the gallery into a camera (the Latin word for "room"). Moving the gallery's entrance to a previously unused exterior side door, the artist funneled viewers through a long hallway (the viewfinder) to two adjacent rooms (the stereograph). Each room contained four *Stereographs* of the same size, positioned to create perspectival illusions. As in Deschenes's previous works, the architecture is activated, here put to the service of a photographic analogy that emerges through space and time. The *Stereographs*, according to Johanna Burton, "must be seen not only as dilating context and insisting on spatial occupation but also as moving speculatively: *developing*."¹⁸

Deschenes continued to use photograms to test the limits of perception with the elegant series *Bracket #1–4* (pp. 60–61), presented in *Bracket* (London) as part of the 2013 exhibition shared by the Campoli Presti galleries in England and France. Four elongated parallelograms, which deflect and reflect the natural light streaming in through skylights and windows, reference the race to announce the invention of photography that occurred simultaneously in London and Paris. The exhibition was "bracketed" by *Bracket* (Paris), shown simultaneously at the French gallery to acknowledge Paris's equal claim. The photograms propose new temporal models for photography, which is often seen as centered on a "decisive moment" (the oft-repeated phrase coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson). "The photographs simultaneously refer to their history, reflect the present, and will continue to unfold over time," says Deschenes, "altering one of the precepts or oft-cited characteristics of photography and its fixed relationship to the past."¹⁹ While her works claim a strong tie to photography's past, their continually changing contexts and surfaces insist on their identity as present-tense objects that embody a state of flux.

12

Film and its apparatus have been a touchstone for Deschenes throughout her career, and her 2014 series *Zoetropes* (pp. 36–37) draws on proto-cinematic technologies. Zoetropes were another popular nineteenth-century device, which produced the illusion of motion from still images.



A cylinder with slits cut into it was lined on the inside with drawings or photographs, and when it was spun on its axis, the images were magically animated when viewed through the slits. Deschenes's *Zoetropes*, comprised of thirteen vertical black photograms presented in concave frames, essentially turn the contraption inside out. The works are predicated on the persistence of the viewer's movement. Rather than requiring a stationary vantage point, Deschenes has unraveled the zoetrope on a wall, inviting the spectator to walk its length. "Everything in the piece is a reversal from the pre-cinematic zoetrope," the artist explains. "The slits of a zoetrope are convex (part of the circle), the photograms are concave. The slits on a zoetrope are a removal so that the viewer can see in; the photograms are an addition that allows the viewer to see everything that is outside the work reflected back in the work."²⁰

Deschenes has omitted the recognizable subjects and images of the historical zoetrope. Her photograms contain only the temporary reflections of the viewer, the light, and the surrounding architecture. Traditional content is peripheral, as in the work of avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s. Deschenes acknowledges the influence of structural filmmaker Peter Kubelka, whose six-minute stroboscopic film *Arnulf Rainer*, 1960, distills film to four essential components: light, dark, sound, and silence (fig. 17).²¹ Similarly, Deschenes has used the zoetrope as a way to contemplate the basic elements of light, duration, reflection, and movement. Her work conjures fundamental questions similar to those posed by Kubelka's films: Can photography be both subject and object? Can something be a picture of a thing and the thing itself at the same time? Can photography operate in a fleeting in-between space, an expansive realm that frees it from the confines of its own traditions?

Fig. 18
 Sherrie Levine (b. Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 1947)
After Walker Evans: 4, 1981
 Gelatin silver print
 5 1/8 x 3 7/8 inches (13 x 9.8 cm)
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of the artist, 1995



13

At the invitation of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in 2014 Deschenes created *Gallery 7* (pp. 130–35), a site-specific installation that folds issues of history, architecture, conceptual art, feminism, and photographic technologies into a single elegant and multilayered work.²² The installation was comprised of three elements: eleven photographs in freestanding frames arranged a single line; three horizontal lines etched into the gallery's walls, recalling a hanging system used by the Walker in the 1920s; and the natural light that flooded the gallery through floor-to-ceiling windows. Since the exhibition was on view for a year, the light conditions were always changing, and this encouraged the oxidation of the light-sensitive photograms, furthering a "development" of the work over time. The installation radically reorients the viewing experience in several ways. The freestanding frames occupy the center of the space and mimic the traditional position (and average height) of the spectator. The windows relocate the viewing experience from the walls toward the windows and the city beyond. "The gallery becomes an enormous camera, a viewing platform," notes Deschenes, "a way of looking at the city of Minneapolis throughout the entirety of a year."²³

Of the eleven photographs that comprise *Gallery 7*, nine are silver-toned photograms mounted in boxlike frames, each of which is presented at a slightly different angle so that they refract the surrounding architecture in varying ways. The additional two are digitally produced, blue-pigmented prints on acrylic, their hue alluding to the Blue Wool cards used by conservators to test the fading of textiles and artworks. The proportions of the photographs are derived from those of the index card, a reference to the feminist writer and critic Lucy Lippard's groundbreaking c. 7,500, an exhibition of conceptual art by women artists such as Eleanor Antin, N.E. Thing Co. Ltd., and Martha Wilson, held at the Walker Art Center in 1973. In lieu of a catalogue, Lippard compiled index cards with statements, documents, and instructions related to the work of each artist, her use of everyday materials and actions embodying the essence of conceptual art practices. This process of dematerialization and communication informs Deschenes's work as a whole—consider the matter-of-fact title *Photograph* she chose for her first series of photograms, or the reference to the mundane task of registration suggested by the title of her 2007 exhibition of *Moirés* at Miguel Abreu Gallery. *Gallery 7* is the apogee of the numerous ideas—about feminism, photography, technology, conservation, architecture, exhibition design, phenomenology of vision, and the performance of the body—that have continuously informed Deschenes's art.

Deschenes's work must be considered not only within the legacy of feminism and conceptual art, but also as a direct inheritor of the so-called Pictures Generation, the (mostly female) group of artists whose work suggested the finiteness of the visual world,

the depreciation of the primacy of a single image, and photography's capacity to both bolster and undermine the production of stereotypes and representations in our dominant camera culture. As the artist and critic Thomas Lawson wrote in 1981, "The photograph *is* the modern world," a declaration that is even truer today.²⁴

While it might seem that Deschenes's investigation of photography is at odds with the appropriation work of artists such as Sarah Charlesworth and Sherrie Levine, she shares with them a suspicion of the indexical capacities of the medium and an embrace of the expansiveness of its parameters.²⁵ Levine's re-photography of Walker Evans's Depression-era pictures, *After Walker Evans*, 1981, for example, challenges the chief tenets of traditional photography—originality, faithful reproduction, and indexicality (fig. 18). Levine's feminist appropriation of photography's patriarchal history has deeply informed, animated, and ultimately liberated Deschenes's work.

14

No matter when a work of art is made, it is contemporary, in that it is experienced anew in the here and now. This is certainly true of Deschenes's art. Singular in its vision, infinitely complex in the ideas it contains, and radically original in its capacity for multiplicity, Deschenes's work must always be considered in the present moment. By the very nature of the work, the artist alerts us that perception is bound to time, context, history, and identity.

At its core, Deschenes's work embodies resistance: resistance to a single definition of photography, resistance to time, and resistance to representation. The resistance to representation involves a rejection of the limiting depiction of identity, gender, and the body. For all its assertiveness, however, the work calls for careful, close looking on the part of the viewer to discern its many layers and implications. Depending on the day, the weather, the architecture, and the presence or absence of others in the gallery, each encounter with Deschenes's work is a unique experience that speaks to our fundamental desire to be transformed by art.

Notes

1. Several historians have argued that the credit for photography's "invention" should go to Daguerre's original partner, Nicéphore Niépce. Others have proposed a more nuanced understanding of photography's development, dating it back to the early 1700s, when the chemistry necessary to reproduce camera obscura images became available. For a detailed account, see Geoffrey Baatchan, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).
2. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The stereoscope and the stereograph," 1859, in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays and Images; Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 53–54.
3. Johanna Burton, "Liz Deschenes: Miguel Abreu," *Artforum* 45, no. 10 (Summer 2007): 497.
4. See also *Ma-re Mount*, an exhibition Deschenes initiated at Galerie Buchholz in Cologne, November 12, 2014–January 31, 2015, featuring the work of four artists hailing from Boston's South Shore: Carl Andre, Richard Prince, R. H. Quaytman, and Deschenes.
5. In a conversation with the author, June 12, 2015, Deschenes noted the influential work of Simon Watney, in particular *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (London: Cassel, 1997).
6. An echo of this student presentation is a recent collaborative project with Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl titled *Parcours*, held at the Art Institute of Chicago, April 21–September 9, 2012 (see pages 68–71). The exhibition was inspired by an unrealized 1930s exhibition proposal by Bauhaus artist and designer Herbert Bayer, who proposed a series of parallel walls that would turn the gallery space into a maze. The collaboration between the artists and the institution is captured on the museum's website at <http://exhibitions.artic.edu/parcours/>.
7. See Matthew Witkovsky, "Another History: On Photography and Abstraction," *Artforum* 48, no. 7 (March 2010): 212–21; Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2009); and Carol Squiers, *What Is a Photograph?* (Munich and New York: DelMonico Books • Prestel; New York: International Center for Photography, 2013).
8. Deschenes, quoted in Ann Temkin, *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 212.
9. Deschenes, in conversation with the author, June 26, 2015.
10. Deschenes, artist's statement, 2007.
11. László Moholy-Nagy, quoted in Clive Scott, *Street Photography: From Atget to Cartier-Bresson* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 17.
12. George Baker, "Photography: An Art of the Real," in Squiers, *What Is a Photograph?*, 50.
13. Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (September 1969): 30.
14. Deschenes, artist's statement, 2007.
15. Deschenes, in conversation with the author, July 27, 2015.
16. Karen Rosenberg, "Liz Deschenes, Tilt / Swing," *New York Times*, May 29, 2009.
17. Matthew Witkovsky, "Another History," 215.
18. Johanna Burton, "Because There Is No Decisive Moment," in Bettina Spörr, *Liz Deschenes: Secession* (Vienna: Secession, 2012), 15.
19. Deschenes, quoted in Roxana Marcoci, "Radical Looking: In the Presence of the Image, In the Absence of Spectacle," *Mousse*, no. 43 (April–May 2014): 255. This text has been adapted for the current volume; see pages 51–53.
20. Ibid.
21. Deschenes, in conversation with the author, July 27, 2015.
22. For more on *Gallery 7*, see the essay by Eric Crosby in this volume, pages 132–35.
23. Deschenes, quoted in Thea Ballard, "How to Light a Show: Liz Deschenes Turns the Gallery into a Camera," *Modern Painters* 26, no. 11 (December 2014): 60.
24. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 45.
25. See a text by the late Sarah Charlesworth reprinted in this volume, pages 124–25.

BECAUSE THERE IS NO DECISIVE MOMENT.

Johanna Burton

In conceiving her exhibition for the Secession, Liz Deschenes has come to describe what she will present there as functioning in a "stereo graphic" manner.¹ By this she means, I think, not that she will labor to translate the spherical into the planar (the contemporary definition pertaining to stereographic mapping) nor, extending such a function, the dimensional to the flat. Indeed, this latter definition in particular would be wholly untenable, since Deschenes's photographs work resolutely against notions that render the image a one-dimensional imprint—or index—thinly representing some "real" thing, out there, "in the world". The "stereo graphic" in Deschenes's practice might, rather, be conceived of in terms of its particular facility to produce a meeting-place *between* images, or—to put it differently—to render visible the operations of photography as it has functioned and as it might come to function, both materially and as a discursive form. Indeed, the artist's insistence on splitting the word into two symmetrical halves marks a difference between stereography and her own "stereo graphy"—a distinction that usefully privileges gaps instead of trying to close them.

The term "stereograph" was coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes, a physician and writer from Boston who wrote glowingly of the invention in the late 1850s.² His utter enthusiasm for a then-new photography-related technology led him to pen a treatise of sorts. In "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" he came up with the two terms we continue to use today for what had theretofore been rather clunkily described as a "double-eyed or "twin" picture (stereograph) and the contraption with which to view it (invented by Holmes, who subsequently named it "stereoscope"). A stereograph basically consists of two nearly identical pictures placed at eye distance from each other. Viewed through the stereoscope, the two pictures produce a single—three-dimensional—image. The simple science of creating a photographic scenario capable of *spatial* imaging comes, intriguingly, via the doubling and splitting of otherwise ordinary two-dimensional photographs.

Holmes's faith in the stereograph was complete and, like others of his generation who turned to photography and its offshoots as harbingers of a new reality, he found in it unsurpassable

potential. For the most part, Holmes's conception of photography—one might say, his ideas about its ontology—were in line with others who saw it as a radically objective tool. Arguing for the camera as an instrument of wholly neutral, mechanical reproduction, he was fascinated by what he saw as images that gave a view of reality as realer-than-real: unsullied, that is, by traces of human creativity or point of view.

This belief in the photograph as unmediated window on the world has today mostly lost credibility. Holmes also believed—erroneously—that stereographic images allowed viewers to visually “feel” *around* the objects contained in what were experienced as three-dimensional photographs. Although this was only an illusion, something of Holmes's argument should, I think, retain our interest. Indeed, his assumption that photographs could be experienced spatially led to a further, speculative, conclusion. For Holmes the stereographic experience was one that produced new objects—forms untethered from the matter with which they are typically associated in the world. “Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us,” Holmes wrote, going so far as to argue that, “Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their *skins*, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.”³

Holmes's emphasis on form is not an echo of the Platonic ideal, not an argument that what we experience in the world is but a pale approximation of something that, while perfect in its contours, is inaccessible to us except as a concept. Rather, I think, he is an unexpected precursor to thinkers like André Malraux, whose notion of the *musée imaginaire*, a century later, would posit photographic reproduction as the means by which to construct radical new typologies of form. In Malraux's system, as with Holmes's before him, the imperative of traditional classification of objects (grouped by date, medium, school of thought, etc.) gave way to morphological and thematic connections across time and space. For Malraux this shift—where a photograph of a Byzantine sculpture might have unexpected affinities with, and occupy a similar pictorial status to a modernist portrait painting—allowed for a through-line of “style.”⁴ Style! This is a word we regard with suspicion, calling as it does attention to the surface of a thing, rather than to its content, *per se*. Yet style, etymologically at least, must be understood as aligned with naming, with giving designation. This is to say that, *pace* Malraux and going back to Holmes, style can be the key to disrupting tradition and hegemonic ordering systems and can be taken up as a tool for suggesting *other* constellations of form. Perhaps it is, then, the very *skin* of a thing (to use Holmes's some-

what unsettling metaphor) that gives us some agency in how we place and, crucially, *re-place* that thing in a world that has previously accommodated it far less limberly.

To that end, let us return to Deschenes's insistence that she is working "stereo graphically". Though as I write this essay I have only a schematic understanding of the artist's installation for the Secession, I know that—in the spirit in which she has been functioning for the last several years—her work there will necessarily reflect something of the site itself while also bucking up the very implications of site-specificity as that concept is currently formulated. Indeed, while acknowledging the very particular—even eccentric—situation of the Secession (a building famously derided at the beginning by the contemporary public for which it was ostensibly constructed) and, moreover, the very particular—even eccentric—space in which Deschenes's exhibition is to be mounted (the basement area, bearing the traces of a now outdated *update* from the 1980s and at odds with the more lyrical, naturally-lit galleries above ground), what is presented there will foresee future exhibitions by the artist, too. Or to put it differently, the Secession exhibition *anticipates* how the works by Deschenes shown within its walls will come to occupy other spaces in other configurations (with those other configurations—upcoming shows in London and New York—bearing something of the *history* of the Secession show). Apart from operating spatially, the Secession is asked to operate temporally, too, to enable the notion of exhibitions that unfold not simply within the optical and synchronic registers, but within the imaginary and diachronic registers as well. Deschenes's "stereo graphy", then, does not present us with twinned images, nor with an apparatus that would pull from them added dimensionality in the visual field. Yet like Holmes's stereography, Deschenes's relies on a kind of doubling and splitting in order to get at a fuller representation—better, to get at a new kind of representation. What is represented is also being fundamentally presented or, as I will argue in a moment, *developed*. The "stereo graphic" as taken up by Deschenes is an experience, not an image.

At the Secession, Deschenes will ask viewers to enter her exhibition from the outside of the building, using an access rarely in service (calling attention to the parameters of the building and also creating a direct route to an otherwise less easily reached space). They will step into a hallway unpopulated by "artwork" of any kind, a pause space that, nonetheless, comprises one aspect of the show and acts as what the artist calls a "viewfinder" for the other rooms. A visitor may opt to go to the left or to the right but is ultimately forced to retrace her steps if she wants to see the

gallery not first chosen. In these two galleries, Deschenes presents a selection of her *Photographs*, an ongoing series of works with material specifications that firmly locate them within that medium's history while also pressuring its perceived limits. To begin with the "photographs" are, indeed, that, but they are also, more specifically, photograms, that breed of camera-less photography that eliminates the mechanism in lieu of direct contact between photographic paper and light's inscription. Also, while still "photographs" these are vehement objects, too. Having been exposed by moonlight, the sheets are then fixed with toner and mounted, rendered either mirror-like or more obtusely metallic; shiny or, as they can become over time, oxidized—evidence that, as Neil Young reminds us, rust never sleeps. And while occupying a heretofore relatively unplumbed category, that of "abstract photography", the photograms retain something of the will to document, even if what is evidenced here cannot be accounted for in terms of Roland Barthes's famous "this-will-have-been".⁵ Indeed, one might say that what is documented is, precisely, what is thought to outpace the parameters of photography, understood as it so often is as bound to the logic of the past. Deschenes's photograms, even with their fixed, ostensibly imageless surfaces, continue to evolve—continue, that is to say, to *develop*, with all the photographic implications of that word intact.

On the one hand, I say this in the most literal way. In her "stereo graphic" installation at the Secession, depending on the direction in which she takes the silver toning for the photographs she will install in that space, there are two possible options as to how her works will, for instance, visually pick up something of the reflection of the space around them. If mirror-like in surface, they will hold but necessarily relinquish images of the viewers who see them; if opaque and oxidizing, they will also bear the literal traces accrued during time spent in the Secession's halls. In this regard, one might argue that the photographs, counter to the behavior we expect of them, continue to acquire in their contours—by which I mean that they are not exhibited in final form but, rather, as images in process. On the other hand, less literally, but importantly aligned with the above (the material implications of this argument necessarily inform the conceptual ones), Deschenes's photographs can be seen as *developing* in that they build a narrative across and between places. The "stereo graph" that is the Secession gives a "double eyed" picture of what is to come in London and New York, even if nothing about those future sites is directly visible.

Even in an instance where Deschenes's positioning of her work relative to the space it inhabits might be seen as much more straightforward, few viewers would immediately recognize the

symmetry, although they might sense something of its logic. For her project for the Whitney Biennial in 2012, for instance, Deschenes took up the iconic—yet rarely accounted for these days—structure of the Breuer building, constructed in 1966 and soon to be evacuated by the museum for a more “contemporary” home.⁶ Positioning her photographs to mimic some of the rhythm and spacing of the Breuer building’s façade (which itself looks very much to the artist like a view camera, that large-format tool often utilized to photograph architecture), the artist produced an installation at once loaded with cultural history (with built-in phenomenological memory) yet radically divorced from it.⁷ Planar non-representational photographs assembled at so many heights and angles together resulted, no matter how keyed to Breuer’s specifics, in a new configuration and produced a wholly distinct *atmosphere*.

This word, “atmosphere”, was radically deployed by another of Deschenes’s muses, the game-changing museum director, curator, and pedagogue who brought his ideas from Europe to the United States when he joined the Rhode Island School of Design in 1938, serving for three years as the museum director there. Alexander Dorner’s “atmosphere rooms”, as he called them, acted as a corrective to prevailing strategies of museum display, which Dorner saw as extracting works of art from their active roles in the world. Such a move was, Dorner argued, the worst destiny for artworks, which necessarily were better understood within the rich, expanded context of their time. The “atmosphere rooms” aimed to re-emphasize art’s contingency and, in so doing, make art newly relevant to those who encountered it. Emphasizing, in particular, the spatial aspects of contemporary viewing, Dorner imagined an active, mobile viewer, and one who encountered artwork—even that from another period—in the here and now. “People no longer desire,” he argued, “an accumulation of works of art, divided from us by time and space, clinging to us on all sides as ivy does on romantic buildings, but instead they want to know what direct bearing these things have on our times.”⁸ Tools to make such direct bearing even more readily available were design-based: from colored walls to metal strips emphasizing the walls, to vitrines filled with non-art materials, Dorner’s atmospheres unfolded via a very careful choreography of the gallery spaces. Deschenes’s photographic installations bear obvious affinities to Dorner’s atmosphere rooms, if not by replicating their formal elements (a move Dorner himself would, no doubt, have discouraged since, per his argument, each historical moment calls for different design strategies). One can feel echoes here as well of the then-contemporary artwork Dorner was invested in, abstractionist, in particular, from Mondrian to Lissitzky. Indeed, even in Deschenes’s earliest work, one sometimes

finds the thrust of the atmosphere room within the bounds—impossibly it would seem—of single photographs. From some of her first landscape-based work (often hung to approximate the elevation levels of that which is depicted) to her initial investigations of the monochrome in photography (using dye transfer, an outmoded process to obtain lush color that, while non-referential, is nonetheless overtly symbolic), Deschenes has forcefully utilized photography's (changing) context as part of her engagement with the medium itself.

By underscoring photography's contingency, then, she acknowledges its potential to locate aspects of the past, but only while insisting that it is possible to aim its sights forward. Her "stereo graphic" was apparent already in the *Blue Screen* and *Green Screen* series from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Here Deschenes's attention to the apparatus that acts as literal placeholder for special effects in movies resulted in abstract photographs with meta-discursive framing, at once commenting on the (historical as well as present) status of abstraction and pointing to its ubiquitous utility in contemporary, digital, culture. And later, in a series of works from 2007, the artist made photographs using perforated paper—hanging the pocked sheets in a well-lit window, photographing them, and then layering two copies of the negative on top of each other. In other words, Deschenes produced highly Op pictures that were nevertheless haunted by their manual making. While beholding a single image, that is to say, one still could not help but sense a space—infrathin, impossible depths—somehow existing therein.

Looking, then, at the *Photographs* on view in the Secession, one understands how in this installation (as well as those in previous years and those yet to come) the artist has been "stereo graphic" for as long as she has employed photography itself. These "double eyed" pictures must be seen not only as dilating context and insisting on spatial occupation, but also as moving speculatively: *developing*. Contrary to Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion, which is still much heralded today, a great photographer need not be attuned to any fleeting instance for it to be captured for all time; that is to say, an image can be specific and yet other than singular—it can point in many directions at once. Asked in a recent interview how she knows just when her responsive installations are "finished", Deschenes replied that the work, even when mounted, isn't really done at all. "Because," she says, "there is no decisive moment."⁹

- 1 In e-mail and in-person exchanges with the author, September and October 2012.
- 2 See "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph", *Atlantic Monthly* (1859), pp. 124–281, excerpted in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven/CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), pp. 71–82.
- 3 Ibid., p. 81.
- 4 See Hal Foster, "Archives of Modern Art", in *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 65–82, esp. p. 77. Foster argues that, for Malraux, "... though the reproduced work loses some of its properties as an object, by the same token it gains other properties, such as 'the utmost significance as to style.'" Malraux's phrase comes from his *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 112. Of significance for Foster is that Malraux's concept of the *musée imaginaire*, though later taken up with gusto by postmodernists, does not do away with the notion of an "original" object altogether; indeed, it posits a new possibility for originality, as well as—perhaps dangerously to some degree—as Foster puts it, "provid[ing] the means to reassemble the broken bits of tradition into one meta-tradition of global styles." Interestingly, Holmes suggests something of a *musée imaginaire* himself, writing that should the stereograph attain the cultural importance that is its due, eventually there will be "such an enormous collection of forms that they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now. The time will come when a man who wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go to the Imperial, National, or City Stereographic Library, and call for its skin or form, as he would a book at any common library." (Holmes, see note 2, p. 81) It goes without saying that Holmes's ambitious hopes for the stereograph were not realized. Seen by most in its day as an amusement, it is today mostly regarded as a quaint, outmoded, pseudo-scientific contraption.
- 5 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.)
- 6 The Whitney Museum will move to its new downtown location, a building designed by the architect Renzo Piano, in 2015. The old space, at 75th and Madison on New York's upper east side and designed by the Hungarian-born modernist Marcel Breuer, will be taken over by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which will house its new contemporary art program there.
- 7 See Matthew S. Witkovsky, "The Eyes Bear the Load", in *Whitney Biennial 2012* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), p. 92.
- 8 From Dörner's transcript for "My Experiences in the Hanover Museum: What can Art Museums do Today?", a talk given at Harvard in 1938. Cited in Curt Germundson, "Alexander Dörner's Atmosphere Room: The Museum as Experience", *Visual Resources*, 21:3, p. 265.
- 9 In "Liz Deschenes: In the Studio with Brian Sholis", *Art In America* (March 2012), p. 155.

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[Essays](#)

[Guests](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Reviews](#)

[News](#)

[Archives](#)

[Fr / En](#) [Q](#)

2

Sculpture Garden

—
by Patrice Joly



3rd edition of the Biennale de Genève

Curation Devrim Bayar

Geneva, Parc des Eaux-Vives et de La Grange, Quai Gustave-Ador

10.06 – 30.09.2022

As Lionel Bovier (director of the Mamco, Museum of Contemporary Art, Geneva; also a partner for this third edition of “Sculpture Garden”) pointed out, contemporary art in the outdoors has a long history—from Arnhem 1949 to New York’s recently built High Line. As Bovier also stated, the objective of this type of event is to maintain, not only a high quality in the artworks shown—seemingly a given—but also to establish contact with the type of public which frequents these types of places, which are generally dedicated to something entirely different from art; while also attempting to diffuse a host of works which resonate with the aesthetic and societal preoccupations of the curator. Another of the many difficulties which must be overcome when it comes to an event of this sort is the fact that the works included will need to hold up under outdoor conditions. For some artists—whose work is mainly conceived and produced for aseptified indoor environments, devoid of the risk of deterioration or damage from inclement weather or “visitors”—this means that their practice must be adapted. Yet another ingredient to take into consideration in order to achieve a certain measure of success is that the works must be able to “exist” in an imposing environment. In the case of the park, which has been designed to have an aesthetically sophisticated relationship with nature; it is a place where rare plant species, remarkable trees and grasses combine to form something like a living artwork. Here, grass grows and flowers bloom, rain can impose itself to an invasive degree, a turtle can come along and interrupt the stillness of a pond, as can the flight of a crow over a grassy monochrome; the competition is tough.

The strategy to adopt is simple: choose good artists. Not necessarily ones that are accustomed to working in the outdoors, but simply artists who are capable of responding to the exigencies listed above. Several tactics are at work in this edition of the biennale. The first is to break with the idea of harmony that was prevalent in the planning of the park. In terms of attention-grabbing, this is certainly the most successful one. The duo formed by Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys scores high points when it comes to this little game: their work, A.M.M.S.A.303, immediately takes hold of you upon entering the garden. It holds court in the middle of the lawn, in line with the Eaux-Vives restaurant; metallic minimalism breaking radically with the curving paths and large-canopied trees surrounding it. This version of Soldats (Soldiers)—a work they adapt regularly—integrates the logo of Ethereum, a type of crypto-currency, present in the form of the faces of the figures, as well as stroboscopic lights—made by Boeing and originally designed to give the real time position of aircraft—that sit atop the silhouettes of the sentinels. The work is a clear nod toward a country that certain people seem to consider to be a massive safe. In a similar vein, Nina Beier’s lions (Guardians) set up a double semantic displacement by reminding us of what occurs when sculptures of exotic animals are placed here and there inside these types of parks. However, the multicoloured replicas are grouped in such a disorganised manner, with the vaguely utilitarian usage of a soap dish, that their customarily decorative role is thrown off-kilter. Ana Alens’s fountain (Liquid Agreements) and Elif Erkan’s “menhirs” (Where You They form) also break form with sculptural conventions, one by attempting to create regularity through design out of the loose stones that the park aesthetic tends to absorb, the other by leaving behind all attempts at grace and elegance, by exposing the inner workings, tubes and structures on which a fountain is built.

The other major tendency here is that of fusion, which tends to adhere to standards of classical garden sculpture, with Diana the huntress surrounded by her water nymphs and false fountains, with the addition of rocks to elevate the representation of objective nature modeled after the idealised vision of the owner. Lucy Mackenzie's work is pitch perfect in the way that it updates the canon of beauty to reflect current tendencies; one which since antiquity has been mostly determined by male sculptors. Pushing this reification of female forms to its limits, the artist gives this modern Daphne the airs of a department store mannequin. These idealised forms respond to a consumerist imperative which the contemporary woman is expected to identify with, and from which men are supposed to draw satisfaction from (Anonymous Statue). While this work from the Scottish artist possesses a grating quality, through deliberate dissent, others use a more "homeopathic" approach. For example, Koenraad Dedobbeleer's work is a wrought iron door in the form of an ampersand which separates two spaces in the garden; Céline Condorelli's retaining structure for a tree is repurposed into a dog park feature/sculpture in a section of the park where canines can run free. A reference to Donna Haraway and the idea of companion species, the sculpture counteracts the idea of a gulf which supposedly separates different tree and plant species. Aside from the reflexive effect the work of Sammy Baloji produces, there seems to be an effort to create a miniature park, which ends up being a reflection on the provenance of plant species which populate parks in the Western world and the effect that these multiple uprootings and importations have on the ecosystems these plants originate from (...and those North Sea waves whispering sunken stories).

How to name and comment on a selection of works that all resonate with the idea of the garden, of its multiple meanings and historical representations, some which choose to upset this order, others to test its limits? Some comment on societal issues, or rather, on the aftereffects of a context that has had an enormous impact on modern life in recent years. The curator seems to have opted to transcend this context, alluding to a more joyous future, one where conviviality might be restored—which is a shared objective with city parks in general. The work of Suzanna Csebatul responds to this in a playful and spectacular way, Bojan Sarjevic's work integrates itself directly into the party planning committee. Liz Deschenes takes things off the beaten track with *Blue Moon Scale*, which does its best to question the lakeside landscape, as if it has been submitted to the same light-induced damage as a work in a museum.

Image: Liz Deschenes, *Blue Wool Scale*, 2022. UV print, stainless steel, acier inoxydable, Sculpture Garden 2022. Courtesy de l'artiste.

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Contributors
Contact
Index
Shop
Podcast
Jobs
Snap Review
Search

The Inconstant World at ICA LA

April 15, 2021
Text by Vanessa Holyoak

Snap Review Email
Social Media
Submissions



Liz Deschenes, *FPS (45)* (2018).
Silver gelatin photograms
mounted on Dibond, 45 parts, 60
x 5 inches each;
overall installation dimensions
60 x 445 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist, Miguel Abreu
Gallery, New York, and the
Institute of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff
McLane/ICA LA.

The nine works on view in the ICA LA's current exhibition, *The Inconstant World*, share a common thread: through their own careful formal strategies, each draws the viewer's attention to the otherwise unremarkable or invisible, confronting the limitations of representation in especially timely ways. In an era of necessary concern around global surveillance, as it manifests both in the policing of Black people and through the unrelenting data collection of clickbait capitalism, these works offer an elegant form of resistance, redeploying abstraction as a tool for subverting surveillance and reclaiming agency over our images—and in turn, our identities.

Surveillance technologies cannot capture what cannot be identified or fully seen. The works in *The Inconstant World* explore what it looks and feels like to evade such capture. In Sandra Mujinga's three-channel, greyscale video installation, *Disruptive Pattern* (2018), an abstracted, transparent figure flickers, as if dancing to an unheard beat amidst screensaver-like digital pools of shifting shapes. Moving between fluctuating degrees of opacity, the dancing figure (distinguishable only by the slippery forms of a sweatshirt and hat on its see-through body) resists classification by the camera, thereby defying surveillance and "capture" via the viewer's gaze, occupying an alternative visual space that is neither here nor there.

Other works propose similar alternatives to the immediately recognizable image, urging us to pause and take a second, deeper look, and challenging the cultural expectation for a relentless feed of visual content. In Liz Deschenes' *FPS (45)* (2018), 45 photograms mounted as vertical panels are installed at even intervals spanning the corner of one room. The photograms, silvery and indeterminate, bear no distinct imagery—their long, rectangular planes drawing attention instead to the spatial and temporal experience reflected, both literally and imaginatively, in their sleek but "empty" surfaces. While the distinctions between each panel are not apparent at first glance, upon closer inspection one notices that none are identical—each panel will react differently to the gallery environment over the course of the exhibition, marking them with the variable and distinct effects of space and time.

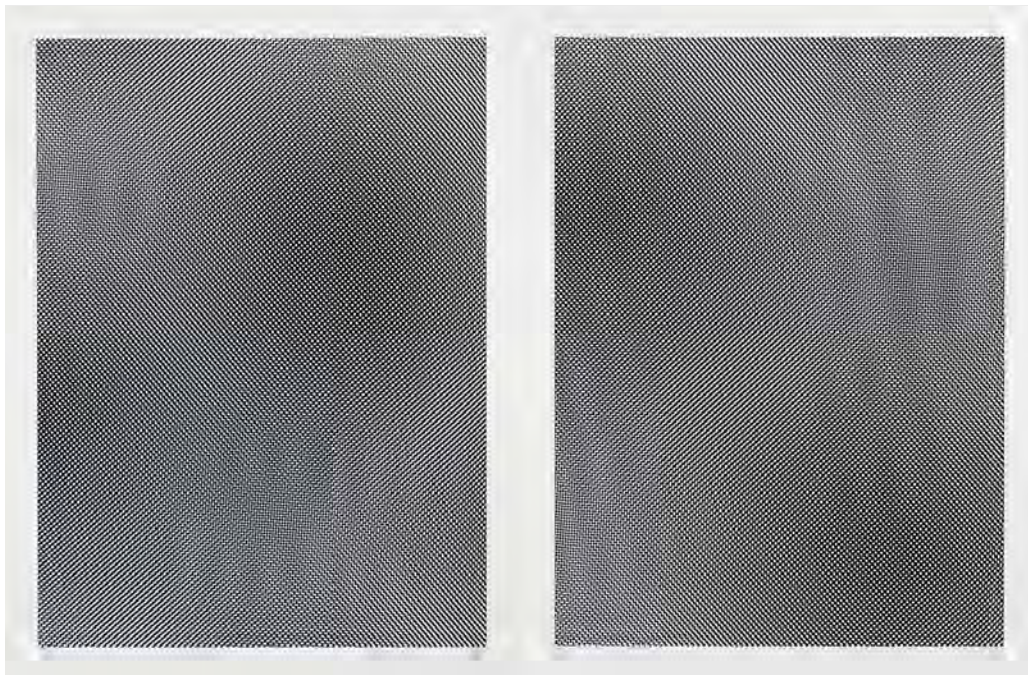
David Horvitz's work, *Nostalgia (18,600)* (2019–2021), is also an experiment in the erasure of content, a resistance to the late-capitalist impetus toward the performance of identities via social media (each of us

producing, and thus becoming, our own content). In this work, 18,600 of the artist's personal digital photographs, taken between 2019 and 2021, are projected for a minute each and deleted at the end of the day. Over the course of the exhibition, all 18,600 images will be deleted. By effacing all traces of these images and their corresponding data from the cloud, Horvitz defies the typical cycle of digital image circulation. If our collective contributions to algorithmic platforms like Instagram have turned AI into the de facto site of endless archival memory, *Nostalgia* pushes against this archival automatism, restoring the role to our own individual capacity for memory. The images' erasure also ensures their protection from both the overt and covert ways that AI mines, tracks, and capitalizes on our images as sources of profitable data, turning us into involuntary victims of algorithmic manipulation and bias.

The works in *The Inconstant World* are not intended for easy consumption. They demand more time, more attentiveness, and more reflection than we may be used to in our age of clickbait, hashtags, and seconds-long video clips. The experiences that they offer, though slow to reveal themselves, are worthy of this labor. By resisting visibility and defying easy legibility, they inhabit a fluid world beyond the reach of AI's infinite memory, making room for an alternate kind of representation—one negotiated by the artist on their own terms. In a cultural moment in which our images no longer belong to us, *The Inconstant World* proposes a visual strategy of refusal. In this alternate visual realm, we are the authors and overseers of our own images, or indeed, non-images—we decide how we are seen, who sees us, and who doesn't.

The Inconstant World runs from March 6–May 30, 2021 at ICA LA (1717 E. 7th St., Los Angeles, CA 90021).

Neue Zürcher Zeitung



(Bild: Liz Deschenes)

Fotografie? Ist das tatsächlich ein Fenster zur Wirklichkeit?

Muss die Rolle der Fotografie vielleicht gänzlich neu gedacht werden?

Die amerikanische Künstlerin Liz Deschenes stellt mit ihrem konzeptuell-fotografischen Schaffen unsere Sicht auf die Welt radikal infrage.

Christian Schaernack

19.01.2019, 05.30 Uhr

«Images à la sauvette», «The Decisive Moment»: Wie auch immer man jenen zentralen Begriff der jüngeren Fotogeschichte übersetzen mag, den kein Geringerer als Henri Cartier-Bresson prägte – die Idee eines «entscheidenden Augenblicks», in dem der Fotograf den Auslöser betätigt, um ein «Bild auf die Schnelle» zu schießen, ist in der theoretischen Diskussion fest verankert und gilt gemeinhin als immanentes Prinzip des Mediums. Doch was, wenn es diesen Moment nicht gibt? Wenn

das Foto also gar nicht fixieren soll, weder die Zeit noch den einen – den einzigartigen – Blick des Fotografen auf das räumliche Geschehen? Und was würde dies über unsere Sicht auf die Welt besagen? Muss die Rolle der Fotografie vielleicht gänzlich neu gedacht werden, wie dies in besonders radikaler Form etwa der französische Philosoph François Laruelle tut? Es sind solch zentrale Fragen, bei welchen die Künstlerin Liz Deschenes ansetzt.

Wer erstmals den Werken der Amerikanerin begegnet, denkt nicht zwangsläufig an Fotografien. Ihre «Moirés» etwa mit den vexierhaften Op-Art-Effekten erscheinen wie vergrößerte Ausschnitte von Offsetdrucken. Noch verblüffender die silbrigen Platten, die auf den ersten Blick gealterten Spiegeln ähneln, hinter denen sich jedoch aufwendig hergestellte Fotogramme verbergen. Dazu sind Deschenes' Installationen nicht selten ausgreifend, verwoben in komplexem Wechselspiel mit der Architektur. Andere frei stehende Arbeiten wiederum verwischen die Grenzen zur Skulptur und muten an wie minimalistische Gebilde.



Sie sucht den Diskurs jenseits des Bildträgers: die amerikanische Fotokünstlerin Liz Deschenes. (Bild: Sonia Gil-Costa)

Deschenes' Output der letzten zwanzig Jahre fällt gemeinhin in die Rubrik abstrakter Fotografie, was die Betrachtung über Abbildungen nahelegt. Gleichwohl kommt diese Kategorisierung ins Rutschen, sobald die physische Konfrontation mit den Werken stattfindet. Insbesondere ihre Fotogramme mit den fast monochrom silbrigen Grundtönen gelten nämlich als schwer reproduzierbar. Denn hier wird die figürliche Erscheinung, in Person des unmittelbar anwesenden Betrachters, zu einer entscheidenden Grösse.

Konzeptionelle Radikalität

Lange arbeitete Liz Deschenes nahezu unbemerkt vom grossen Kunstbetrieb, vom Markt ganz zu schweigen. Geboren 1966 in Boston, stand sie mit ihrer Praxis im Schatten gerade während der neunziger Jahre vorherrschender Trends, wie sie etwa von Vertretern der Düsseldorfer Schule gesetzt wurden. Dabei ist Deschenes fest verankert sowohl in Traditionen der europäischen Avantgarde der zwanziger Jahre als auch in Amerikas Konzeptkunst der Nachkriegszeit.

Von der prägnanten Pictures Generation der achtziger Jahre musste aber auch sie sich lösen, wenngleich auch sie die Skepsis gegenüber der Verlässlichkeit des Fotos als Index, als direkter Abdruck der Realität, übernommen hat. Zeichnen sich deren Hauptvertreter wie Cindy Sherman oder Sherrie Levine nicht zuletzt aus durch die Aneignung, Aufmischung und Rekonfiguration bekannter Bildsujets, so ragen Deschenes' Referenzen ungleich tiefer hinein in die Geschichte des Mediums, in seine Entstehung und seine diversen Verfahrensweisen. So ergibt sich ein Werk, das zugleich von hoher visueller Anziehungskraft wie auch von konzeptioneller Radikalität geprägt ist.

Als exemplarisch kann die mehrteilige Installation «Tilt / Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)» von 2009 gelten. Die Arbeit, die sich heute im Besitz des New Yorker MoMA befindet, besteht aus sechs rechteckigen Fotogrammen unterschiedlicher Höhe, aber jeweils zirka 1,50 Meter breit, die kreisförmig an Wänden, Decke sowie auf dem Boden liegend angeordnet sind; das Modell selbst

beruht auf einem unrealisierten Projekt des deutschstämmigen Bauhaus-Architekten Herbert Bayer von 1935. Der Betrachter steht wie in einem schmalen prismenartigen Tunnel, inmitten opaker Spiegel unterschiedlicher Neigungswinkel, gleichsam auf Spurensuche sich in den Bildoberflächen neigend und wendend (tilt, swing), und dabei ohne fixierten Standpunkt oder einheitliche Zentralperspektive.

Die physische Einbindung des Besuchers in einen dynamischen Ausstellungsraum verdichtet Deschenes dann drei Jahre später in der Wiener Secession: Hier eignet sich die Künstlerin gleich die gesamte Architektur des Gebäudes an und konzipiert den Parcours durch ihre Arbeiten – diesmal streng vertikal angebrachte Fotogramme –, als entspräche der Raum (lat. camera) dem Inneren einer Kamera selbst.

Vor genau zwanzig Jahren veröffentlichte der US-Fotograf und Hochschullehrer Stephen Shore «Das Wesen der Fotografie», sein einflussreiches Elementarbuch zur praktischen Anwendung. Deschenes, die inzwischen am gleichen renommierten Bard College liest, bricht mit fast allen Regeln Shores. So schreibt der ältere Kollege, ein Foto habe flach zu sein, einen Rand aufzuweisen und sei statisch; es markiere letztlich einen Ausschnitt, die Illusion eines Fensters zur Welt; und der Fotograf schaffe nicht nur durch seinen monokularen Blickwinkel, sondern gerade durch die Betätigung des Auslösers («The Decisive Moment») klärende Ordnungsprinzipien.

Dagegen ist die Zeit im Werk von Liz Deschenes nicht zwingend festgeschrieben. So werden Arbeiten immer wieder dem Einfluss der Elemente überlassen und Oberflächen bewusst nicht fixiert. Die Folge sind altersbedingte Veränderungen, die sich in Verfärbungen, Verdunkelungen oder dem Sichtbarwerden von Bearbeitungsspuren bemerkbar machen. Die Momentaufnahme weicht dabei der Daueranalogie, die von Henri Bergson bereits am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts zur Philosophie und das Prinzip erhoben wurde.

Fünf wichtige Ausstellungen:

- 2018 New York, Paris, London, die Zusammenführung Pointillismus und Impressionismus
- 2016 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
- 2014 MoMA, New York
- 2014 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- 2012 Secession, Wien

die Frühgeschichte des Mediums in einem Ausstellungsprojekt 2013: «Bracket», so der Titel der Doppelschau, fand nahezu parallel in Galerieräumen in London und Paris statt, um zu unterstreichen, wie die beiden Länder im 19. Jahrhundert konkurrierend um die ersten fotografischen Erfindungen buhlten.

Liz Deschenes



Liz Deschenes, geboren 1966 in Boston, lebt und arbeitet in New York. Ihre Fotografien stehen in engem Bezug zur konzeptuellen Fotografie und zur Minimal Art. Arbeiten von Deschenes befinden sich heute in zahlreichen öffentlichen Sammlungen, darunter jenen des Metropolitan Museum, der Tate Modern und des Pariser Centre Pompidou.

Fünf wichtige Ausstellungen:

2018 New York Public Library

2016 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

2014 MoMA, New York

2014 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

2012 Secession, Wien

Welt des Unsichtbaren

Insbesondere beim antiquierten Verfahren der Fotogramm-Technik mit seinen Anklängen an Fox Talbot und Daguerre sind die Herstellungsprozesse äusserst arbeitsintensiv, tragen bei Deschenes Züge eines alchemistischen Rituals; dabei produziert sie wohlgemerkt keine Editionen, sondern wegen des Fehlens von Negativen – die Werke entstehen ohne Kamera – ausschliesslich Unikate. Die Künstlerin belichtet das Fotopapier unter freiem Himmel direkt im Tages- oder auch Mondlicht. Anschliessend findet die chemische Bearbeitung statt, die Tage dauern kann.

Ammoniumhydroxid und Silber kommen zum Einsatz, wobei die Oberflächen nicht nur auf Schwankungen der Umwelteinflüsse wie etwa Luftfeuchtigkeit reagieren, sondern mit ihren Kratzern

und Schlieren auch die Narben der manuellen Intervention aufweisen. Das Foto übernimmt hier gerade nicht die Funktion eines prädisponierten Fensters zur Welt, sondern vielmehr jene einer schemenhaften Spiegelung einer Welt, die den Gesetzen von Raum und Zeit, aber eben auch dem zufälligen Geschehen unterliegt.

Eine konsequente Analyse der Grundlagen und das Sichtbarmachen fotografischer Prozesse hatte Deschenes bereits mit farbigen Arbeiten wie «Elevation #1–#7», «Red Transfer» (beide 1997) und besonders mit ihrer Serie von «Green Screens» aus dem Jahr 2001 vorgenommen. Grüner Hintergrund gilt heute bei Film und Fernsehen gemeinhin als Matrix für digitale Spezialeffekte, bleibt für den Zuschauer selbst jedoch unsichtbar. Indem die Künstlerin ebendiesen zur monochromen Bildfläche erhebt, gelingt ihr trotz knalliger Farbigkeit eine poetische Metapher. Diesmal gibt ein «Green Screen» den Blick frei – wohlgemerkt aber in eine Welt des Unsichtbaren.

Raum, Zeit, die physische Einbeziehung des Betrachters, aber auch die Parameter und porösen Grenzen des Mediums Foto: All dies bündeln die jüngsten raumgreifenden Arbeiten. «Timelines» etwa heisst eine Installation, die auf der Art Basel Unlimited 2017 vorgestellt wurde. Als Modell diente das «Zoetrope», ein zylindrischer Mechanismus aus dem 19. Jahrhundert, mit dessen Hilfe eine Abfolge statischer Bilder in Bewegung gesetzt wurde, um einen filmartigen Effekt zu erzielen. Hier freilich war es der Besucher, der sich einer im Rund fix montierten Abfolge konkaver Fotogramme gegenüber sah. Als Reverenz an den Chronofotografen Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) sind dann wiederum jene mehrteiligen Fotogramm-Sequenzen zu verstehen, in denen Deschenes das Abschreiten der zehn Meter langen Werke an die spezifische Taktung bewegter Bilder koppelt. Zeit wird erfahrbar.

So entwirft die amerikanische Fotokünstlerin ein Werk, das mit seiner radikalen Überprüfung der Grundlagen gleichzeitig weit über spezifische Fragen der Fotografie hinausweist. Ihre Arbeiten gehorchen zwar den formalen Regeln kühler Abstraktion, aber dennoch ist es die unmittelbare physische Erfahrung des Betrachters, die einen umso emotionaleren

Transformationsprozess ermöglicht; allein der in Philosophie und Kunstgeschichte hoch aufgeladene Topos der Spiegel-Metapher lädt ein zu mannigfaltigen Spekulationen. Letztlich also öffnet Liz Deschenes dem Betrachter vielleicht doch ein Fenster, zu einem Diskurs allerdings, der sich jenseits jedes Bildträgers abspielt – hin zu einer Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung.

Informationen zum Bild

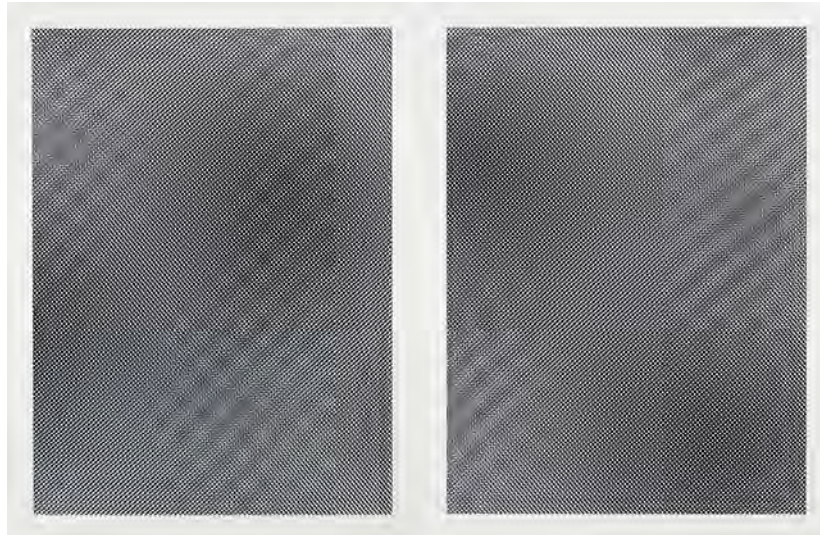


Bild als PDF herunterladen. (Bild: Liz Deschenes)

Moirés-Muster

Im Allgemeinen beschreibt ein Moirés-Muster eine Anordnung von Punkten, Linien oder Wellen, die entsteht, wenn zwei nicht ganz identisch reproduzierte (oder reproduzierbare) Matrizen übereinandergelegt werden. Die optische Verzerrung kann bei Druck-verfahren – so auch bei der Herstellung von Zeitungen – oder bekannterweise beim Abfotografieren von Fernsehbildern entstehen. Der Effekt entsteht auch bei leichten Rotationen und nicht passgenauer Überlagerung. In der Wissenschaft werden Moirés oft genutzt, um minimale Bewegungen überhaupt erst sichtbar zu machen.

Liz Deschenes' Serie von «Moirés» entstand um das Jahr 2007 und zählt heute zu den prägnantesten Werkkomplexen der Fotografin; zahlreiche Exemplare befinden sich in Museen. Als Einzelarbeiten konzipiert, werden hier zwei ausgesuchte Moirés im Format eines Diptychons einander gegenübergestellt.

Das Spiel mit optischen Irritationen hat in der Kunst eine jahrhundertealte Tradition. Prominent sind die Vertreter der Op-Art um Victor Vasarely, während François Morellet bereits 1958 mit der Rotation übereinandergelegter Zeichnungen mit Rastermotiv («Grids») experimentierte. Bei Deschenes' «Moirés» reichen die Referenzen einmal mehr weit zurück in die Foto-Geschichte, etwa zu Henry Fox Talbots «Three Sheets of Gauze, Crossed Obliquely» (1852 bis 1857). Dabei berühren die Arbeiten zentrale Anliegen der Künstlerin wie Fragen zur Perspektive oder zum Sichtbarmachen von für das Auge verborgenen Prozessen.

Für die Herstellung wurde perforiertes Papier gegen ein Fenster mit einer Grossbildkamera in Schwarz-Weiss abgelichtet. Vom transparenten Negativ wurde ein Duplikat erstellt, und beide wurden anschliessend zur Vergrösserung übereinandergelegt. Dabei gleicht keines der so resultierenden Bilder dem anderen. Gleichwohl handelt es sich stets um einen gemeinhin als fehlerhaft oder ungewollt bezeichneten Effekt, wie er letztlich auch den «Green Screens» der Künstlerin (siehe Haupttext) zugrunde liegt. Auch formale Aspekte wie die Bildgrenze werden mit den scheinbaren Endlosmustern hinterfragt. Konstituierendes Element ist jedoch die Bewegung und damit die Aufhebung einer vertrauten Zentralperspektive. Nicht nur die «Moirés» selbst sind in ihrer Erscheinung «rastlos» und lassen sich optisch nicht arretieren. Auch der Betrachter findet keinen festen Platz im Raum, der einen perspektivisch korrekten Blick zuliesse, sondern ist zu ständiger Bewegung angehalten. Der Gerinnungsprozess hin zu einem statischen Bild bleibt also gleich in doppelter Hinsicht versagt. Die Fotografie präsentiert sich nicht als Fenster zur Welt, das einen in der Vergangenheit gebannten Moment der Wirklichkeit zeigt, sondern wird selbst zur primären Seherfahrung.

So legt Liz Deschenes mit ihren «Moirés» eine Bilderserie von gleichzeitig hoher visueller Intensität und programmatischer Dichte vor.

photograph

LIZ DESCHENES: RATES (FRAMES PER SECOND) AT MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

By Alex Jen



Liz Deschenes, *FPS* (45), 2018 (detail). Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery. Photo: Adam Reich

Liz Deschenes's new photograms never quite settle, but reveal details of their production as viewers move in front of them. Exposed in trays of developer outdoors under the moonlit sky before being developed and toned, each of her pieces becomes an index of the surrounding buildings' stray light or the weather conditions that affect the chemical processes involved. In addition, Deschenes's photograms slowly oxidize over time, reaffirming her steady, inquisitive experiments in photography.

The show at Miguel Abreu Gallery in the spring included two series that take as a starting point Étienne-Jules Marey's 19th-century experiments in isolating and recording movement. The works in "*FPS*" (*Frames per Second*) are cut and mounted directly on vertical strips of dibond, and those in "*FPF*" (*Frames per Feet*) are pressed closely in thin, horizontal frames. Both series are hung and spaced carefully, progressing with the rhythm of footsteps – except the viewers are now the subjects, their reflections becoming pictures that move and change speed depending on the width and number of photograms.

Deschenes's photograms feel purposeful but melancholic, almost as if excluded from the category of photography as we know it. But there is something defiant about her decision to make these furiously etched, laboriously processed, cameraless images – which involve toxic chemicals and can take a full 36 hours from set up to clean up. And perhaps it's the heat of that charge, coupled with the light that these photographs hold and refract, that make them shine and hum, pushing all the expectations of the medium.

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Liz Deschenes, *FPF #5*, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery. Photo: Adam Reich

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BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

June 5th, 2018

LIZ DESCHENES: *Rates (Frames per Second)*

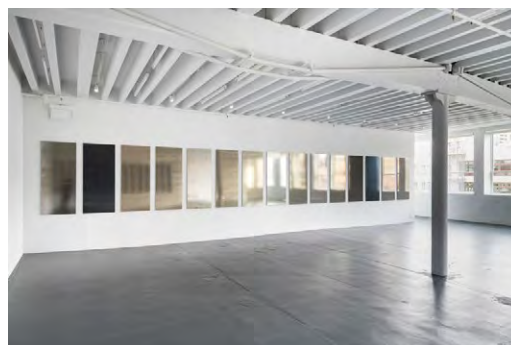
by Millie Christie-Dervaux

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY | MAY 4 – JUNE 17, 2018

As with much abstract art, you have to look for a while before you start seeing things in Liz Deschenes's work. The artist's newest show, exhibited in both locations of Miguel Abreu Gallery, features a series of works comprised of photograms, a medium Deschenes has referred to in interviews as "camera-less photography": large-format, metallic-looking prints that she creates by exposing photosensitive paper to moonlight, then laboriously developing them through the night—rocking the prints in large bins of chemicals and meticulously drying the large sheets on clothesline. (The process to create a single photogram can take up to 36 hours.)

At the gallery's Eldridge street location, the photograms are divided into four multi-part pieces, *FPS (60)*, *FPS (45)*, *FPS (30)*, and *FPS (15)* (all works 2018). The first room features *FPS (60)*, a series of sixty tall, narrow panels that together look like a zoetrope—slits through which to see an animated picture—laid flat against a wall. In each subsequent room, the panels grow wider, though their organization and spacing remains identical throughout. The progression from *FPS (60)* to *FPS (15)*, the last and "slowest" of the works (which, as its title reflects, only includes fifteen panels), feels perhaps obviously linear: The panels grow in width as the number of frames in the work decrease. But there is a recursive rhythm and relationship between the works, too—one that subverts the straight sense of progression between rooms.

The series pays direct homage to the 19th-century scientist Étienne-Jules Marey, a physiologist who, like his more famous contemporary Eadweard Muybridge, produced black-and-white photographs to study bodies in motion. (His camera could only capture sixty frames per second, hence the starting point of *FPS (60)* for the show.) But where Marey studied time by photographing its effects on subjects—showing, for instance, the progressive wing movements of a bird in flight—Deschenes uses photography to study time as a physical entity. Similar to the way a tree's rings can point to how long the tree has lived, and to changes in its environment, such as damage wrought by drought or fire, or periods of exponential growth, Deschenes's photograms act as a record of the material conditions of their creation. The photograms take on different hues, ranging from deep, purplish blues to warm, silvery greys, depending on how clear the night sky was while the prints were exposed. They also possess unique textures owing to the specific irregularities of how the silver gelatin is spread on their surfaces, marks of Deschenes's own physical handiwork. The prints act as both a tool to measure light, movement, and other environmental factors that surrounded their creation, and as sum products of these elements.



Installation view, Liz Deschenes: *Rates (Frames per Second)*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich

owing to the specific irregularities of how the silver gelatin is spread on their surfaces, marks of Deschenes's own physical handiwork. The prints act as both a tool to measure light, movement, and other environmental factors that surrounded their creation, and as sum products of these elements.

Deschenes's approach is rigorous and deeply cerebral, and occasionally, the prints are at risk of being overshadowed by the intellectual weight of their titles, their techniques, and the philosophical traditions she engages with. Facing these pieces can feel like trying to solve an equation composed entirely of unknown variables, and the prints can seem intractable. But reducing textures

Deschenes's work to its process misses its embodied, more elemental qualities. Though the artist is interested in the question of how to quantify time, the main aim of *Rates (Frames per Second)* is not to inform viewers about the specific atmospheric or environmental conditions that produced each print. At their core, the photograms are rather a reflection on how time is *felt*, and each panel contains its own particular imprint of time, and the specific weight that time can hold in space.

The exhibition continues at the gallery's second location, on Orchard Street, displaying a suite of eight photograms—titled *FPF #1* through *FPF #8*, acronyms for “frame per foot”—cut in long, horizontal panels, and arranged in diptychs across the walls. Each photogram has been exposed for the length of time that a human foot hits the ground in a single step, with the speed or frequency changing slightly piece to piece depending on the walker's gait and pace. Beyond their horizontal arrangement, these images depart in tone from the contemplative pieces at Eldridge Street. Whereas the former serve as meditations on time as a fundamental element of nature, the Orchard Street photograms feel more sinister and more human, lacking in the sense of grand-scale cosmos that pervades the Eldridge Street series. The panels here are placed at varying heights around eye level, like one-way mirrors in an interrogation room, and are arranged on three contiguous walls in the gallery's small space. Surrounding the viewer in a man-made (and sometimes, dystopian) recursive loop, the photograms seem to watch us, panopticon-like, instead of the other way around.

In a 2016 interview with Deschenes in *ArtNews*, critic Alex Greenberger noted that “ordinary viewers” might not pick up on the technical complexity of her work. “I set up the conditions,” she responded. “People can either participate or not.” And she's right. Regardless of whether we understand the laws of physics that explain gravity, the movement of the planet, or time itself, we still exist on this earth with them. Similarly, the prints in this exhibition will endure, oxidizing over time in the gallery's natural light, and in so doing, retain the imprint of our presence with them. Deschenes's photograms find their strength not in didacticism—explaining how time works, or how the prints themselves work—but rather in their material properties, the way they shape time into a physical presence.



Installation view, Liz Deschenes: *Rates (Frames per Second)*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich

CONTRIBUTOR

Millie Christie-Dervaux

Millie Christie-Dervaux is a writer, photographer, and editor based in New York.

Wallpaper*

Photo finish: Liz Deschenes' conceptual images take over the ICA in Boston

ART / 1 JUL 2016 / BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER



The artist Liz Deschenes is currently receiving a mid-career survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, her hometown

INFORMATION

'Liz Deschenes' is on view until 16 October. For more details, please visit the ICA's [website](#)

Photography courtesy of the artist and ICA Boston

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'In terms of conceptual art, any conceptual artist would laugh. They would say that conceptualism lasted a very short time and that was in the 1960s,' says artist Liz Deschenes, 'I was born in 1966, so I totally missed it!' Photography has always been a pluralistic discipline, but it hasn't been historicised in this way. Deschenes' photographs follow more in line with process and presentation than genre or subject – or rather, typical delineations of the medium. 'It's often thought to be this or that, i.e. analog or digital, colour or black-and-white,' she explains, 'I don't find those binaries to be as compelling as the medium is.'

Now 50, the beloved new wave photographer, who has received comparisons to Moholy-Nagy and James Welling, is finally receiving her first mid-career survey at the Diller, Scofidio + Renfro-designed Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, the city which she was born.

‘The site is tremendous, right on the water,’ she exclaims, ‘As important as a site is, sites are flexible. I’m interested in the conditions of display. Often times people think the way things get displayed are static. It’s not.’



The exhibition traces Deschenes’ work from 1997 and eschews any chronological narrative - a conscientious decision arrived at from dialogues between her and curator Eva Respini



Her works stand out, quite literally - many of her photogram pieces rise from the ground as freestanding objects

Seeing as presentation concerns inform much of these meditative and physical works, the show isn't merely a bunch of pretty photographs hung on the wall. The ICA exhibition traces Deschenes' work from 1997 and eschews any chronological narrative, a conscientious decision arrived at from dialogues between her and curator Eva Respini. Deschenes has taken advantage of what she calls 'the flexibility and dynamism' of the institution to offer a 'highly selected groupings of work', even finishing the show with a site-specific series for the museum's Founders Gallery.

Her works stand out, quite literally – many of her photogram works, such as *Tilt / Swing*, Gallery 7 and Gallery 4.1.1., rise from the ground as freestanding objects while unravelling the layers of what have been imposed as the defining components of photography (e.g. light, frame, subject, contrast, etc). Deschenes also often forgoes the usage of a camera, just relying on natural sun or moonlight instead.

Deschenes offers luminous and reflective works – literally – wherein they mirror both what's in front and behind them. For the show's finale, the series *Timelines*, 11-part silver-toned photograms act as two-way seeing devices and are hung directly onto the gallery's glass walls, overlooking Boston's busy port, ascending or descending depending on the vantage point. 'The work obstructs the view but it also reveals a different view at the same time,' she says. 'Like many of my works, it [has] double functions. Every time I do a show I like to reveal something in the process.'



She explains, 'I'm interested in the conditions of display. Often times people think the way things get displayed are static. It's not'

BIG RED AND SHINY

| Field of Vision: Liz Deschenes at the ICA

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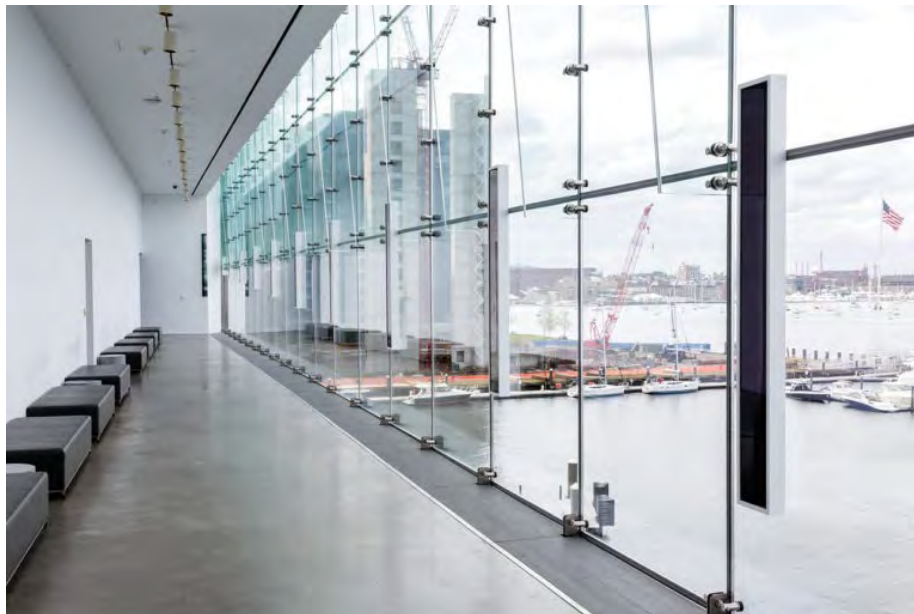
BY SCOUT HUTCHINSON ON AUGUST 4, 2016

FEATURE, MAGAZINE, REVIEWS

In his quintessential text on vision, *Techniques of the Observer*, author and art historian Jonathan Crary notes: "The mind does not reflect truth but rather extracts it from an ongoing process involving the collision and merging of ideas."⁽¹⁾ The nineteenth-century theorists he cites understood perception as being in a state of flux, informed by past sensations and transcending the present moment.

The photographs of Liz Deschenes, whose first mid-career survey is currently on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, seem to echo this sentiment. Dating from the late 1990s to the present, the roughly twenty works on view clearly express a fascination with human perception—both the physical, biological act of seeing and the conceptual processes that follow the intake of visual information. Calm and cerebral, Deschenes' photographs explore themes that range from process and material to vision and perception and are lodged in the history of the medium itself.

Eschewing representational imagery, the New York-based artist works with abstract patterns, monochrome prints, and glossy panels that more closely resemble sheets of metal than traditional photographs. The latter are in fact photograms—a process that bypasses the camera and requires only light-sensitive paper, photographic chemicals, and a light source to create an image. Photograms are most commonly exposed under an enlarger or by sunlight, but Deschenes often makes her images by the light of the moon. Indeed, there is something of the celestial, the organic, the elemental in her images that resemble materials like mercury or obsidian. The photograms in *Timelines* (2016), a new piece created as a response to the architecture of the John Hancock Founders Gallery which overlooks Boston Harbor, mimic the reflective, blue-black color of the water below.



The subtle beauty of her metallic photograms in stark contrast to the bright, rainbow hues of pieces like *Gallery 4.1.1* (2015) and *Elevation #1–#7* (1997), yet somehow the juxtaposition is not unsettling. As Deschenes remarks, "I like taking seemingly opposing things and positioning them together."⁽²⁾ A sense of cohesion is maintained throughout the exhibition by the work's consistently clean, Minimalist forms and its material presence.

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Deschenes' photograms are reminiscent of Minimalist works like Carl Andre's *144 Aluminum Square* (1967) and Richard Serra's *Prop pieces*, while the more colorful prints share similarities with certain Donald Judd *sculptures*. Perhaps the most significant comparison can be found in Robert Morris' *Untitled* (1965), in which the mirrored surfaces of four wooden cubes reflect and multiply the gallery around them. Morris' intent was to make the viewer hyper-aware of his or her physical presence in relation to the sculptures. (3) Deschenes describes how her photographic work aims to achieve a similar awareness in her audience:

[M]any of my photograms take on the rooms they're exhibited in as a viewing device, where the viewers can actually see themselves seeing and can have a clearer understanding of the object's construction—as well as of their own perception. I'd like people to have agency with the work and their experiences, to develop a deeper sense of their relationships to space, light, color, and, of course, photography.⁽⁴⁾

Like the Minimalists, materiality and the physical object are central to Deschenes' work, yet her images and geometric sculpture-photograph hybrids do not erase the evidence of the artist's hand. Deschenes remarks, "The hand versus the machine is something that I've investigated in a way that wasn't of interest to [Donald Judd] at all. The photograms are so handmade that the hand, as you can see, is still in them."⁽⁵⁾ Of note, too, is the fact that although her work gives the appearance of metal, sleek enamel, or a mirror, the effect is an illusion. They are prints on photographic paper, an organic material that the artist has carefully manipulated and experimented with to achieve the final product. This is quite different from the Minimalist approach of outsourcing the fabrication of industrial materials in order to eliminate the presence of the artist.



Deschenes' work engages both with the theory and physical processes of making an image. Titles like *Rise / Fall*, *Tilt / Swing*, and *Shift / Rise* refer to ways of positioning a camera in order to control focus and perspective, while her *Stereograph* series alludes to the *stereoscope*: a viewing device that simulates depth by focusing on two nearly identical images. Her work in the darkroom seems to challenge the precise set of steps every student is taught to adhere to in an introductory photography course; her images are not always permanently fixed to the paper. As a result, the surfaces will "oxidize" over the course of the

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Five artists, curators answer the question practice for?" and th



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Five artists, curators answer the question practice for?" and th

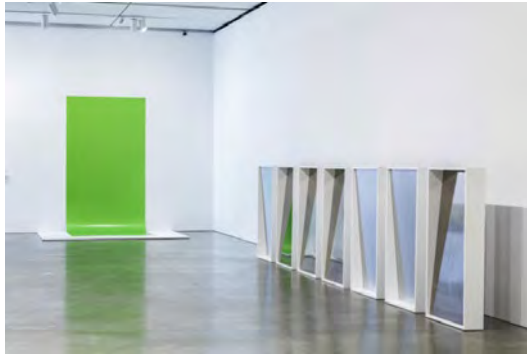


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exhibition according to the conditions of the gallery's atmosphere. Unfixed and mutable, they take on a life of their own. They become, in effect, a kind of historical record, an abstract documentation of not only the gallery space but our presence in it as well.

As concerned as she is with the material processes of photography, it would be difficult to classify Deschenes strictly as a photographer. Some of the works in the exhibition occupy space in the center of the gallery, while others are curved into concave shapes to relieve them of their planar forms. In his 1965 essay "Specific Objects," Judd outlines the tenets of a "new work" (later referred to as Minimalism): "[T]his work which is neither painting nor sculpture challenges both. It will have to be taken into account by new artists. It will probably change painting and sculpture."⁽⁶⁾ Deschenes seems to take inspiration from Judd's words, turning her attention to photography rather than painting. Her work pushes at the boundary between photography and sculpture in an effort to liberate photography from its status as "a secondary medium beholden to framing single moments in time and space" that are ultimately mounted flat against the wall.⁽⁷⁾



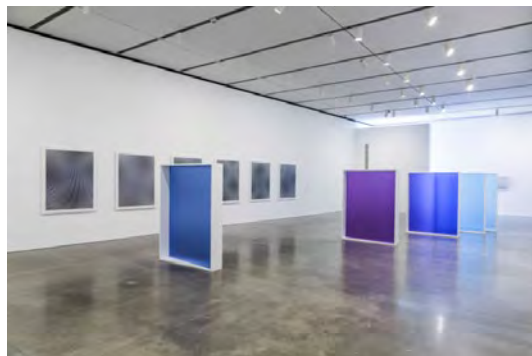
The artist also experiments with unconventional modes of display, providing a further reference to Minimalist strategies. These works tend to inhabit space on the floor, ceiling, and at the very edges of gallery walls. *Shift / Rise #42* (2016), for example, is tucked unassumingly in a corner at the beginning of the exhibition. With a finish like black lacquer and a slender rectangular form, it could easily be mistaken for an architectural element of

the gallery space, much like the thin, bent photograms in her *Stereograph* series. *Green Screen #4* (2001/2016), a long inkjet print in a vivid green hue, hangs unframed from the wall and extends onto the gallery floor like a backdrop. These shifts in placement are subtle, but they immediately activate the images into objects that confuse the line between photography and sculpture.

Works like *Gallery 7* (2014) and *Gallery 4.1.1* (2015) expand on this concept. In *Gallery 7*, silver gelatin photograms mounted to sheets of aluminum stand upright on the gallery floor, stabilized by rectangular white frames. The frames, lined along one wall of the gallery, are positioned to show either the matte surface of the aluminum or the highly reflective silver-and-copper-toned photograms. Rather than positioned against the wall, *Gallery 4.1.1* occupies the main floor and presents the most interactive work in the exhibition; there is enough space between the five free-standing frames for the viewer to navigate in and out of the monolithic works. The work feels serene, comprised of five pigment prints on acrylic that range from pale blue to violet. While one side is reflective, the other side gives the effect of a fogged window through which one can make out only vague areas of light and dark.

Here Deschenes plays with photographer and curator John Szarkowski's 1978 definition of contemporary photography, in which "the photograph is seen either as a *mirror*—a romantic expression of the photographer's sensibility as it projects itself on the things and sights of this world; or as *window*—through which the exterior world is explored in all its presence and reality."⁽⁸⁾ Deschenes cleverly translates Szarkowski's

metaphor of mirrors and windows into a literal manifestation. The duplicity of surfaces in both *Gallery* series is intended, in Deschenes' words, to create "a new set of portals, reflective viewing experiences, transparent viewing experiences, opaque viewing experiences."⁽⁹⁾



Perhaps the most notable example of Deschenes' experimental installation technique is found in *Tilt / Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)* (2009). Comprised of six rectangular photograms mounted on sheets of metal, *Tilt / Swing* greets the viewer upon entering the gallery. Only one of the six images is positioned on the gallery wall. The others are hung from the ceiling, propped against the wall or laid flat on the gallery floor. Installed in a ring, the work suggests suspended orbital movement, encouraging the eye to move from plate to plate. The silvery sheen of their surfaces is blemished by stains from photographic chemicals and its gradual oxidation process, giving them the appearance of tarnished antique mirrors which both reflect and distort the viewer's image.

Tilt / Swing is modeled after a 1935 illustration by Bauhaus artist **Herbert Bayer**, *Diagram of 360 Degrees Field of Vision*, a replica of which accompanies the installation's wall label. At turns a graphic designer, architect, and photographer, Bayer took a particular interest in exhibition design, declaring it in 1961 "an intensified and new language" which should be, among other things, concerned with "movement (of the display as well as the visitor)."(10) When mounting a show Bayer would often install works on the floor or lean them against the wall rather than resorting to the traditional formula for hanging two-dimensional work, in which the center of the piece is positioned sixty inches from the ground (a standardized, "ideal" height).

The innovative designer conceived a way to take advantage of the full range of human vision, creating an unusual and dynamic viewing experience that activated the eye. In the diagram, the viewer (depicted as a human body with a single, hieroglyphic eye for a head) is positioned on a small elevated platform in the center of a ring of rectangular panels, much like Deschenes' *Tilt / Swing*. Unlike the figure in the reproduced drawing, however, the viewer is barred from entering Deschenes' circle of photograms—a shame, as this would have been a compelling vantage point and seems fundamental to completing Bayer's theory.



The Bauhaus member was equally concerned with the viewer's physical movement within the gallery, going so far as to direct visitors by adhering cutouts of footprints to the floor.(11) Deschenes, however, is not as interested in such a rigid experience of her work. The space being fairly open, there is not a clear path that directs us through the exhibition. There are no benches—ubiquitous of museums and galleries—strategically placed in front of individual works to indicate an ideal vantage point. These conditions encourage the viewer to move around the works more fluidly, navigating the entire exhibition autonomously. Like Bayer, Deschenes' innovative installation design is an "acknowledgment of the relationship between the viewer and that which is viewed."(12)

This relationship is clearly significant to Deschenes, and feeds back into her notion of human perception as a complex, shifting and historical process. It extends in both directions from the present moment, informed by past experiences and continuing to develop long after the initial viewing of the image. Deschenes explains that within the model of past, present, and future, the latter is determined by "how the work

changes, and how people interact with the work,” placing an emphasis on the viewer and her role in completing—or at least extending—the work.(13) How liberating, then, for a medium whose identity has been defined by capturing a single moment, to instead be viewed as a “continuum”—for an image’s meaning to unfold over time.(14)

1. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 101.
2. Liz Deschenes, interview by Jonathan Bruce Williams, *The Third Rail*, no. 5 (2015), 37, accessed July 28, 2016. http://thirdrailquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/10_Deschenes_TTR5.pdf.
3. “Untitled”, Robert Morris.” *Tate*, August 2004, accessed July 31, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/morris-untitled-t01532>.
4. Liz Deschenes, as told to Gabriel H. Sanchez, “Liz Deschenes talks about her retrospective in Boston,” *Artforum*, July 25, 2016, accessed July 31, 2016. <http://artforum.com/words/id=62368>.
5. Deschenes, interview by Jonathan Bruce Williams, 37.
6. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” Originally published in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), accessed on the Judd Foundation website July 30, 2016. <http://www.juddfoundation.org/generalinformation>
7. Thea Ballard, “How to Light a Show: Liz Deschenes Turns the Gallery Into a Camera,” *Blouin ArtInfo*, November 29, 2014, accessed July 28, 2016. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1064289/how-to-light-a-show-liz-deschenes-turns-the-gallery-into-a>.
8. Museum of Modern Art, New York, “Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960,” June 1978, accessed July 30, 2016. https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5624/releases/MOMA_1978_0060_56.pdf?2010
9. Ballard, “How to Light a Show.”
10. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.worldcat.org/wcpa/servlet/DCARead?standardNo=0262692724&standardNoType=1&excerpt=true>.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ballard, “How to Light a Show.”
14. Deschenes, interview by Jonathan Bruce Williams, 37.

ARTFORUM

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Liz Deschenes

07.25.16



View of "Liz Deschenes," 2016. Photo: John Kennard.

Since the early 1990s, Liz Deschenes has made photographs stripped bare, focusing on elements of light, material, and space to expose the aesthetic and conceptual boundaries of the medium. Here, Deschenes discusses her current midcareer retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, as well as her fascination with the histories and challenges of photography. The show is on view through October 18, 2016.

PHOTOGRAPHY IS still being historicized and I'm happy about that, but I'm no historian. What I am most interested in is how long it took for certain discoveries to be worked out. For example, it was discovered in the early 1700s that silver halides are light sensitive, but it was not until the early 1800s that people—the inventors of photography—learned how to arrest the action of the light on silver, and not until 1839 that this research was formally presented. I make work, and do research for the classes that I teach, that responds directly to these histories of photography and art.

Just like other disciplines, photography needs to be reinterpreted constantly. I've become fascinated by an economy of means: to make the most out of the least amount of materials, and to not put more work forward in an exhibition than absolutely necessary. With that, I'm often surprised by what occurs in both making and exhibiting. Just as *camera* translates into "room" in Latin, many of my photograms take on the rooms they're exhibited in as a viewing device, where the viewers can actually see themselves seeing and can have a clearer understanding of the object's construction—as well as of their own perception. I'd like people to have agency with the work and their experiences, to develop a deeper sense of their relationships to space, light, color, and, of course, photography.

For my current retrospective at the ICA, I worked closely with chief curator [Eva Respini](#) to collect pieces that are critical to the trajectory of the work and could be brought into new spaces and conversations. Over the course of a year we developed a scale model for the exhibition, while simultaneously editing a book that would not copy the show at all. Through the pieces and the curatorial choices—from the placement to the walls themselves, and the light within the galleries—we've presented an opportunity for people who have never seen the work to view twenty years of it, in absolute ideal conditions.

The eleven new works for the series "Timelines" came from a prompt from Eva last summer to respond to the building, specifically the founder's gallery, which connects the east and the west galleries with one of the most tremendous views of Boston. Over time and many site visits, I arrived at a proposal to make and install works on the windows—specifically, photograms that I made a few months ago, which are all curved in their artist frames, and descend or ascend in height depending on which way the viewer moves. They produce an illusion that the works will continue beyond the building. I installed them on every other window panel, and the works can look like part of the building or reveal themselves as artworks, while simultaneously drawing attention to the panes of glass and the weather that is held at bay. As a New Englander, I am acutely aware of the ever-changing weather patterns in Boston and all of New England. It's also important to note that through the model and 3-D sketch-ups, we constructed the walls and decided on the "anchor" works for the exhibition. I only wanted to exhibit works that would reveal my current concerns as a maker. I hope there is a through line through the twenty years worth of work.

Like many other artists, I really do not remember a time when I did not have the desire to make images. At the Rhode Island School of Design, students have to choose their major during their freshman year. I chose photography because I knew very little about the medium but at the same time was constantly surrounded by it. Until this decision, I had only had experience with cameras on family outings and at school events. I did not know how to load a 35 mm camera or use a reflex or range finder. Through that experience I was presented with challenges, technically and otherwise, and I made a tremendous number of mistakes. Today, I'm still fascinated by photography's complexities, uncertainties, and potential to captivate. Curiosity drew me to it, and I continue to be enthralled by the discipline and history of photography.

— As told to [Gabriel H. Sanchez](#)



Liz Deschenes at the Walker Art Center



Liz Deschenes's works exist as photographic objects and understanding of its realization at once. During the last three decades, Deschenes has sought to expand what defines the viewing of a photograph, her work inhabiting a space between image and sculpture. Over the years she has pared down the photograph to its most basic elements—paper, light, and chemical— and amplified them. Now, for a yearlong exhibition occupying the Walker Art Center's seventh-floor gallery, Deschenes presents a large-scale installation, or "photographic intervention." Of her work in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, she [told *BOMB Magazine*](#), "What I am responding to is that photography is a translation of color and tones—a language." Her aims are more abstract than traditional photography, she explained, often to "enable the viewer to see the inconstancy of the conditions of display, which are always at play but sometimes hard to see."

In this most recent project, she shifts the contours of the room by letting in natural light and reorienting the layout with rectangular, colored panels, which consist of a combination of silvery photograms and digitally printed blue monochromes. She creates these photograms using a method for which she has become well known, in which she makes use of dim nighttime light on photosensitive paper, to be later washed with silver toner. Much like her new layout of the exhibition space itself, the result of the photograms depends on subtle shifts of light across space, here across surfaces. The other panels represent newer experiments with digital pigment printing on acrylic in various shades of blue. It's an intervention in that the display's parts alternately take in and reflect light, same as they intend to rearrange our movements. In that vein, Deschenes uses not just the materials of photography but also its usual setting for viewing— the show title, "Gallery 7," is the original 1971 name for the gallery space, now called the Medtronic Gallery.

"Gallery 7" is on view at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, MN, through November 22.

MODERN PAINTERS

How to Light a Show: Liz Deschenes Turns the Gallery Into a Camera

BY THEA BALLARD, MODERN PAINTERS | NOVEMBER 29, 2014



Installation view of "Gallery 7" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.
(Photo: Gene Pittman, 2014. Courtesy the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis)

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Liz Deschenes

"In many white cubes, you could be virtually anywhere," says [Liz Deschenes](#), in her Ridgewood, Queens, studio, walking around a model of a gallery in the Barnes building at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. "Here, you'll know exactly where you are in the world." In the model, scaled so that an inch represents one foot of space, she has arranged small foamcore models of the sculptural, stand-alone photogram pieces she will exhibit on the gallery floor—sparse and conceptual, in the vein of the body of work for which the artist has become known.

Her studio is a fittingly uncluttered space that, on this crisp late September day, contains fragments of the Walker exhibition, set to open November 22. She pieces together, in a somewhat circular fashion, how these elements relate to one another: transparent squares of blue Plexi hanging on the wall—matching the artist's button-down shirt, in a pleasing chromatic twist—are revealed to be references to "blue fade tests done by conservators to show how sensitive to light a pigment is. It's not a medium-specific way to evaluate how lightfast a work is; it's used from painting to photography to sculpture," she says. Material samples, models, and older pieces line the studio's walls, the silvery, oxidized finish of her photograms—photographic works made without a camera by exposing photo paper to light—demonstrating what the final appearance of the rectangular models will be. There isn't, as far as I can tell, a camera anywhere in the room, but there is an array of household tools organized on a table, perhaps a better indication of her practice.

Having received traditional training as a photographer at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid 1980s, Deschenes has, for the past two decades, pursued a deconstructed, critically minded approach to the medium: one that places emphasis on the materials and mechanics of the photographic, invoking a rich history of producing and theorizing images, and developing a spatially minded minimal aesthetic that is quietly beautiful. In addition to photograms, she has also taken an interest in processes including dye transfer, the materials for which were discontinued by Kodak in the early 1990s, and the green screen. “There’s not one procedure I use,” she explains. “There are multiple procedures depending on what it is I’m responding to. I’m interested in making cameraless works, but I think it’s more about an inversion of elements playing against each other than it is a dedication to the photogram, or any other process, per se. It’s a means to an end for dealing with materials, an architectural mirror.” Important, too, is an interaction between the mechanics she invokes and the natural world. Her first photograms, created in Madrid in 2003, were exposed outdoors at night, picking up on the moon and the stars, as well as the city’s ambient light. Lately, she creates the pieces in Bennington, Vermont, where she also teaches, a location whose seclusion allows the material to have a focused response to primarily natural light. Additionally, recent works have emphasized an expansion beyond the traditional frame of a photographic image. Aside from pieces like *Green Screen 4*, 2001, which extends to rest on the floor, or *Bracket*, 2013, four parallelograms that, though stationary on the wall, create an odd, sideways sense of perspective, Deschenes’s oeuvre often incorporates the architecture of its location, toying with the viewer’s relationship to the space.

The Walker show will do this in a particularly rooted way, interacting with not just the Barnes building but—on the occasion of its 75th anniversary—the institution’s history as well. Initially, Deschenes intended to create a work for the museum’s Herzog & de Meuron building, which generally houses minimalist pieces, but a scheduling overlap led her to the older Barnes, a fortunate change of plans. Her actual interventions are light-handed: a series of the paneled, stand-alone photograms; three horizontal lines running the perimeter of the gallery and recalling a three-tier hanging system employing visible wires used by the Walker around 1940; the decision to remove the neutral-density filters the museum uses on the one large window at the building’s front, filling the space with natural light and opening up visibility on each side of the gallery’s walls. It is smaller, less visible details, however, that color in these gestures. For example, the photograms are sized in the proportions of an index card, intended to recall an iteration of Lucy Lippard’s “Numbers” exhibition series, “c. 7,500,” which showed at the Walker in 1973. They’re also arranged in such a way that, when viewed from above, their shape recalls the angles of the Walker’s staircases. And crucially, Deschenes says, “the works are placed where you would generally find the spectator standing, so there’s a reversal: the work takes the place of the viewer’s position.”

This, alongside the now-transparent window, serves to locate the viewer by disrupting her relationship to the room. “Being in a museum with density-filtered windows is like wearing sunglasses,” she explains. “It really separates the museum from its neighbors. I’m looking at the space not only as a site of intervention but as a way of thinking about the work in relationship to cameras. To me, the gallery becomes an enormous camera, a viewing platform, a way of looking at the city of Minneapolis throughout the entirety of a year.” The unfiltered light will, of course, also activate the photographic works, which, though fixed, slowly oxidize in response to the conditions of the space in which they’re installed—ultimately, over time, allowing them to bear some trace of the site in which they are displayed. The artist often plays with how works are lit. For example, a photogram installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this past summer, *Tilt/Swing*, 2009, was lit at lower levels than the work surrounding it. “I like to work with the spaces I’ve been given, but not necessarily the light I’ve been given,” she says. “I think this kind of intervention slows people down, though it may not be readily apparent.”

In the case of this commission, notes Deschenes, “all of the works are double-sided. People often mistake my pieces for being metal and not photographic, so in this case, you are actually able to see the back of the works, which are mounted to aluminum.” They are also slightly angled back in their frames, so they will mirror the architecture of the gallery. In the end she says, “I’m hoping that what I’ve made, alongside the preexisting apertures of the space, creates a new set of portals, reflective viewing experiences, transparent viewing experiences, opaque viewing experiences.” It’s a project that contains shades of Brian O’Doherty’s seminal essays on the homogeneity of the gallery interior and the lack of porousness between these spaces and the world outside them, in *Inside the White Cube*; however, Deschenes is careful to describe what she’s doing as motivated less by institutional critique and more by “an interest in responding to the museum’s configurations: removing walls, taking down filters, or putting work in the place where one expects to find the viewer. I’m hoping it’s a conversation, though,” she says, laughing. “It’s not easy to get museums to take down walls.”

Deschenes has held a number of teaching posts at institutions including Bard, Columbia, and, since 2006, Bennington College. Her practice’s engagement with the history of photography—particularly Jonathan Crary’s influential text *Techniques of the Observer*, which is writ large over projects like the viewing platform she has produced at the Walker—is, she says, very much the result of writing her own syllabi. As an active creator of both pedagogy and work that pushes forth an expanded understanding of photography, she is, it seems,

angling to shift photography's position from a secondary medium beholden to framing single moments in time and space to a process containing past, present, and future. I propose to her that her oeuvre has a foot in each of these tenses, and she agrees. "Looking at how the medium has been historicized is the looking back, expanding how photography is considered is the present, and the future would be how the work changes, and how people interact with the work, which are the variables that are, to a certain degree, completely out of my hands," she says. "Not only do I hope it involves past, present, and future, but it involves how many constraints I can establish, and the work either fails or succeeds within them."

In working with an expanded notion of photography, Deschenes joins a continuing tradition of artists experimenting with the form. She cites an exhibition she curated in 2000 at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, "Photography about Photography," which included artists like Thomas Ruff, Louise Lawler, and Vera Lutter, as, at that point, a rare opportunity to exhibit artists with "self-reflexive practices" in photography. "In 2000," she says, "nobody wanted to talk about nonnarrative concepts of photography. I didn't have a big audience for that project, but I had 13 amazing artists—important people making important strides in photography." It seems, however, that a niche has been carved for this sort of work, evidenced by exhibitions like this past summer's "Fixed Variable" at Hauser & Wirth and an upcoming survey of new photography, mostly by women, at the Guggenheim. Deschenes was recently a recipient of DeCordova Sculpture Park's Rappaport Prize, a major award given to an artist with strong ties to New England (in addition to teaching in Vermont, the artist was born and raised in Boston). Accordingly, she had much on her plate when we spoke—she is also in the early stages of curating another exhibition of photography and video for MASS MoCA, for which participating artists will select their own works to display, accompanying a new commission from Deschenes. With her installation at the Walker set to remain open for a year, the longest the artist has been able to display work in one space, she's leaving plans for the exhibition open-ended, as well. "Right now, I look at the project as a proposition," she says. "I may install works from the permanent collection. I may work collaboratively with choreographers. A lot will be revealed through not only the inauguration of the exhibition but its duration."

This is, after all, the future-facing element of Deschenes's practice: the variables she can't control. "If I could predict outcomes, I don't know if I'd be as engaged in doing this," she tells me. "The work changes, the sites change, the viewer changes, the artist changes. All those things are changing in relation to each other, but not in a way that can be measured."



Liz Deschenes

The green (or blue or red) screen is a ubiquitous backdrop in movie and television studios, used primarily in the production of special effects. In this process, an actor will stand in front of the screen during filming, and then in postproduction a technician will "key" out the specific color and replace it with a new background. The monochromatic environment is only a temporary stand-in for a representation that will be achieved later in production. Its particular color is completely utilitarian, determined by the industry for its direct contrast to the visible range of human skin tones. The green screen is meant to be an invisible component of image production; its appearance in a live news broadcast, for

example, would signal a technical malfunction.

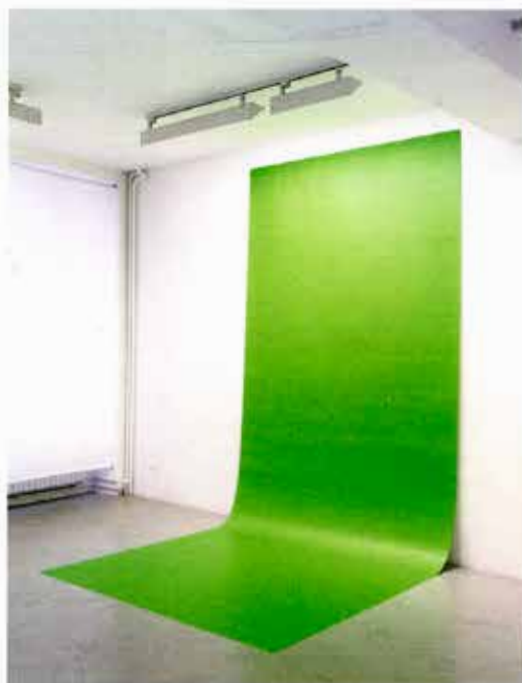
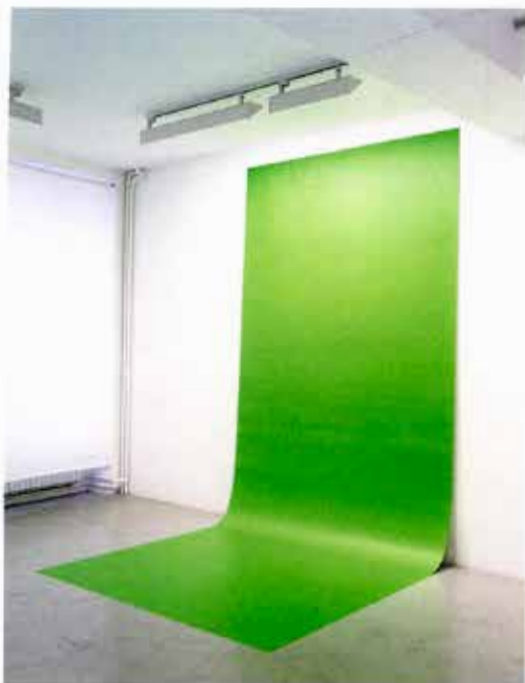
Liz Deschenes, who routinely focuses in her art on the conditions of representation and photographic display, encountered a green screen in 2000, as part of a product display at a broadcasting convention in Las Vegas; the technology became the subject of her 2001 series **Blue Screen Process**. On first glance, **Green Screen #4** might appear to be a readymade—an actual sheet of seamless green paper pinned to the wall of the gallery and unfurled on the floor. It is not, however, monochromatic paper, but rather an inkjet print of a photographic image that has been UV laminated

on the front and coated with Duratrans material on the back. "The large green monochrome backdrop," the artist has said, "is a photograph, and could 'act' as the thing that it is depicting."¹¹ Beyond the history and processes of photography, though, Deschenes also brings the work into a dialogue with high modernism by positioning it in relation to the monochrome, from Alexander Rodchenko forward. With this self-reflexive sculptural piece, she conflates within a single object the history of modernist painting and contemporary imaging processes, foregrounding disparate connections between the apparatuses of photography and art history. —EC

[11]

Liz Deschenes, in Kathleen Peterson, "Interview: Liz Deschenes," **Bomb**, no. 119 (Spring 2012), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6428/liz-deschenes>.

[CAT. 17]



Green Screen #4 2001

The New York Times

Art in Review

ART IN REVIEW

Liz Deschenes: 'Stereographs #1-4 (Rise/Fall)'



From Liz Deschenes's "Stereographs #1-4 (Rise/Fall)."
Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

By Martha Schwendener

May 15, 2014

Miguel Abreu Gallery

36 Orchard Street, near Hester Street, Lower East Side

Through June 25

Liz Deschenes is one of the quiet giants of post-conceptual photography, but she is also increasingly engaged with the legacy of minimalism. Many of her recent projects involve photographs, pushed to the limits of that definition, installed in spaces that determine their viewing and reception. A touchstone might be Robert Morris's 1964 exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York, in which the site is virtually always mentioned as part of the work.

“Stereographs #1-4” (2012) were previously shown in Vienna, but their current display at Miguel Abreu feels equally definitive. Four elongated photograms made at night by exposing photographic paper to moonlight are mounted on Dibond and hung on the walls. The silvery planks look more like metal than photographs, although, close up, you can see striations produced during the developing process. They are hung in a symmetrical fashion that mimics both 19th-century stereoscopy and the receding lines of linear perspective. The current installation is also shaped by the recessed ceiling of Abreu’s space, the muted floor tiles — shades of Carl Andre — and the history of the room, which functioned at one point as a Buddhist temple.

Ms. Deschenes’s whole career has consisted of stripping photography to its core, exposing the apparatus. What is gained by threading this practice through the needle of minimalism?

If Mr. Morris’s installations leaned on existential phenomenology, activating the interaction of bodies and objects in space, Ms. Deschenes’s work shifts this to the techniques of the observer: “Photography” in her hands becomes immanently material, with images, stereoscopes and other devices structuring our experience as concretely as the architectural spaces in which they are displayed.

MOUSSE

RADICAL LOOKING; IN THE PRESENCE OF THE IMAGE, IN THE ABSENCE OF SPECTACLE

BY ROXANA MARCOCI



One of the principles of instantaneous photography is its ability to capture a moment and thus produce a “still” of what has just now become the past. But the work of Liz Deschenes seems to imply a multiple timeframe of the moment, a “duration,” which refers to history, reflects on the present, continues to unfold in time, and produces new forms of subjectivities. Roxana Marcoci conducts an “in reverse” interview with the artist that reveals her particular procedures and anti-spectacle techniques, between cinema and photography, and certain ways of reorganizing the viewing experience.

Deeply invested in the histories of photography, film, architecture and exhibition design, Liz Deschenes has furthered (without any trumpets) an uncompromising critique of late capitalist society, *hic et nunc*, when capital, to paraphrase Marxist theorist Guy Debord, was accumulated to the point where it became image. If photography has been at once linked to technological apparatuses and global capitalism, manifest in the “blizzard” surplus of images, how can it be now uncoupled from the circuit of unsustainable production, instant circulation, bulimic consumption and imperialist redistribution? Deschenes’ radical reconception of the proper site of politics offers a counter-model. Her installations—these include dye-transfer/technicolor monochromes, photo-filmic moirés, green-screen works, cameraless photograms with reflective surfaces, and zoetrope-like installations of photograms that reflect the space outside the work—resist adding any more pictures to the world. Images, in her installations, are stripped of their *de facto* function as agents of spectacle. We are faced instead with an urgent questioning of the culture of consumerism—of images and products. And with an insistence on site-specificity, mechanisms of display, experience of materiality (as in Marxian materialism), and accruing temporalities/histories in the act of looking.

Deschenes delves into the conditions of seeing as an extensive interplay between the agent-subject and reality. She enters into a dialogue with historical avant-garde precedents: Herbert Bayer, Alexander Dörner, El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, etc. The idea of perception as a confluence of the phenomenal and the social was central to Moholy-Nagy, hence his association with the political Volkstheater of the Weimar-era playwright and director Erwin Piscator, who visualized the act of seeing as consciousness-raising. In her set of *Tilt/Swing* constructs Deschenes references Bayer’s 1935 spatial scheme for extending the viewing experience—a post-Bauhaus diagram consisting of a ring of panels installed at 360 degrees around a central viewer. Deschenes similarly visualizes the act of seeing in a non-linear way (it’s her proneness for the oblique), but dismantles Bayer’s panoptic structure into fragmented reflections of the viewer’s motion in space. Each move engages cognitive reorientation. Eschewing a fixed, predetermined position, she channels attention to the processes of looking. Visual agency is ultimately her subject. Perception is historically bound to a specific time, gender, experience and context; and it is through this dynamic interrelation, or bonds of sociality, that the work’s signification, its promise of continuous discursivity, is generated.



Elevation #1-7, 1997-2003. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

4. Would you say that at times your work shifts toward filmic possibilities? Your series of moiré photographs made through the misregistration of several negatives provokes a startlingly vibrant optical effect that nearly causes vision to blur—an “innervation” similar to that experienced when watching Hans Richter’s flicker films or the hypnotic, pulsating rhythms of Duchamp’s rotoreliefs. What are the political stakes of opening an analogy between technical media (photography, film) and the mechanisms of human imaginary?

liz deschenes: The relationship to those works is pertinent, and it is also important to note that there are a few series of works before the moirés that were less optical, and more process-based, that explored film and photography’s shared technologies. *Elevation #1-7*, 1997-2003, *Blue Screen Process*, 2001, and *Black and White #1-5*, 2003, are three series of photographs that precede the moirés, and take on some of the shared conditions of film and photography. *Elevation* utilized Dye Transfer prints—Technicolor in film—while *Blue Screen Process* featured almost every type of print available in 2001, from analog to hybrids to an enormous inkjet print, and *Black and White* referenced some of the binary schisms so prevalent when talking about film or photography’s use of black and white or color, and digital or analog. It has been a consistent procedure to take what is known in another medium and reposition it in the realm of photography. This brings me to the moirés. By misregistering two pieces of film, the resulting print has the illusion of movement, which is largely associated with film; when photography has movement it appears as a blur. To confound that limitation was a challenge—to make something with a property largely outside of the confines of photography and the expectations that are brought to looking at a photographic work. I was also interested in the moirés’ capacity to extend beyond the frame. This would be in tune with Duchamp’s rotoreliefs and the anaglyphes, as well as Hans Richter’s *Rhythmus 21*. My most recent body of work references an apparatus from film, and is currently on view

in a group exhibition at ICP, “What Is a Photograph?” It is a 13-part photographic work comprised of photograms and titled *Untitled (Zoetrope)*, 2013. Carol Squiers, the curator of the exhibition, asked me for some writing on the work, and here is how I responded to a few of her questions:

The photograms are stand-ins for the slits of a zoetrope; everything in the piece is a reversal from the pre-cinematic zoetrope. The slits of a zoetrope are convex (part of the circle), the photograms are concave. The slits on a zoetrope are a removal so that the viewer can see in; the photograms are an addition that allows the viewer to see everything that is outside the work reflected back in the work.

The number is rather straightforward—it comes up most frequently in relation to zoetrope slits or openings. It’s probably the minimum number of openings to have the illusion of persistence of vision.

The size of the works corresponds to a human being’s center or core. The viewer activates the work from their movement, which is another reversal—the zoetrope would move in a circular motion, but here the zoetropes are static and the viewer is in motion.

3. In your signature *Tilt/Swing* (2009) you materialize Herbert Bayer's *Diagram of 360° field of vision* (1935) by floating six large photograms in an oculus-like formation of all viewpoint possibilities. This installation marks a break with strategies of canonical museum display. It grants viewers an intensified sense of visual agency. Can you speak about the underpinnings of this field of vision extended into architecture?



LD: It began with a curiosity to make the drawing come to life, albeit with some significant shifts and edits. The drawing has one viewer who is centrally located on a pedestal—I took out this key component. The diagram was most certainly intended for the display of paintings; in *Tilt/Swing* paintings are supplanted by highly reflective photograms. The architecture becomes as significant as the panels around them and the viewer is liberated from standard viewing procedures.

Nicholas Knight, artist and writer, in his review of the exhibition states, “The

exhibition title *Tilt/Swing* takes its name from the movements of the camera lenses used in architectural photography. Deschenes turns the language back on itself with a large six-panel work, itself titled *Tilt/Swing*, creating a piece that imposes optical distortions onto the space rather than discreetly eliminating them. Tilt/swing lenses work by allowing a photographer to place the lens on a plane that is not parallel to the plane of the film. The most common purpose is for making the straight lines of architecture perfectly parallel and orthogonal in the image, rather than allowing them to converge perspectivaly.”¹

2. Sigmar Polke once said that “a negative is never finished,” implying that a photograph is not determined by the decisive moment (releasing the shutter), but by a series of expanded, unfinished temporalities. I think of this each time I’m in front of one of your photograms (taken by daylight or moonlight) whose abstract surfaces are reminiscent of direct-positive daguerreotypes. Would you say your work engages multiple temporalities? Differently put, can we speak of historical unevenness, where past and future tenses spawn a network of meanings that vexes linear exposition?



LD: Last fall, I had the opportunity to exhibit work in solo shows in London and Paris at the same time. I entitled the exhibitions using the names of these cities so crucial to the inventions of photography, adding the word bracket and putting the names of the cities in parentheses. All of the works were photograms that referenced Fox-Talbot and Daguerre. I hope that this potential Polke refers to is manifest in the photograms, that mirror their environments, change as they

oxidize, acquire a history of where they have been exhibited, resulting in work that shifts in relation to the viewer and the site. The photographs simultaneously refer to their history, reflect the present, and will continue to unfold over time, altering one of the precepts or often-cited characteristics of photography and its fixed relationship to the past.



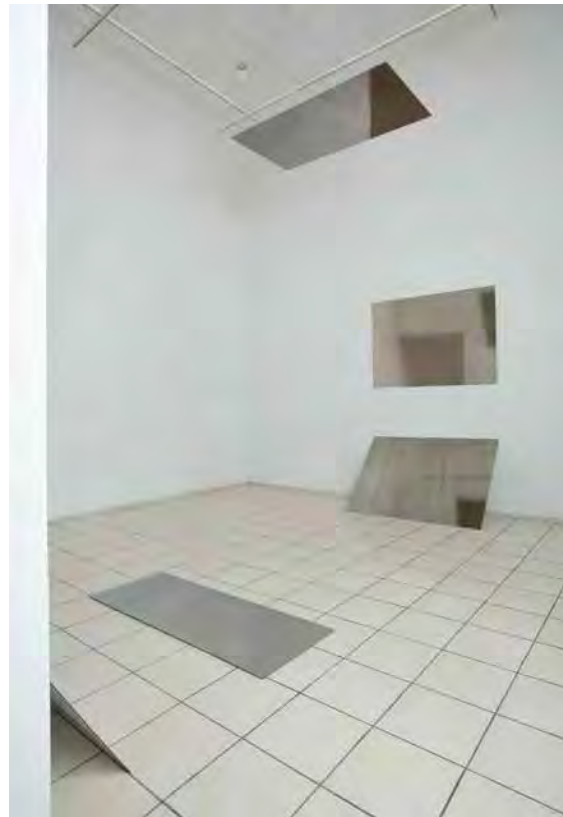
Opposite - "Bracket (Paris)", installation view at Campoli Presti, Paris, 2013. Courtesy: Campoli Presti, London/Paris

Above - "Photographs", installation view at Sutton Lane (Campoli Presti), London, 2007. Courtesy: Campoli Presti, London/Paris

Right - "Tilt/Swing", installation view at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

Below, Left - Green Screen #6, 2001. Courtesy: Campoli Presti, London/Paris

Below, Right - "Bracket (London)", installation view at Campoli Presti, London, 2013. Courtesy: Campoli Presti, London/Paris

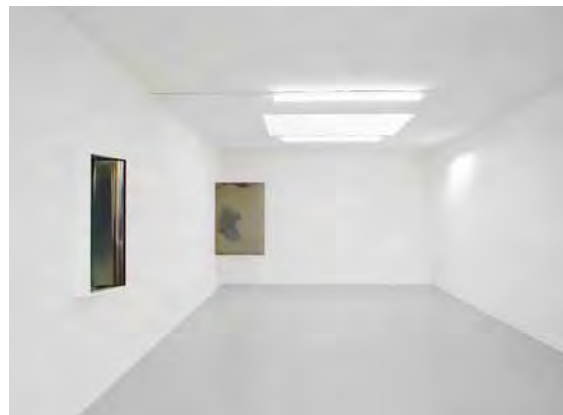
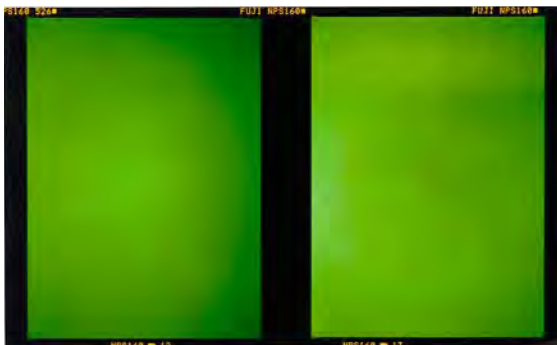


1. You've been called a photographer's photographer, although you confront your viewers with a paradoxical coincidence of unconventional photographic and architectural production. I'll get back to the way you actively extend the framework of photography into architecture, but first can you say a few words about the hybridity of legacies in your practice?

lā: I have reversed the order and chronology of your questions. The first one, this one, is the most difficult to answer, in part because it addresses how the work has been received, alongside some of the procedures I have chosen to employ. I learned in my first solo exhibition that I could not address all the issues I wanted to investigate in one body of work—there had to be a focused sequence of displays over time, that would incrementally take on issues of self-reflexivity and the conditions of display. The work, in distinct series, has taken on the guise of sculptures, architectural structures, and the monochrome that is almost exclusively associated with painting's domain. In question #4, I address

many of the series that have taken on film and movement. What all of these works and series have in common is that every one of these investigations positions photography in a central role, not the supporting role to which it is often relegated. I hope that in the previous responses I have begun to describe some of those procedures that you refer to in this question.

1. Nicholas Knight, Liz Deschenes, "Tilt/Swing" at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York <http://nicholasknight.net/wordpress/?p=166> (May 25, 2009)



ARTFORUM

search

Liz Deschenes



View of "Liz Deschenes,"
2013.

In the first room of American photographer Liz Deschenes's exhibition "Bracket (London)," a series of deep viridian photograms hung unframed in a neat row: *Bracket 1*, *Bracket 2*, *Bracket 3*, and *Bracket 4* (all works 2013). The surfaces of these four large parallelograms, designed to reflect the light and shadows cast by the gallery's skylights and windows, changed according to the fluctuations of the natural daylight that streamed in. The gallery's second room contained two more photograms, silver-toned and tarnished-looking, which offered a stark contrast to the iridescence of the previous space. One, *Bracket 6*, was hinged at right angles to the wall, as though a blank window or door, while the second, *Bracket 7*, was curled to create a concave mirror nestled inside a smaller open box frame.

One of the earliest forms of photography, a photogram is made without a camera by exposing photosensitive paper to light over a period of time. Deschenes made the works on view here at night, exposing the paper slowly to ambient (and artificial, in the case of the four parallelogram pieces) light. She then toned, fixed, and washed the photograms, creating a series of pours, trickles, puddles, and pools, which marks the surfaces of the photograms in thin, uneven veils that register by turns as shiny and opaque, dull and matte when caught in the light. These surface effects are minimal yet ravishing: all Whistler-nocturne and pearly petrol sheen.

But these effects are purely tricks of the light—most of the photograms are in a slow state of material as well as visual flux. The fragile silver gelatin used to arrest the slow exposure of the work gradually deteriorates, and the photograms continue to slowly oxidize, darken, and change appearance over time. Of all photographic processes, the photogram is the most literal as a material indexing of the world outside it. Deschenes's skylight-shaped works—which pun on the notion of the photograph as a "window on the world"—are powerful precisely because they do not set out to represent the world as much as insist upon their material status as objects in it.

Photography is posed here not as a statement but as a question. Deschenes's works are not simply about photography's past, despite their looking back to Fox Talbot, Niépce, and Daguerre. They look also to the present conditions of the photograph as an object in a state of flux and interrogation. Deschenes insistence on the slow exposure of her photograms stands in stark contrast to the production of the digital image, drawing attention instead to the evidence, and occasional errors, that the handmade work contains (and what could be more analog than a handmade, moonlight-processed, camera-free photograph?). Testing—developing—the limits and possibilities of the photographic medium continues to be a viable and productive activity for Deschenes, for, despite the archaic nature of her processes, she is keyed into contemporary debates that circulate around questions of the analog and digital, of close looking versus rapid reproduction and dissemination. The subtle yet stunning visual effects Deschenes achieves temper the seriousness of her endeavor. For there is a playful aspect to her works, too. They are surprising, affective objects whose demand for close attention belies their apparently simple surfaces. The weight of those discourses is worn lightly, with a confidence that is utterly compelling.

—Jo Applin

ArtReview

Liz Deschenes *Bracket (London)*

Campoli Presti, London 14 October – 14 December

On seeing one of the first photographs, in 1839, the painter Paul Delaroche is supposed to have exclaimed, 'From today, painting is dead.' Since the conclusive arrival of digital-image culture during the 1990s, with Photoshopping and CGI moviemaking, much the same thing could and has been said of analogue photography, with all its special papers, messy chemicals and darkrooms. Liz Deschenes doesn't mind, though. Just as painting's redundancy as realist art didn't kill it, but led painters into further investigation of its abstract and material dimensions, Deschenes, who has been working since the 1990s, is one of a generation of artists to regularly delve into the fundamental properties of light-sensitive paper and its exposure – Wolfgang Tillmans, Walead Beshty, Gerard Byrne, Broomberg & Chanarin or Michael Part come to mind – without worrying too much about lenses, or the making of actual images.

Deschenes's work is something of an extreme in this evolving field. Large sheets of silver-toned gelatin print, exposed at night, sometimes outdoors, and still potentially oxidising even when exhibited, Deschenes's

photograms are darkly reflective surfaces, metallic in sheen, which ditch bright colour for a palette of decaying metal – tarnished silvers, lead and pewter.

It makes for elusive objects, whose gloomy depths draw you closer, or alternatively reflect you back at yourself, keeping you dangling in the in-between. Because for all that they wear their materiality on their sleeve, Deschenes's works are still playfully haunted by images. *Bracket 1, 2, 3 and 4* (all works 2013) are four parallelogram-shaped prints, mounted on aluminium, ranged across one wall. Whatever strange business of exposure, dribbling and drying has taken place, what's left are dimly modulated swirls and pools of deep black-blues, faded verdigris and contrasting whitened areas, which first seem to resemble the grain of worn marble, but eventually flip the eye into the extreme depth of twilight horizons and vast, distant cloud ranges.

Nevertheless, Deschenes's shaped prints, like many of her earlier installations, push us eventually back into the space around, gesturing to the surrounding architecture (the parallelograms mimicking the skylight above, or the

shifting planes of the gallery's walls). If there is an image in these photographic surfaces, then Deschenes seems keen to insist that it is the reflected image of the world and us in it that her photograms transiently contain: *Bracket 5* presents us with a tarnished, spotted silvery surface affixed inside a wall-mounted display case to form a concave mirror, our reflection warping and flipping as we move, as in a fairground hall of mirrors.

There's little that's celebratory or playful in Deschenes's sombre, reflexive photo-objects, however. Meditative and elegiac, maybe, for the age when we believed in images fixed, forever, in chemical matter, Deschenes's surfaces are chemical experiments, but there's too much affect here for it to be mere technical tinkering. There is, of course, something historically regressive to this – back to the time before Daguerre, when chemicals deteriorated and images slipped away. Still, digital images, in their rootless circulation and corruption, are more volatile. By contrast, Deschenes's works insist, however tentatively, that somewhere, sometime, light and matter did in fact coincide, that reality still leaves a trace behind. *Charlesworth*

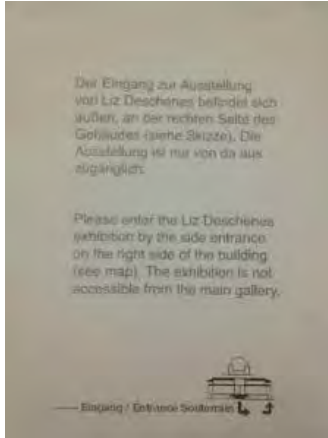


Bracket 4, 2013, silver-toned gelatin silver print mounted on aluminium, 183 × 91 cm. Courtesy Campoli Presti, London & Paris

the PARIS REVIEW

Seceding: A Conversation with Liz Deschenes

January 22, 2013 | by [Lauren O'Neill-Butler](#)



On a typically snowy January morning in Vienna, I visited the famed Secession to see an exhibition by New York-based artist Liz Deschenes. For many years her work has articulated a materialist stance; rather than taking pictures of things in the world, Deschenes usually works sans camera, turning to the inner life of photography and proposing discursive questions about its philosophical, scientific, and experimental possibilities. Deschenes has recently called her approach “stereographic,” a term originally coined in the 1850s for two nearly identical prints that are paired and viewed through a stereoscope to produce a 3-D illusion of a single image. Deschenes employs this operation of doubling and dividing to give the viewer a chance to actively participate in her work, and it also places an emphasis on the constantly changing nature of her recent photographs.

As soon as I stripped off my coat and sweater at the museum, I learned that I needed to exit, since Deschenes had chosen a rarely used side door outside the building as the entrance to her show. Bringing my attention even more crisply to the Secession’s unique architecture, this unusual parcours led to a so-called “viewfinder,” a small empty hallway before two other rooms that (stereographically) forked to the left and right. Inside these chambers Deschenes had installed a series of moonlight-exposed photograms—Stereograph #1–#16, 2012—long and lean silver-toned planks, which she coupled to form four sets in each room. The energetic spaces formed

within these brackets reframed and isolated—as one does when taking a picture—the spaces, and they offered an atmosphere for contemplation and concentration. In turn, the photograms themselves were still developing—oxidizing in situ and already bearing the traces of their time spent in the Secession’s lower gallery.

*In an interview in the show’s catalogue, Deschenes notes, “The reference is cameras as rooms. ‘Camera’ literally means ‘room’ in Latin.” More specifically, it comes from the Ancient Greek *καμάρα*, or “kamara,” anything with an arched cover. Curious to learn more about her installation in this vaulted chamber, as well as the ways in which she feels each piece is never really “finished,” I asked her a few questions from frosty Vienna about the show. The [exhibition](#) is on view at the Secession until February 10, 2013.*

These photograms began in Vermont, by being exposed by the night sky. Do you prefer to work nocturnally?

I worked at night for purely practical reasons. Simply put, the paper I used for these pieces is light sensitive, so working during the day—no matter how sunny or cloudy—would overexpose the paper.

What was it like to install in the Secession? Take us through a little bit of the process of putting the show together in the space.

Secession, as you mentioned, has a rather esteemed history. In response to the building I wanted to reframe the spaces and the entry point. By doing so, the order of the spaces was thus altered. Bettina Spörr, the curator, was instrumental to this project—amongst other significant contributions, she managed to convey, in only a twenty-four-hour site visit, the dynamism and unique artistic opportunity that sums up Vienna’s Secession. I always make scale models for the projects too, and lately, I’ve made models of the photographs at a one-to-one scale, so that I can get a better sense of the final works in space.

You have some upcoming shows, in London at Campoli Presti and in New York at Miguel Abreu Gallery. Will *Stereograph #1–#16* be presented again soon elsewhere? Will the installation change, or be “finished,” if so?

I’ve decided not to reconfigure these works in new venues. As for the works being finished, I’m reminded of the title of Johanna Burton’s essay for Secession’s catalogue, which was drawn from something I said in an interview recently. I was asked about my relation to Henri Cartier-Bresson’s notion of the decisive moment and in response I said that in my work, “There is no decisive moment.”

But actually, there are so many decisive moments, and their effect is cumulative. Sometimes decisions are altered or changed entirely—for instance, I thought this work could travel to London, but it will not. Instead, I’ll make new pieces that will respond to that site in more specific ways that are yet to be determined.

<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/01/22/seceding-a-conversation-with-liz-deschenes/>

Stereographic vision activates the viewer, making one more aware of the constantly changing work in the gallery. It seems like this perception could also extend outside of the gallery, too. Is that something you aim for?

Yes—and I'd like to take on other venues too, not just galleries and museums. I don't have an ideal site, though I like the idea of the work being installed at unexpected places, like when On Kawara's work was installed in an elementary school classroom.

You're deeply engaged with photography, but there's also a painterly and sculptural aspect to your work. Still, I wonder if light is really your medium. Do these works represent light, or is it more that they are light?

The work reflects or absorbs light, certainly. I'm hoping that they simultaneously suggest other ways of viewing, even if the shift is barely perceptible in the moments of viewing.



LIZ DESCHENES

Secession

Wien

Helen Chang

Liz Deschenes' zinnfarbene Fotogramme *Stereograph 1–16* (2012) sind dafür geschaffen, sich im Laufe der Zeit zu verändern. Während der neun Wochen, in denen sie im Untergeschoss der Wiener Secession ausgestellt waren – die nächsten Stationen werden New York und London sein –, sind diese Arbeiten korrodiert und ausgebleicht; vielleicht sind durch die Temperatur auch die Grauschattierungen nachgedunkelt. Diese Werke mögen geheimnisvoll sein – selbst aus nächster Nähe sehen sie nicht aus wie Fotografien und funktionieren auch nicht so –, sie mögen nicht reproduzierbar, schwer zu fotografieren und so abstrakt sein, dass sie eigentlich gar nichts abbilden. Und doch haben sich auf ihnen die Fingerabdrücke all der taktil veranlagten Besucher angesammelt, die dem Drang nicht widerstehen konnten, diese zarten, silbrig schimmernden und wie geknicktes Blech wirkenden Streifen zu berühren.

Tatsächlich bestehen Deschenes Arbeiten nicht aus Metall, sondern aus lichtempfindlichem Papier. Sie sehen aus wie reflektierende Schutzstreifen für die Wände, so, als hätte jemand den Ausstellungsraum mit matten Distanzhaltern ausgestattet und ein paar Ecken neu eingezogen; oder als sei der Raum dezent in Klammern gesetzt worden, mal, um einen Bereich wie beiläufig zu verdichten, mal, um neue, subtile Intervalle zu setzen. Deschenes sagt von ihren Eckformen, die aus je zwei Fotogrammen von etwa 213 cm Länge und 13 cm Breite bestehen, sie seien wie die Falten von Kamerabalg; doch dieser Effekt ist derart zurückgenommen, dass man hier weniger das Gefühl hat, sich in einer raumgroßen, imaginären Kamera zu bewegen, als schlicht im etwas unspektakulären Untergeschoss des Secessionsgebäudes, in mit Neonröhren ausgeleuchteten Räumen, die ihre letzte Umgestaltung in den 80er Jahren erfahren haben; Räumen, in denen es nicht allzu viel zu sehen gibt.

Und Deschenes gibt dem Betrachter noch einen weiteren Hinweis darauf, wie man diese Falten verstehen könnte, diesmal einen, der sich auf deren Größe bezieht. Die Dimensionen der Paneele orientieren sich grob am üblichen Grundmaß für Bauholz, wie es beim Bau des Secessionsgebäudes zum Einsatz kam – in einer Zeit, als Holzbauten eher selten waren. Als das Secessionsgebäude Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts errichtet wurde, war in Wien die Ziegelbauweise üblich; dass mit der Secession damals – ganz entgegen dem sonst üblichen Anspruch auf Dauerhaftigkeit – ein temporäres Gebäude geschaffen werden sollte, ist heute längst in Vergessenheit geraten. Auch Deschenes' Fotogramme sind als eine Reaktion auf eine Form des Temporären zu verstehen. Ihre Arbeit speist sich weniger aus dem einzelnen Moment und mehr aus der Gesamtheit ihrer Arbeitsbedingungen. Die so entstandenen

monochromen Bilder suggerieren scheinbar unendliche Möglichkeiten und beständigen Wechsel – aber ebenso die enge Begrenztheit unserer Wahrnehmung.

Deschenes' kameralose Bilder sind einzig durch den Einsatz von Papier und Chemikalien entstanden. In Vermont, wo die Künstlerin am Bennington College lehrt, wurden sie erst dem Mondlicht ausgesetzt und anschließend mit Toner fixiert und aufgezogen. Flecken, Streifen und andere Spuren, die beim Hantieren mit den Fotogrammen entstanden, blieben erhalten und wurden zur unmittelbaren Manifestation des Entstehungsprozesses. So pragmatisch die Künstlerin in der Herstellung auch vorgehen mag – dass auf ihren Fotogrammen nichts Konkretes zu sehen ist, öffnet dennoch Raum für eine mystische Dimension. Sich auf die Grautöne und die feinsten Andeutungen von Farbe einzulassen, kommt dem Eintauchen in eine wunderbare Wolke gleich: Hier ist eine fotografische Alchimistin am Werk, berückend malerisch wirken ihre Bilder, umgeben von einem Nebelschleier der Subjektivität. Doch dann sickert die Erkenntnis durch, dass, was hier aussieht wie Abstraktion, letztlich etwas ganz Reales ist – der Himmel über Vermont und wie er aufgezeichnet wurde. Und so merkt Ruth Horak im Katalog der Ausstellung an: „Erst wenn die Fotografie ‚nackt‘ ist, ohne ein kleidendes Bild, erst im Zustand einer fortgeschrittenen Reduktion können ihre Parameter freigelegt werden.“

Einem ähnlichen Ansatz folgte Deschenes bereits 2001 für ihre Arbeiten aus der Serie *Green Screen*, grünen Projektionsflächen, die man – werden Bilder auf sie projiziert – selbst nie wahrnimmt. Indem sie den Fokus auf eine einzelne, materiell vorhandene Komponente reduziert, wird der Prozess der Bilderzeugung selbst sichtbar. Und er wird in einer Form wiedergegeben, die leicht historisch anmutet. Die Arbeit *Stereograph 1–16* beschwört ein Zeitalter vor der Fotografie herauf (und wirft zugleich die Frage auf, zu welchem Zweck Stereogramme ursprünglich überhaupt angefertigt wurden). Denn einer der eifrigsten Verfechter der Stereoskopie, Oliver Wendell Holmes, dachte von ihr, sie könne uns in die Lage versetzen, um die

Bilder herum zu sehen. Im Geiste dieses Irrglaubens hat Deschenes – wie sie in einem Interview erklärt – ihre Arbeiten benannt. *Stereograph* meint bei ihr jedoch nicht das doppelte und zu einem verschmelzende Bild der Stereoskopie, sondern Bilder und Nachbilder, auch solche aus zukünftigen Ausstellungen. Mit anderen Worten: die Fotografie, wie sie funktioniert hat und vielleicht auch wieder funktionieren wird.

Übersetzt von Michael Müller

Liz Deschenes's tin-coloured photograms, *Stereograph 1–16* (2012), are designed to change over time. For the nine weeks they were mounted in the Secession's basement – in addition to their future stations in New York and London, where they'll travel next – they've been rusting and discolouring, perhaps deepening in shades of grey, because of temperature. Owing to their mysteriousness – even up close, they neither resemble nor perform like photographs: they're irreproducible, they're difficult to photograph, and they're so abstract, they don't actually depict anything – they've also been accumulating fingerprints from tactile-oriented visitors unable to resist the delicate, silvery strips that resemble folded metal sheets.

But these are made of light-sensitive paper, not metal. And they look like reflective protection strips for walls, as if someone had clad the exhibition room with matte elbow guards and introduced new corners; or as if the space had been politely marked with bracket notations, modestly concentrating an area here or implying new, subtle intervals there. Deschenes says the corner shapes, made of two photograms, each seven feet long and five inches wide, are like the folds of camera bellows; but the result is so slight that it feels less like walking into an imaginary room-sized camera than simply spending some time in the Secession's unglamorous basement, which was last remodelled in the '80s and is lit with fluorescent tubes, with very little to contemplate.

One hint Deschenes gives for the use of the folds relates to their size. The dimensions of the strips are roughly based on 2 × 4 inches,



The Eyes Bear the Load

MATTHEW S. WITKOVSKY

"The architects are the form-givers and the photographers are the image-makers, and the relationship is more incestuous than one would think."
—Ada Louise Huxtable, 1973¹

There is a memorable photograph of the Whitney's Breuer building, from a coffee-table book put out in 1970, four years after the building's completion, that shows it rising awkwardly over 75th Street in an axonometric view.² Heavier at top than at bottom and barnacled with windows, the structure appears fetchingly odd, like the massive head on John Hurt in David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*. The three inverted setbacks on the main facade, seen foreshortened and in calming shadow, have a regularity and logic that contrasts strikingly with the side elevation, which is peppered by a seemingly random array of faceted windows caught here raked by morning sunlight to maximize the sense of their depth. The proportions and spacing of these windows make little sense from the exterior, where they seem like a glut of eyeballs looking out on the world below. Regular on one side, irregularly encrusted on the other, the structure thus rises from its pit and looms, gazing through its oblong protrusions onto further odd but endearing couplings at street level: the snub-nosed Fiat wedged between two very American sedans, or the prototypical 1960s Madison Avenue man in his skinny tie who appears to be helping his sensibly dressed grandmother hail a cab.

"That sheet of enclosure—that division between indoors and outdoors, the skin of a building—has again requested new answers to its problems," Breuer argued in April 1966, just as the Whitney building was nearing completion (it opened that September).³ Breuer did not like his creations to appear transparently comprehensible from without, in the manner of Walter Gropius's glass architecture or the expressed I-beams of Mies van der Rohe; instead, he wanted internal functions such as air circulation, electrical or water conduits, and skeletal structure to be contained in precast concrete units that could either weight the cladding and make it load-bearing, like an exoskeleton, or, in the case of the Whitney building, rupture an otherwise smooth epidermal surface. Because the precast units for the Whitney exterior are essentially updated window moldings, the building appears to have a number of heavily lidded eyes punched through its outer skin. "A new depth of facade is emerging," Breuer conclud-



Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1), 2009
(installation view, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2009). Six unique silver-toned black-and-white photograms, 136 x 192 x 58 in. (345 x 488 x 147 cm).
Collection of the artist

ed, "a three-dimensionality with a resulting greatly expanded vocabulary of architectural expression. Sun and shadow."⁴

Sun and shadow have a signal bearing on photography, which as Liz Deschenes knows, has a great tradition of bringing together the acts of writing and building. When Deschenes exposes sheets of photographic paper by moonlight, then processes them into lustrous, mirrored objects, she is consciously connecting with the development of "words of light" by the early photographer William Henry Fox Talbot, whose favorite subjects in the 1830s included written or printed surfaces and views of his manorial estate. Deschenes has used her heavily silvered "mirrors," which offer alluringly indistinct reflections of the surrounding space, to occupy that space as quasi-architectural elements in their own right. Her 2009 installation *Tilt/Swing*, for example, involved six of the mirrored photograms deployed in a full circle on the floor, two walls, and ceiling of a commercial gallery. Visitors stepping toward the ensemble saw their dim yet richly textured likenesses scattered and fragmented across multiple surfaces. The two-word title is common parlance among architectural photographers: *tilt* refers to the ability to swivel the lens plane relative to the image plane, so that elements not otherwise parallel to the camera will register as being in alignment and, thus, all in focus; *swing* (or *shift*) describes a movement of the lens directly up or down on an otherwise stationary camera,

typically to keep the image plane parallel to the plane of the subject, as when photographing multistory buildings. Deschenes's nocturnally prepared photograms involve no lens, so the words *tilt* and *swing* are liberated from a technical reference. They evoke instead abstract issues of viewpoint and manipulation, for example the ways in which the spectatorial subject is turned or focused in the controlled setting of a museum building.

For her participation in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, the artist is contemplating an arrangement of non-representational photographic elements that would suggest a relation between Breuer's sculptured architecture, with its stepped facade and many protruding eyes, and the lens and bellows of a view camera (a large-format device typically used to picture static subjects, such as buildings, in great clarity). It is another odd yet apposite pairing, tinged with melancholy: a high modernist monument, made in the very years in which architectural modernism was being condemned and relegated to the past, is coupled to a kind of camera rendered defunct now that film has ceded to digital photo sensors. We have no need of a bellows to create space between lens and film. For that matter, we no longer need an inside and outside to make a picture; dark and light need not be divided either in the moment of registration or during printing. Sun and shadow are what permit us to see an image, no longer to make one. In important respects as well, we concentrate today on the potential of skins, emphasizing surface over depth and thus refuting in every possible way the assertions made by Breuer in print and in his buildings.

The Breuer building, which will house the Metropolitan Museum of Art after 2015, will nevertheless live on, an archaic technology updated through new users. That moment of passage—like the far greater passage from analog to digital film—provokes nostalgia, but also the sort of critical reflection that Liz Deschenes regularly builds on in her work.

September 2011

NOTES

1. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Perspective on the City: The Photographer's Eye," *New York Times*, November 25, 1973, reprinted in Huxtable, *Kicked a Building Lately?* (New York: The NY Times Company, 1976), 137. 2. The photograph appeared in Tician Papa-christou, *Marcel Breuer: New Buildings and Projects* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Praeger, 1970), 123. 3. Marcel Breuer, "The Faceted, Molded Facade: Depth, Sun and Shadow," *Architectural Record*, April 1966, 171–72. 4. Ibid.

LIZ DESCHENES was born in 1966 in Boston. She lives and works in New York.

LIZ DESCHENES

IN THE STUDIO WITH BRIAN SHOLIS

FROM EARLY EXPERIMENTS with green-screen backdrops to recent, camera-less images made by exposing light-sensitive paper directly to the night sky, Liz Deschenes has persistently explored the photographic image-making process. She isolates the component parts of mechanical seeing and underscores the materiality of the screens that display images. But the loveliness of her artworks belies the asringency this description suggests.

Deschenes (b. 1966 in Boston, Mass.) graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1988 and has worked in New York since the early 1990s, exhibiting regularly from the end of that decade onward. She outlined the contours of her practice with "Photography About Photography" (2000), an exhibition she curated for Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York that drew together artists (Vera Lutter, Adam Fuss, Thomas Ruff, Uta Barth) who likewise explore the medium's mechanics. I first encountered her work in a 2003 exhibition, also at Andrew Kreps, where a selection of her monochromatic photographs illustrated a range of printing and display techniques. These works, in varying shades of gray, were bereft of information when seen from a distance, but upon closer inspection revealed details that hinted at how they were made. One was an image of a plasma television screen (turned off), others photograms made with the light from an enlarger. These works, though conceptually related to their predecessors, seemed far more sober than Deschenes's earlier, brightly colored images.

As the decade progressed, her work shed external references. Yet from limited means Deschenes creates a visual

plenitude. For her 2007 solo exhibition at New York's Miguel Abreu Gallery, she photographed perforated paper held against a window, then superimposed two copies of each negative in an enlarger to create moiré patterns that were somehow both understated and optically vibrant. Two years later, "Tilt/Swing (360 degree field of vision, version one)," her show of six graphite-colored photograms installed on that gallery's floor, walls and ceiling, revealed no image. Yet the installation captured the reflections of viewers who stood among the works, as if the prints were being continually remade in the image of their beholder. That their untreated surfaces are meant to oxidize, to change over time in response to the atmosphere, adds a sense of romance to the blankness.

As the unconventional presentation of "Tilt/Swing" suggests, Deschenes has added to her explorations of the medium an interest in display strategies. Now she thinks of her work almost exclusively in terms of the other artworks with which it will be shown, and the conditional nature of that approach extends to her studio itself: she doesn't have a room to which she retreats daily. She divides her time between New York and Vermont, where she teaches at Bennington College, researching and experimenting constantly but making her art on an as-needed basis. At present it's needed at the Whitney Museum, where she'll participate in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, and at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she will exhibit in a two-person show with Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl (Apr. 21-Sept. 3). We spoke in January at the CUNY Graduate Center.

BRIAN SHOLIS Let's begin with the works slated to be in the Whitney Biennial.

LIZ DESCHENES There will be two pieces, both photograms. A four-panel work will duplicate the Madison Avenue facade of the museum building: each element, though turned on its side, will represent one "level" of the stepped facade. The other piece will reference the building's irregularly shaped windows, in part by reversing their tilt. The

surfaces of the facade piece will be silver, though they will not be reflective. The work will, however, change throughout the course of the exhibition. I'm not putting any protective glazing on the surface, so the four panels will oxidize during the show's run. The piece that reinterprets the windows will be black and will have a shinier, mirrorlike aspect.

SHOLIS Allowing one of the works to oxidize has to do with your increasing interest in architecture. Buildings weather over time; spaces show the effects of people's use of them.

DESCHENES I'm absolutely interested in the conditions of display literally being part of the work, being incorporated into the surface of the work. It's not incidental that I've chosen to make these works for what will probably be the last Biennial in the famous Marcel Breuer building.

SHOLIS Do you conceive of this version of the building's facade as a kind of architectural drawing or a model? Is it to scale?

DESCHENES It's roughly proportional; I made each panel a bit longer than necessary to take into account the height of the third-floor wall on which it will be exhibited. I see this work in relationship to both photography and architecture. Architectural photographers can use tricks, movements of the camera, to correct for perspective. That's part of the reference in this four-panel work, and the other reference is very literally to all the photographs that exist of the Breuer building. I see my work as a stand-in for all of the images documenting the building.

SHOLIS Can you speak a little more about the second work included in the Biennial?

Liz Deschenes, 2011.
Courtesy the artist.

COMING SOON
"Parcours," with Florian Pumhösl,
at the Art Institute of Chicago,
Apr. 21-Sept. 3.

"OVER TIME I'VE BEEN ABLE TO REMOVE SOME OF THE MORE PERIPHERAL OR EXTERNAL CONCERNS THAT I PREVIOUSLY USED TO GIVE PEOPLE ACCESS TO MY WORK."

DESCHENES Well, it relates not only to the Whitney's windows but also to my exhibition "Tilt/Swing," which was very sculptural. Whereas in the earlier show I installed pieces that were not perpendicular to the floor and walls, these pieces will be angled to the wall, though the frames I'm building will make the sculptural qualities less readily apparent.

SHOLIS Is that a way to reassert that you are indeed a photographer and not a sculptor as you increasingly consider architectural questions and investigate strategies of display?

DESCHENES I think it's more a question of being subtle and asking people to look closely, not automatically revealing everything about each work. There are more connections between the Breuer building and photography. The museum looks like a machine, specifically the Rolleiflex 2½-inch camera, or a 4-by-5-inch camera with its bellows extended. I can imagine the building as a camera or as a kind of photographic installation. The other way in which the building replicates the camera is through the windows, its apertures.

SHOLIS I had wondered whether you had exhausted your interest in the camera and photographic printing technologies. And yet, despite the fact that your recent installations can be conceived of as architectural, you are still nonetheless intimately engaged with ideas of how cameras are built and what they can do—with technologies of mechanical seeing.

DESCHENES Mechanical seeing, yes, but I don't necessarily utilize the camera to talk about it. I think it's key that these pieces will also be camera-less pieces.

SHOLIS The camera is a means to an end, but the end is not what anyone would expect a photographer to come up with, in a way.

DESCHENES No, and even photo curators don't necessarily recognize the end product as being photographic.

SHOLIS You mentioned to me that you've been speaking with curators or working with some who mistakenly slot your work in their database of objects as sculpture?

DESCHENES Or as paint or metal—just metal. [laughs] So the thing

that's actually most photographic is sometimes least recognized as being photographic.

SHOLIS Perhaps we can move on to a curator who hasn't made that mistake, Matthew Witkovsky at the Art Institute of Chicago. Can you discuss the show you'll be in there and your work for it?

DESCHENES It's a two-person show with Florian Pumhösl, an Austrian artist who lives and works in Vienna. Before Matthew came for a studio visit last spring, I had laid out tape along the floor in accordance with a Herbert Bayer drawing describing how to move viewers through an installation space. Matt suggested that I could potentially bring together other photographers who were also working in the medium in unpredictable ways and present an exhibition in Chicago using the Bayer drawing as an installation guideline. I worked on that for several months and couldn't really find a particular reason to bring five or six different artists together other than liking all of their work.

At that point I thought it would make more sense for Matt to take back the role of curator. He decided to position my work alongside Florian's. Upon visiting Chicago, both Florian and I were, I think, rather taken by the differences between the old parts of the Art Institute and the new Renzo Piano-designed Modern Wing. One main reason is that the Renzo Piano walls are, I think, 16 inches thick and the walls in the preexisting galleries are about 8 inches.

SHOLIS And the walls in most other art galleries are only a few inches thick.

DESCHENES Piano's walls, for whatever reason, are so thick. So with that in mind we were going to re-create parts of the older Art Institute buildings inside the new Modern Wing to draw attention to the different modes of display that have existed throughout the museum's history. We're not only bringing the walls from the older parts, we're also bringing some screens used to block daylight in the McKinlock Court to the Modern Wing as well.

SHOLIS And this exhibition will include works from the photography

collections of the museum, so your contributions will be framing devices of sorts, meant to contextualize or bracket both Florian's work and the collection's work.

DESCHENES That's a good way to describe it. I think I'm only going to have two pieces that will be nestled in corners. I'm not sure what the proportions of those pieces will be, but in these corner pieces I might replicate an interval system Piano came up with for the Modern Wing that is based on a 6¼-inch unit used in various architectural elements.

SHOLIS His version of the Golden Ratio, so beloved by Le Corbusier.

DESCHENES Yes. It's human, but substantial.

SHOLIS You mentioned having had a studio visit with Witkovsky. Yet you and I are sitting in a lounge at a university and not an artist's studio. Can you describe a little bit of your working process? Even without a formal studio there are haptic, tactile, studioli-like aspects to how you come up with these pieces and their specific properties.

DESCHENES Of course, there's a deep research component to the work, some of which takes place in terms of teaching, at Bennington or elsewhere. I build scale models for all of the exhibitions in which I participate. The Usdan Gallery at Bennington is actually based on the third floor of the Whitney building, so instead of using a foam-core model I used a model that was built in the early '70s . . .

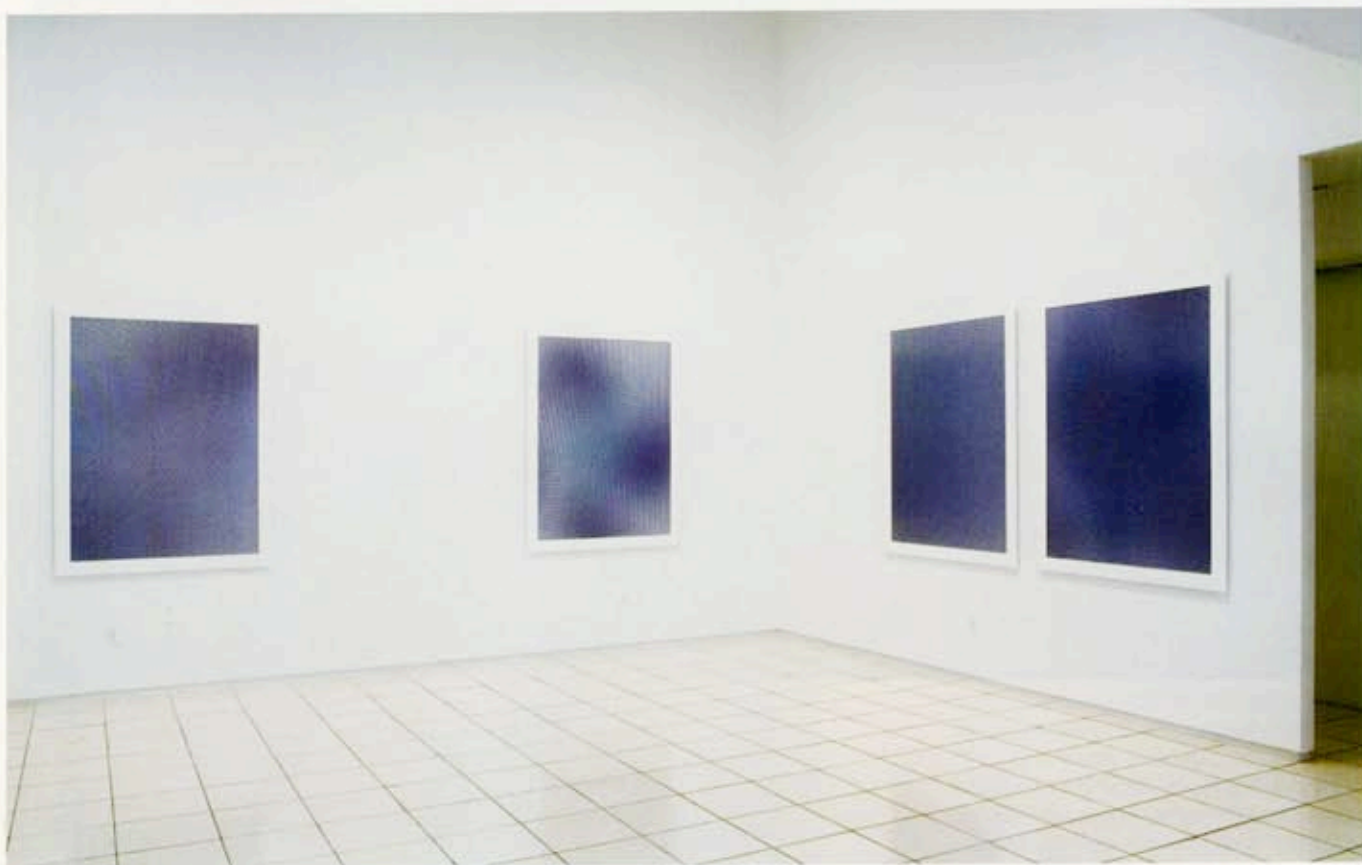
SHOLIS That you can walk into!

DESCHENES . . . that I can walk into and actually feel the proportions of the work. The initial proportions I came up with for the four-panel piece were too wide for the space, so I narrowed them down. And returning to my interest in pedagogy, I think the Art Institute exhibi-

Opposite top, view of the exhibition "Back Grounds," 2002, showing the photographs *Green Screen #1*, *#3* and *#4*; at Galerie Nelson, Paris.

Opposite bottom, view of the exhibition "Registration," 2007, showing four UV laminated chromogenic prints from the "Moire" series; at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.





Above, view of the exhibition "Tilt/Swing (360 degree field of vision, version 1)," 2009, six silver-toned, black-and-white photograms; at Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Right, *Tilt/Swing* #5C, 2011, silver-toned photogram mounted on Dibond, 44 by 62 inches framed.

"I'M ABSOLUTELY INTERESTED IN THE CONDITIONS OF DISPLAY LITERALLY BEING PART OF THE WORK, BEING INCORPORATED INTO THE SURFACE OF THE WORK."

tion points to those concerns. Using the Breuer—er, using the Bayer—I can't believe I just confused them! They weren't close friends. Using the Bayer drawing to guide people through space and asking them to look at the walls in a new way touches on this. And of course what gets installed on those walls will be equally crucial to understanding the exhibition, and I like that a lot of those decisions haven't yet been made. The walls are being built right now, but I won't know until I actually go to Chicago what work gets installed, so there is an aspect of spontaneity that frees me from a daily studio practice. I'm more interested in responding to the conditions of exhibitions. As they change, I can change along with them.

SHOLIS Your "decisive moment" happens during the installation process?

DESCHENES No, it keeps on happening. I constantly have to respond to the changing conditions of the work, which is part of the reason why I'm trying to make work that also changes during the exhibition—and beyond. Because there is no decisive moment.

SHOLIS You also mentioned pedagogy. For a long time you were learning new things about photographic technology, but now it's also as if you're trying to give yourself a kind of autodidact's M.Arch. degree. Reading new kinds of drawings—plans, axonometric views, and so on—almost entails a new

way of seeing and thinking. Is that a fair characterization of what you've been up to in recent years? And, if so, does that impact the ways that you think about the field of photographic image-making that you know so well?

DESCHENES That's an interesting question. Earlier I described the Whitney photographs as being standards for the building. The building will obviously continue to exist, but as a newer or different institution. So to actually put scaled photographs representing the facade in the interior of the museum is a way of repositioning what you would generally find outside of the museum. I don't necessarily need to understand the things that Breuer had to understand in order to build that building. It's more about trying to understand photography through architecture.

SHOLIS Let's talk a little bit about Herbert Bayer, who was one of the last surviving members of the Bauhaus. He was known most prominently neither as an architect nor as a photographer but rather as a graphic designer and a type designer. You've latched on to an ancillary or secondary aspect of his practice to explore for your own purposes. How did you first come across his work?

DESCHENES It was when I studied with the historian Mary Anne Staniszewski at Rhode Island School

of Design, and she published a book on the history of installations. It was in her text that I found the drawing from his idealized 360-degree viewing that I later used as the basis for my 2009 exhibition at Miguel Abreu.

I have no idea where this investigation will go. It's becoming looser and looser. The Art Institute of Chicago is not a direct iteration. In the drawing, Bayer has a beginning, a middle and an end to the viewer's path. I likewise tweaked the 360-degree viewing drawing; it was a collapsed space that I expanded outward for my installation. I've taken a lot of liberties with Bayer's drawings, mostly in an attempt to be less controlling about how people move through the installations.

SHOLIS Is that because you're more confident in being able to communicate through your objects? Or are you just mellowing as you age, spending more time in Vermont?

DESCHENES [laughs] I trust that people can determine their own beginnings, middles and ends and their own sense of whether they want to be inside a piece or outside a piece.

SHOLIS And their ability to stitch together a meaningful experience from that.

DESCHENES I think people can find their own vantage points.

SHOLIS In our earlier conversation, you chafed a bit at the fact that your work has been corralled into discussions of photographic abstraction. Though many of your works are monochromatic, they're not necessarily abstract. So how else can we categorize your practice? Given your interest in strategies of display, would site-specific be a better term—or site-responsive, medium-specific?

DESCHENES During our last conversation you asked me when the break happened between earlier explorations of the medium and the larger questions about installations and space I'm addressing now. I think both aspects of my practice have always existed. Over time, and through the accumulation of installations, I've been able to remove some of the more peripheral or external concerns that I previously used to give people access to my work. My first exhibition contained seven monochromatic dye-transfer prints. I think if I hadn't included



"I DON'T WORK WITH A CAMERA REALLY AT ALL ANYMORE, EXCEPT TO DOCUMENT VIEWS WHILE DOING RESEARCH."

landscape references, there would have been virtually no point of entry for the viewer. The images corresponded to—or were literally stand-ins for—topographic maps, so they went from a sort of cyanish green, which would represent sea level, to a dark brown, which would represent the tallest mountains.

One additional reason I've been able to eliminate some of the easier access points to my work is that other artists have opened up in the public's mind new ways of thinking about photography. A lot has shifted since I curated an exhibition in 2000 of photography about photography. The discourse then was entirely narrative, and now it's not. That means things like color no longer need to be a dominant force in my work. I don't work with a camera really at all anymore, except to document views while doing research. I would describe my trajectory as more of a narrowing than a broadening of concerns.

SHOLIS You've been kicking away the props. It's gotten to be almost pure image-making.

DESCHENES I should emphasize that I needed those things, too. Creating a 17-foot green-screen backdrop over a decade ago helped me to think these past few months about the Breuer building, and about the Art Institute of Chicago. All those "props" didn't function solely for a viewer, but also helped me to advance my work.

SHOLIS Is the logical end point to this now two-decade-long progression to stop producing new objects? There's a slightly puritanical aspect to this investigation of mechanical image-making, an obsessiveness that has as its terminus a kind of zero point.

DESCHENES Well, every single time that I'm about to finish a project, I think to myself, *this is it*. I've been saying that for over 16 years. If the past is any indication of the future, the work will continue to look at the conditions of display, which are obviously constantly in flux.

SHOLIS This leads me back to the earlier question about studio practices, because that anxiety sounds like what any artist feels in her studio. Yet for you the will to go on is rooted in responding to other viewing expe-

riences, not in, say, fighting with a canvas. Is your "studio" in part the time you spend looking at and thinking about other art and architecture?

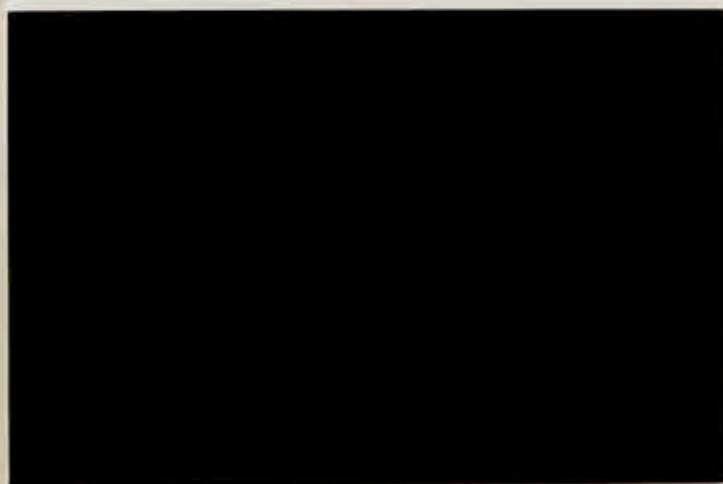
DESCHENES Yes, and reading and listening to lectures and researching for my courses. Others would say something similar about their studio practice, but in addition I wonder whether it's important that my work look a certain way. Have you seen Sherrie Levine's exhibition at the Whitney? In a recent panel discussion, [curator] Elisabeth Sussman said that throughout the entire curatorial process Sherrie did not discuss one aspect of her studio practice. As though it didn't exist.

SHOLIS Or as if Levine was curating somebody else's work.

DESCHENES And Elisabeth and Johanna [Burton, guest curator] likely deferred to Sherrie. And in that show there's no interpretive wall text. So that would be the . . . I don't want to say goal, but not to have to talk about how the works get made would be great. I'm much more interested in talking about my

work in relationship to the work it gets exhibited with. So much of what I'm making right now is intended for the group-show context. The corner pieces were made specifically for a group show. I want the Whitney pieces to correspond not only to the architecture but also to the other artists' work. That wasn't a thought that I could have had 10 years ago. It was only after multiple experiences seeing my work isolated and decontextualized that I thought it made sense to explicitly create art meant to be in dialogue with other people's art. That's probably the biggest shift in the work—one that probably nobody could see but me.

SHOLIS But that runs counter to your description earlier of an increasing laxity on your part, or your ability to be more relaxed about people's ability to interpret your objects. The control that you used to hope to have over viewers, you're now placing over yourself in a way. You're making your practice conform to each of these exhibition contexts. If Witkovsky said, "Actually, let's work with my colleague in classical sculpture," what you would make



Above, *Black Mirror #3*, 2011, silver-toned photogram, 40 by 60 inches.

Opposite, view of the exhibition "Shift/Rise," 2010 showing *Shift/Rise #2*; at Sutton Lane, Brussels. Photo courtesy Campoli Presti, London.



would be probably entirely different from what you would make for your two-person show with Pumphösl in the photography galleries.

DESCHENES I would say that's really accurate, and I would say that's probably where the studio resides now: in proposals.

SHOLIS One of the elephants in the room in discussions of photographic technology is new media. Whereas many people have struggled with the transition from analog to digital, your way of inventing a new studio practice for yourself snuck you past such questions. It was a way to move forward while still exploring analog photography.

DESCHENES Well, for example, my 2001 exhibition "Blue Screen Process" at Andrew Kreps Gallery was about the compositing process as it evolved from the 1920s to the present day. In one series of work I basically covered all of the material possibilities of compositing. Since then new technologies have evolved; the one thing that has always been true of photography is that the technologies have always shifted and changed, digital or no.

SHOLIS Now I'm envisioning the blue screen (or green screen) as a kind of metaphor for your practice as I was describing it earlier: There's Liz Deschenes standing in the image, in the middle, and the background keeps changing, the context keeps changing.

DESCHENES That's a nice way of looking at it. I also don't necessarily look for particular projects, either. I've been really, really fortunate that most of the dialogues that I've had with other artists have arrived when they needed to arrive. I've been familiar with Florian's work for a really long time. Now I get to do a project with him in Chicago.

SHOLIS So the end point I mentioned earlier doesn't come through technological exploration, it occurs only when opportunities to reinvent yourself stop arising. But they continue to.

DESCHENES But they change, too. Florian and I showed together at the Forum Stadtpark, in Graz, Austria, in

2003, in an exhibition called "Rethinking Photography." I don't necessarily think that such a context is as important today as it was then.

SHOLIS Can you envision a time in which your practice is primarily curatorial?

DESCHENES I don't think—I don't think that would be—

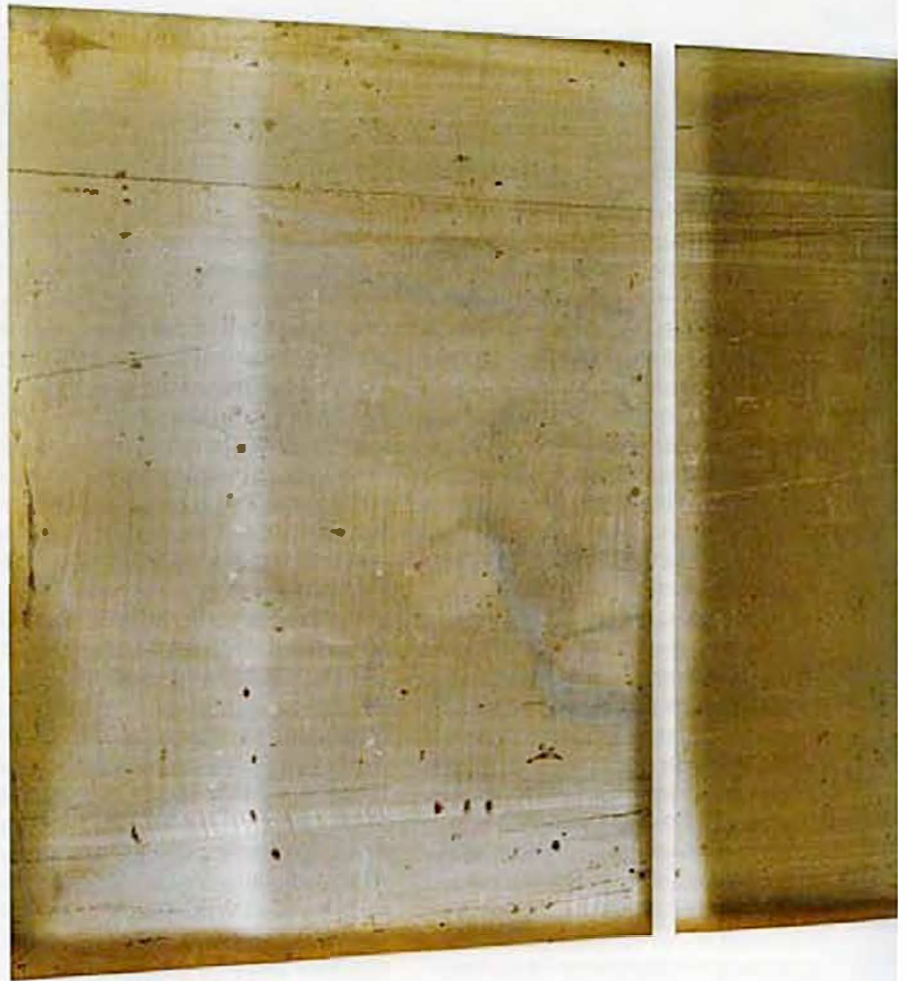
SHOLIS You're still too attached to photography itself and the medium and practicing it?

DESCHENES I think the two modes of working can coexist. Even though I didn't want the title "curator" for what I'm doing with Matt and Florian in Chicago, there will certainly be curatorial components to it. I don't really see a huge separation between exhibiting, researching, teaching. All the facets overlap and photography is—has been—the word that contains all aspects of my work.

SHOLIS Photography is the container.

DESCHENES And I think photography is the perfect container. It has constantly shifted and changed as a technology, so it's a perfect stand-in for all aspects of the work that I do. ○

BRIAN SHOLIS is a PhD candidate in the department of history at the City University of New York's Graduate Center.



*Installation view of Shift / Rise, 2010,
Sutton Lane, Brussels. Courtesy of
Campoli Presti, London/Paris.*

Liz Deschenes by Kathleen Peterson



I met Liz Deschenes at Bennington in August 2010. I had just started teaching poetry and the humanities at the college, where Liz has been a vital intellectual presence for several years. I immediately discerned her rich attentiveness and intuition, and, from students, I heard that her teaching effortlessly combined a sense of discipline and a sense of play. When she and I began to talk about art practice, language, and images, I exhilarated in her mind's unique ability to merge technique and dream, impersonal and personal, heavy and light. As a poet, I'm utterly intrigued by the way Liz can stay with a practice rather than fixate upon an idea. It is interesting to me that so many of our conversations have lingered on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a novel that, in Liz's view, celebrates perception rather

than description as the central, and most vital, task of an artist. Liz Deschenes's haunting work certainly does the same—reorienting the viewer and revivifying our relationship with the image. Rereading *To the Lighthouse*, I found this passage—the thoughts of the woman artist Lily Briscoe—which captures the spirit of Liz Deschenes's upcoming work for the Whitney Biennial: "For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge..."

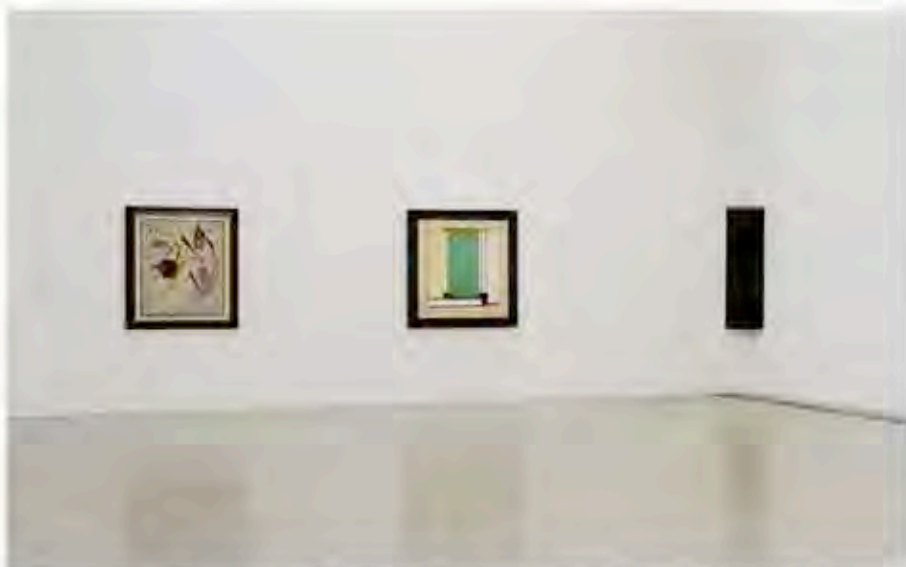
We wrote this interview—back and forth over time—via the new epistolary method, email.

— KATHLEEN PETERSON

KATHLEEN PETERSON I've been thinking about your work in reference to photography and composition—and here are a few questions:

What kind of a relationship does your work have with time? Thinking, specifically, of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, I keep coming back to the notion of everyday time having some relationship not primarily to content but to the form of an artwork. To you, what would be the character of that relationship: Is the passage of time distressing or comforting? I think Woolf felt the passage of time to be quite terrifying and uncontrollable, so she sought in her work both to represent it and to keep it at bay. This is interesting in reference to your work because Woolf is often misunderstood as someone who merely wants to depict time, to show time for what it is. But I don't think her novels are representational exactly. I thought this might interest you.

I am also interested in thinking with you about the difference—not the connection, but the difference—between lived, personal experience, the teeming struggle of forces that bolster and create the conditions of the photo, and the photo itself. I believe the work of women, specifically, in all the arts, has much to say about this. But when I think about an artist like you, I consider the force and depth of our mutual intellectual investigations and conversations and the (abstract, colorful, flat, playful) surfaces of your artworks. This question that I have in mind isn't, How does your work relate to your life? but, If the work is not representational of the life, directly, in what manner is the struggle of the life significant to the work? I mean "struggle" in the broadest sense, from the political (economics, sexuality) to the physical (even merely the experience of pain) to the familial and the spiritual. I am interested in this myself, as I have gone, as a poet, from writing



Installation view of Systemanalyse, 2011, Langen Foundation. Courtesy of Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany, and Campoli Presti, London/Paris.



Shift / Rise #2, 2010, chromogenic photogram, 40 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Campoli Presti, London/Paris.

poems in which I vowed never to use the first person, to ones where I wrote autobiographically, to newer poems driven by a desire to deface and change Christian images. Is this interesting to you?

LIZ DESCHENES I think that the best way for me to reply is with images from recent installations and plans for upcoming ones. The first image is from an installation I did in 2011 at the Langen Foundation, a significant collection of early and mid-20th-century European and Japanese art in Neuss, Germany. In one of the galleries displaying nonfigurative paintings, I suspended a photograph in the corner. It is a photogram (no camera) that has been completely exposed to light and is therefore black. It both brackets and frames the paintings around it. It is the only photograph in the room and it is the only piece that is not part of the collection. Therefore its relationship to the other works is self-reflective and fleeting. I added an unexpected architectural element to the gallery's design, which makes the viewer reconsider the works in the collection and emphasizes the time that has passed since their initial inception and their current presentation.

For an upcoming exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, entitled *Parcours*, I am collaborating with Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl on an even more overt strategy toward investigating conception and design of exhibitions. During our initial visit to the Art Institute we observed shifts in display from the older parts of the museum to the newer wing. Together with the curator Matthew Witkovsky we will select works from the museum's permanent collection and install them with a few pieces by both Florian and me. The exhibition design and installation will hopefully reveal, through its choices of display, that conventions and conditions of presentation are not static. I think Woolf's writing in *To the Lighthouse* is more about perception than it is description.

A project of mine from 2001 is titled *Green Screen Process*. It's a series of photographs that literally have green screens as their "subject matter." The large green monochrome backdrop is a photograph, and could "act" as the thing that it is depicting.

KP What you say about Woolf and perception as opposed to depiction is exactly right. Works of art that resonate with the perceiver are (I think) works of art that open up experience into the condition of event. What I mean is that instead of merely describing an experience, a work

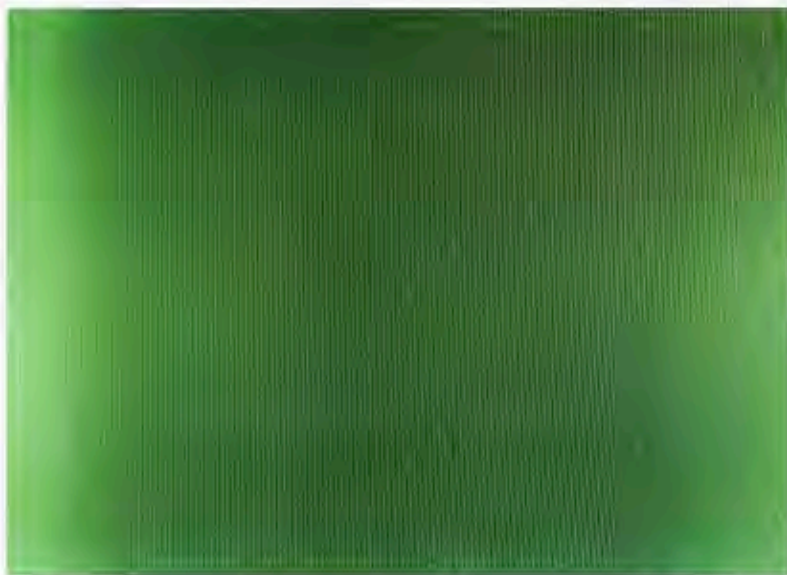


Green Screen #5, 2001, Lambda print mounted on plexiglass, 53 1/2 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

of art should be an event of a kind. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's Lily Briscoe is working on a painting in a frame. But she is always thinking about how to compose the painting using metaphors and techniques outside the frame—for example, the famous moment when she's thinking about moving the saltshakers around on the table. In front of Lily, physically, throughout the novel, is a canvas with limitations—borders of air where the canvas meets the world. In front of Lily's mind, however, Woolf puts all of life—the saltshakers, the family, time—everything Lily has to manage as a perceiver of the everyday. Woolf insists, throughout the

novel, on seeing Lily not only as a producer of a single canvas but as a perceiver—a producer of mental images, of time, of relationships—and therefore, Woolf herself insists on seeing an artwork as more than a single framed picture. This reminds me of your work in the way you want to resist the single image as a resting-place for the viewer. If the single image is not the resting place for the viewer, what is? Or, as you seem to suggest, maybe the purpose of the viewer is not to rest? My next question is a bit brainier, I think, but let me give it a shot. The green screens trouble a distinction between the "real" and the "depicted." The "depiction," if it can act as something real, has just as much use value as the real thing. But the green screens, in the manner in which you arrange them, appear not to have the purpose of providing pure pleasure. What I see is the technique of composition being revealed to be significant but not exactly signifying—to be meaningful without being determinant of meaning. I wonder if you know this poem by Federico Garcia Lorca that starts,

*Green, how much I want you green.
Green wind. Green branches.
The ship upon the sea
and the horse in the mountain.
With the shadow on her waist
she dreams on her balcony,
green flesh, hair of green,
and eyes of cold silver.
Green, how much I want you green.
Beneath the gypsy moon,
all things look at her
but she cannot see them.*



Green Screen #7, 2001, Fujiflex mounted on plexiglass, 50 x 66 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

"All things look at her / but she cannot see them." This is like the image, is it not? The poem itself has both abstraction and narrative—the narrative is dreamy, leads nowhere, much like your pathways through the galleries, which don't command as much as they accompany. So my question is: How do you want the viewer to interact with the space of the gallery?

LD I would like to go back to an earlier statement of yours (regarding the green screens) of meaning being present yet undetermined. Along those lines, I would like the viewer to be guided, and not directed. I can reference a specific example. I made an installation of photographs from a 1935 drawing by the artist and designer Herbert Bayer for an exhibition design he never realized. I radically changed the initial drawing to include much more space for the viewer and allowed for the work to be viewed from either the inside or the outside of the installation. I positioned photographs in the place that had been intended for paintings. I removed the viewing platform so that the viewer was able to determine, and with less pressure, an ideal vantage point, for there wasn't one. The work and the architecture could be viewed from any position.

In the following passages, I will refer back to the time question, and its potential relationship or significance to an audience. I am interested in the period before photography's official invention and indoctrinations. Silver halides were found to be light sensitive in the early 1700s, but nobody could figure out how to arrest the action of the halides until the 1830s. Early proto-photographers' images would disappear, while their work was sometimes carried on by subsequent experimenters who, as Geoffrey Batchen writes, "were already well established in fields which were as wide and diverse as mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, botany, philosophy, art history, physics, and painting." These are some of the disciplines that William Henry Fox Talbot, Louis Jacques M. J. M. Daguerre, and some of the other early experimenters had dedicated themselves to before becoming the inventors of photography.

I have taught a class called Photography's Relationship to Painting and Drawing that forced me to think about the terms around the medium. As Batchen describes in his book of essays *Burning with Desire*, photography is a "compound of two Greek components—*phos* (light) and *graphie* (writing, drawing, and delineation) As a word, it posits

a paradoxical coalition of 'light' . . . and 'writing' . . . , an impossible binary opposition 'fixed' . . . by the artifice of language." He sums up this thought by writing, "Uncertain of its own identity, photography defers instead to the presumed self-presence of its two constituents."

In my installations, I would like the viewer to cultivate the ambition to look in-out, right-left, and up-down. My work for the upcoming Whitney Biennial in New York will use, as a reference, the proportions of the exterior facade of the museum and insert them in the interior of the building. As I write, I realize it is a similar action to the one being proposed at the Chicago Art Institute, which will require moving walls and screens from one part of the building (the older part) to the newer wing. Both of these operations will enable the viewer to see the inconstancy of the conditions of display, which are always at play but sometimes hard to see.

KP What you say about the earliest days of photography is fascinating. Are you attempting, at least in part, to establish (or reestablish) the conditions of the photograph as the means by which we see light and writing themselves? As if the original issue in the making of the photograph was not how to represent the world in pictures, but how to create a space of light's version of reality? What I mean by this is: photography, when it highlights both the conditions of its production and the conditions of display, emphasizes the original qualities of the medium, not the most "artful" qualities but the most physical, the most earth-bound, the most related to the elements in which we move and breathe. And in emphasizing photography's relationship with light and space, you quite naturally become a willing disciple of—a maker in dialog with—time.

So here's a further set of thoughts: The origins of the photograph being brought back into a display of the work of art—which, as you describe, must be more than a single flat item, must, instead, become a pathway toward an experience of the whole environment—reminds me of something very much at play in poetry. Your work has a strong sense of ritual, present both in the way in which the viewer is asked to interact with the space and in the work's emotional tenor, created and structured by elemental repetition with significant differences (the green screen itself and the green screen displayed and photographed). In poetry, even the free verse poem could be seen to invoke an elemental, original

relationship with rhythm, since the cadences of both the fragment and the sentence depend on patterns of syllables and, in English, patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. I would make an analogy between poetry's relationship with rhythm and your photography's relationship with time and light. Rhythm is the unseen, and to some extent, nonhierarchical force that drives poetic language (unlike, for example, the feelings of the first person, biographical event, psychological thinking). Poetry, at its best, wants the reader to participate in rhythm in this respect, to be part of something in the artwork. So, do you ever think of your work, especially your work that concerns the structuring and restructuring of experience (the project that will be shown at the Whitney, concerning the dimensions of the museum space), in terms of ritual?

And one further question: Is there an emotional current in your work that you want to get across? Or am I right to see that what's significant in your work's composition is not any particular emotional state but the presence of these contact spaces between the viewer and the artwork that reveal some opportunity for reaction and interaction?

LD I'll try to answer those questions, maybe altering the order.

I am interested in looking at the separations, the overlaps, and the hybrids, as well as the language that developed around their work—the terms, the materials, the discoveries, and some of the perceived failures. The early inventors did not necessarily share the same objectives or paths. Their approaches have been examined in some of my work: Fox Talbot was primarily engaged in photography's potential for writing and drawing—his book on the topic, *Pencil on Nature*, was the first commercially published book dedicated to photography. Daguerre arrived from the multidimensional world of theater and the diorama. Fox Talbot invented a positive-negative system, and Daguerre made unique (not reproducible) photographs. Works from both of them have made a lasting impression—the entire exhibition that the Metropolitan Museum dedicated to the French daguerreotype back in 2004 and a lace print, from Fox Talbot, that I saw in person last spring, come to mind. Fox Talbot called his camera-less photographs "photogenic drawings."

In terms of the Whitney, I will literally bring the outside in—in a deliberate attempt to pay homage to a very particular building that looks like a machine—a



Installation view of Tilt / Swing (360° field of vision, version 1), 2009, six unique silver-toned black and white photograms of various dimensions, overall dimensions: 136 x 192 x 58 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

camera, to be precise. Actually, two types of cameras: a twin-reflex camera (the windows look like its lenses—one stacked on top of the other) and a large-format view camera and its bellows. The building will host its very last Biennial, as the Whitney constructs a new building downtown. The only other time my work has been in such direct service to memorializing was in a series of dye-transfer prints that I made in 1997. Kodak had discontinued the materials in 1994. However, the work had a dual premise—they used elevation topography maps as their referent and Technicolor dye transfer as its soon-to-be-lost significant material. It is only over time that I can see how the ideas and the materials coalesce. What is quite clear and evident in the project *Elevations* is still being worked out in models of the Whitney's Breuer building. I am not sure how to contend with the question of ritual.

KP I am not sure why I asked that question! I think you've actually just contended with my overdefined and controlling question in beautiful fashion: When you say "memorialization," you indicate your desire to preserve the materials in a way that also allows them to be changed by time. When you say, "It is only over time that I can see how the ideas and the materials coalesce," I believe you are saying something very important about the place of composition within the display of your work. So can I press you on your work at the Whitney a little bit: As you're pursuing these models



Elevations #1–7, 1997–2003, dye transfer prints, 20 x 16 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

In my installations, I would like the viewer to cultivate the ambition to look in-out, right-left, and up-down.

of the Breuer building, what have the challenges been and what are your strategies? What materials are you using and what do you anticipate for their presentation in the exhibit? But I wonder as well about the place of "memorialization" in your work. I really get what you are trying to do with the *Elevations* piece. When I'm writing a poem about a memory, most likely the entire memory cannot be preserved. What becomes preserved instead is one element of the memory—a scent, a color, a snippet of speech. That material—usually directly from the senses—takes on a life of its own in the poem's own pursuit of itself, of its own integrity. My desire to memorialize, to remember a whole always manifests itself as a part. And then, that part becomes its own whole in the space of the artwork. Can you relate to this, or am I totally off base? What feels to me quite magical about the *Elevations* piece is that instead of a personal memory that has to become cultural, or social, or national, the memory of a color begins as something open to more than one's self. Indeed, as Wittgenstein says, it has to be, since colors are basically another form of language game we all play. So the tone of *Elevations* (if a photographic image can have an almost verbal tone) feels to me choral, not communal exactly, but multivocal, or plural.

LD I have been thinking about the reluctance to further describe the upcoming projects in words, that is, what my plans are for the work, as I willingly embark upon multiple conversations (for print) and an artist talk. Obviously, it is all fragmented. There is a drawing from my framer that shows how to resolve the angles of the work in the frames, a confirmation for titles—"side-front" or "front-side"—and requests for photographic documents of the works that will only be able to occur once the work is installed. The photographs (due to their scale and specificity of site) will be actualized in the space. The works were made in direct response to the exhibition. As significant, the other works in the exhibition will only be revealed during the course of the installation. The relationship of these photographs to the exhibition at large is an unknown factor, completely and utterly undetermined. Like the documents, the ability to assess the work will only be able to happen in the space of the exhibition.

KP As an artist, are you interested in reflecting on the independent, sensual qualities of the materials—the nature of green, the intimacy of something (anything) turned toward a viewer, the pleasing quality of something being square, the uncomfortable quality of something being different colors and in process—before they are placed within an exhibition? Is there an interest in preserving these essences or uncovering or setting free these possibilities? Is the process of setting free these possibilities of perception separate from these sensual essences of the materials themselves? Or are the two connected?

LD There was a recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art here in New York that included one of my green screen pieces. The show was entitled *Color Chart: Reinventing Color from 1950 to Today* and the curatorial premise was that the use of color corresponded to a readymade. The work spanned from Duchamp's last painting to a piece of Daniel Buren's reworked in 2008, the year the exhibition opened. Buren's contribution was that he made striped uniforms for the museum's security guards. In between all these works' years, 1976 to be precise, John Baldessari produced a series of photographs entitled *Common Memory Colors*—using the colors and subject matter that consumers complained most about to Kodak for lack of color accuracy. According to the users, for instance, grass did not reproduce well. Baldessari made this the subject of a sequence of images.

KP You have certainly heard Wittgenstein's quote: "There is no criterion by which to recognize what is a color, except that it is one of our colors." I wonder whether you are hinting here that color itself becomes a kind of "material," a locus for the subjective and the communal to interact? As a poet, I often enjoy watching the grass grow—just kidding. But I am intrigued by the idea that people would have an attachment to a particular color that could correspond to a correct depiction of grass, especially since taking, for example, a family photo of a picnic means that the color of the grass is particularly important. This could, of course, become quite dangerous. What about the color of skin, for example? In your

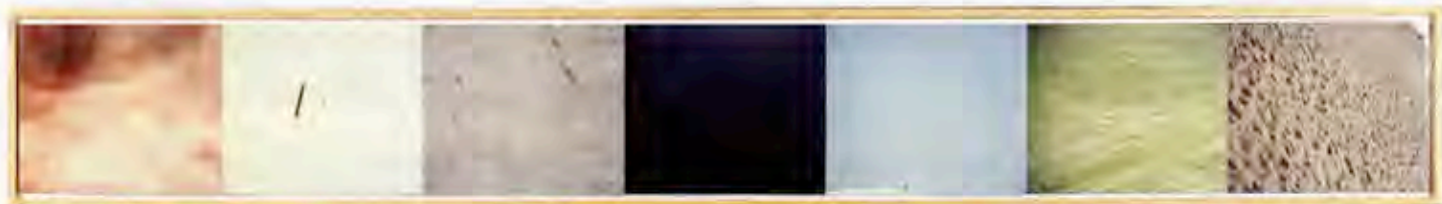
work you appear to take color out of the realm of individual judgments and into a more spiritual and open space. By taking something that is by nature communally understood—color, for example—and offering it to individual viewers, each with their own cultural histories, you also refuse the distinction between the "natural" or "correct" and the "artificial" or "incorrect" that the Kodak viewers wanted to assert in evaluating the depictive properties of the camera. What do you think?

LD What I am responding to is that photography is a translation of color and tones—a language. And just as significant is that absolutely nobody possesses an accurate color memory. Of course, I am interested in saturation, densities, and increments between the colors and in photography's relationship to motion picture, which was part of the reason for making dye-transfer prints—their film analogue is Technicolor. I am really engaged in the concrete and tangible components of color photography.

KP Your piece is actually quite different from Baldessari's in orientation and mood. Mood-wise, yours seems to refuse a self-driven melancholy—to be uninterested in the kind of teacherly re-seeing that Baldessari's tries to reinstate. Instead, what happens—and I can only speak for myself, but your description of the piece appears to back this up—is a kind of contemplative detachment from the conditions of the creation of the "color," whatever the color might be. Instead, a free play of mood and sensibility is inspired and achieved. Even the title of your piece is less didactic than his—and in some sense, less verbal.

Your piece feels to me like a commentary on perception. Baldessari's piece seems to me to be a commentary on depiction, and on people's responses to depiction. Again, the seemingly "flat" surface of your work achieves a kind of depth not through texture and commentary but through juxtaposition, elevation, placement, and isolation. Does that make sense?

LD I think that, for Baldessari, any results from his investigations would have been "correct" and more than worthwhile. I think that the limitations in the translations of the materials are being comically addressed in Baldessari's piece. I like



John Baldessari, *Common Memory Colors*, 1976, C-prints,
11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

how thoughtfully his piece plays with the absurd expectation that your memory and the color will match—forever preserving that particular moment. Josef Albers writes eloquently about this inability to accurately recall and name in his book *Interaction of Color*:

If one says "Red" (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different. Even when a certain color is specified which all listeners have seen innumerable times—such as the red of the Coca-Cola signs which is the same red all over the country—they will still think of many different reds. Even if all the listeners have hundreds of reds in front of them from which to choose the Coca-Cola red, they will again select quite different colors. And no one can be sure that he has found the precise red shade. And even if that round red Coca-Cola sign with the white name in the middle is actually shown so that everyone focuses on the same red, each will receive the same projection on his retina, but no one can be sure whether each has the same perception. When we consider further the associations and reactions which are experienced in connection with color and the name, probably everyone will diverge again in many different directions. What does this show? First it is hard, if not impossible, to remember distinct colors. This underscores the important fact that the visual memory is very poor in comparison with our auditory memory. Often the latter is able to repeat a melody heard only once or twice. Second, the nomenclature of color is most inadequate. Though there are innumerable colors—shades and tones—in daily vocabulary, there are only about 30 color names.

I have one last contribution that goes back to one of your initial questions and how personal experience manifests itself in the work—much of the work that I have been exhibiting began when I was living in Europe several years ago, in both

Madrid and Paris. I was working without any planned exhibitions or institutional support. It was during this juncture that I was awarded an Anonymous Was a Woman Award. This particular recognition allowed me to pursue paths in the work without the finality of an exhibition. It gave me an audience that was supportive in giving the grant and only asked for a letter in return stating how the award affected the work. On another note, I have decided not to title any of the pieces for the Whitney. There should be enough visual clues to discern some of the references in the work—the architecture of the building combined with the photographic materials.

KP It is, of course, impossible for me as a poet to think about titlelessness—or the state, rather, of a poem being title free—without thinking about Emily Dickinson. When asked about her own title-free poems, poet Fanny Howe once remarked, "Why would I put a lid on the loneliness of the poem?" I have always wondered what that meant, and in the context of your work, I can think of two things—and wonder what you think. First, not having a title, in an interesting way, preserves the imagination of an anonymous audience, a noninstitutional audience, an undirected and free audience, the audience you have imagined. By not titling the work, you place the work closer to the mental space of its creation "for free" in your mind. You also (cleverly) situate the work both inside and outside the institution. Who "titles" works in the mind? They exist merely under the sign of creation, of something explored and made. Second, you refuse to put a lid on the "loneliness" of the work. By "loneliness" I don't mean some emotional current of melancholy but the need for the viewer to find and discover it. By not titling the work you remind the viewer that they must discover the work. To me, this parallels (in a very moving way) Dickinson's abandonment of her works on earth when she went into whatever nothingness death is. I'm likening the release of an artist's work into the larger world to a

life's release of itself in death. Dickinson's "career" was left for us without the title of career. This continues, in our consumer society, to frustrate and disturb us. But it is only a reminder of one of the central properties of art as something made by human hands: Art gets released into the world as an event, not a personal experience. That event must be discoverable, but it is not yet discovered—its possibilities have not yet been released themselves. I don't think Dickinson hid her poems and I don't think you're hiding your work at the Whitney; instead, you, too, are agreeing as an artist to move into that other world, leaving the work for us.

LD I simply had too much ambivalence about naming the work. I did not want to instruct via the titles. You wrote that "art gets released into the world as an event, not a personal experience," which may sum up some of my resistance to describing my aspirations and experiences with the work—all or some of the concerns will hopefully become apparent in the completion of the works being exhibited—as well as all the events that cannot be anticipated.

Chemical Dependence **LIZ DESCHENES** by Sara Greenberger Rafferty



American artist and educator Liz Deschenes graduated in 1988 from the photography department at the Rhode Island School of Design, founded by Harry Callahan in the 1960s. While she has been exhibiting her work in the US and abroad for many years, in the past several years her work has been contextualized in some of the most dynamic photographic exhibitions including the *Modern Wing Inaugural Installation of Contemporary Photography* at the newly opened, Renzo Piano-designed galleries in the Art Institute of Chicago; *Photography on Photography: Reflections on the Medium since 1960* at the MET and *Strange Magic* at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York. Her work was also included in the critically complex traveling museum exhibition *Color Chart: Reinventing Color 1950 to Today*, curated by Ann Temkin. Deschenes work has recently been an anchor point for curatorial discussions about the state of contemporary photography, specifically photography that engages a self-reflexive, concrete, or even abstract mode.

For centuries before the declaration of the invention of photography, technology existed to project an image of the outside world through a pinhole or lens onto a wall in a darkened room; and among the first uses of the camera obscura was the direct viewing of solar eclipses (as staring directly at the sun would be painful and impossible to decipher). In this period before photography, precise images of the world could be created and observed but not fixed or carried away except by the mechanical reproduction made by a hand drawing on paper. These proto-photographic facts are called upon when viewing the recent photograms of Liz Deschenes. Made entirely without lens, camera, or enlarger in the open air of the night sky, chemically developed, fixed and then bathed in silver toner, Deschenes' mirror-like works are anti-obscure: finite chemical recordings of the nighttime - moon, stars, city lights - on paper. Unlike the human eye viewing solar eclipses, the photographic paper is able to 'face' directly into the heavens and soak in the scene.

While the works are ostensibly images of the sky exposed over a period of hours, much like Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's early long exposure of the Paris cityscape, they are also mirrors, engaging reflection, the body, earthly space, and illusion. While a specular image is illusory and can never be fixed, Deschenes invokes Jacques Lacan by taking us to the "threshold of the visible", to the mirror that is not image, but an invitation to look. Mirror images - and early photographs - show us the world in reverse. In the case of mirrors, vision is anchored to the position of our eyes, at the top of the body. Contemporary installation practices, which place the eyes at 59-61 inches off the ground, emphasize this connection. In one of Deschenes' most recent works, *Tilt/Swing*, 2009, she has assembled large photogram panels into an installation based on Herbert Bayer's diagram of 360° field of vision, underscoring the role of ocular vision over camera vision even more pointedly.

Deschenes' photograms, though on paper, can be viewed as contemporary daguerreotypes - or as Charles Baudelaire quipped, "scraps of metal" - in large scale¹. Appropriately, the daguerreotype was crowned the first official photograph due primarily to the efforts of Frenchman Dominique François Arago, who was the director of the Paris Observatory at the time of his famous 'flag-in-the-moon' presentation on French photographic invention. Photography was almost immediately put in service of astronomy because, as Alan W. Hirshfeld observed, "the eye is an imperfect astronomical instrument, having a small light-collecting aperture, no magnification, and

no capability to record a scene or to accumulate light in a 'time exposure'"². Many of these early moon and star images, made by John Adams Whipple and William Cranch Bond and now housed at the Harvard College Observatory, still engender a sense of wonderment when the programmatic science is complicated by the awesome celestial vastness.

Deschenes' works function in a similar way, as the smart coolness of her program of breaking down photography and photographs into constituent parts produces objects of exquisite concrete beauty, which equally evokes emotional and analytical responses. Her work adapts historical photographic recipes, including science and pseudo-science, proprietary chemical cocktails, optics, paper, place, reflection, and of course, time into vibrant conceptual and contemplative objects. The works could be easily considered photographs of nothing - just photographs - though their possible position as lunar indices is compelling to consider in light of the medium's histories, to which Deschenes is always clearly referring.

The surfaces of Deschenes' pictures look muddy: highly polished yet seemingly plagued by streaks, blobs, spills, and other blemishes. Depth is created by the different qualities of these 'impurities,' as well as in the compromised optical reflection in the mirrored surface. Similar metallurgic surfaces can be seen in early photographs, principally reflective direct-positive daguerreotypes and tintypes. Many early photographic writings were devoted to these so-called defects. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, a nineteenth century British writer on art and photography, wrote a heated tirade against the assumed 'superiority' of photographic images. She asserted that claims of photographic truth were inherently flawed in part due to the unique 'distorted' surface of daguerreotypes³. In support of this belief, she wrote that "[experiments prove] that mere light, or the luminous ray, is little needed where the photographic or 'chemical ray' is active"⁴. She believed that photography became less 'artistic' the more visually accurate it became, and therefore allowed that early photographic experiments - before optics and chemical formulae had made highly detailed, fully tonal photographs possible - could produce "beautiful conditions."

Nearly 150 years later, writing about the 1993 exhibition of photographs from the Gilman Paper Collection *The Waking Dream* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Murat Nemet-Nejat casts the inconsistent surfaces in many historical photos that are the result of unintended chemical reactions in a new light, he states:

"The glow is the result of the medium's 'failures' to achieve perfect transparency. (...) A blurring, a failure creating an excess of sadness, turning the photographic object, a piece of paper, like a bottle, holding the light of a hundred years ago, into an object of meditation on time, on mortality, the sadness of light surviving the object from which it emanated"³.

That the "glow" of Nemet-Nejat's conception becomes a subject of Deschenes' photographs reinforces her own assertion that her work engages in self-reflexive dialogue about photography. This position seems to underscore her position as a contemporary female artist working in a masterful way with photographic technologies.

Deschenes' work is technically flawless. In all of her series, technical mastery has been a touchstone. While the panels are mirrored and reflective, the irregular surfaces in her case are the result of calculated distress that comes from a deep knowledge of the basic photographic medium: chemistry. The visual language that was the result of mistakes, miscalculations, and trials in the 19th century, has been co-opted by Deschenes as a signifier of photographic history and another essential photographic medium: time. This early history, especially in the US, generally casts the rugged artistic and technical master as a frontiersman working in service of the state and scientific inquiry (think Timothy O'Sullivan holding court with full glass plate wet collodion beneath the skys of the American West). On the other extreme, in Europe, are early pictorial (read: blurry) style portraits by female artist Julia Margaret Cameron (who purposely sought out sub-par lenses in order to achieve her subjective artistic effect). Deschenes' style marries these two canons by using a hybrid outdoor and exacting technique with the planned uncertainty of chemical reactions.

Deschenes' work has been discussed recently in terms of the abstract - but she herself has emphasized the dialogue about self-reflexivity and concreteness over abstraction. A photograph of nothing (or, a photograph of the light source, the moon) is a photograph of the essence of a photograph, and abstract only in that it is a mediated object. Further, her images create pure photographic surface - rather than pictures of something - which in early series she titled simply *Photographs*. In this way, her photograms (and concurrent series of single-color dye transfers) are in dialogue with Allan McCollum's *Surrogate Paintings* of the late 1970s and early 1980s which, like Deschenes' *Photographs*, stood in for the essence and body of a painting, calling up the entire history of all painting,

while each work is completely unique. Rather than editions or copies, both McCollum's and Deschenes' works are made up of a group of individual works even as their accumulation starts to address seriality, groupings, and narrative in their respective media. Deschenes' *Photographs* stand in for photographs, becoming vehicles for or - more appropriately - mirrors to our cultural, social, psychoanalytic, and material relationships with photography throughout the generations since its inventions.

Nemet-Nejat concludes his essay by stating that "[u]nderlying every photograph is the assumption that it is the photograph of 'something'"⁶. He continues, anticipating Deschenes' project even more pointedly, there are "two ways to destroy the god of thereness in photographic language. The first is to eliminate the Camera obscura model, that is to say, reflection, in the creation of photographic image"⁷. As his example he of course turns to Man Ray's *Rayographs* of the early twentieth century, which he claimed "reset the terms of photographic discourse". Deschenes has hit that reset button once more by eliminating not only the camera and its lens, but also the conventional object(s) standing in between the light source and the metallic light-and-chemical-sensitive paper. What seems to be a simple omission, coupled with the oxidation-receptive silver toned areas of the not-quite-fixed works, creates a stunning meditation on the very being of photography and even reflection. Perhaps not surprisingly, this aesthetic and ideological query comes at a time when the definition of photography has been changing from "drawing with light" to "camera-based imaging". That "photographs" can now be made without the use of chemically-photo-sensitive materials - or even time exposure - perhaps privileges Deschenes' objects as photographs.

1. Quoted in Sekula, Allan *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*, "Photography in Prim" (Vicki Goldberg, ed.) p. 362.

2. Hirshfeld, Alan W. *Picturing the Heavens: The Rise of Celestial Photography in the 19th Century*, Sky & Telescope, April 2004, p. 38.

3. Eastlake, Lady Elizabeth *Photography in Trachtenberg*, Alan, ed. "Classic Essays on Photography" pp. 39-68.

4. Eastlake, Lady Elizabeth *Photography in Trachtenberg*, Alan, ed. "Classic Essays on Photography" p. 56-7.

5. Nemet-Nejat, Murat "The Peripheral Space of Photography" *Copenhagen and Los Angeles*: Green Integer, 2003, p. 46-48.

6. Nemet-Nejat, Murat (2003) p. 77.

7. Nemet-Nejat, Murat (2003) p. 80.





Above Liz Deschenes, from Focus Chart Series, Left/Right, 2008, Fujiflex print mounted on aluminium, cm. 50,2 x 89. *Left* Liz Deschenes, Moiré Series #11, 2007, UV laminated chromogenic print, cm. 137,2 x 101,6. *Page 51, top left* Detail from: Augustus Washington, portrait of Stephen Allen Benson, second president of Liberia, created between 1854-1860, sixth plate daguerreotype, Library of Congress. *Page 51, top right* John Adams Whipple, view of the moon, February 26, 1852 courtesy Harvard College Observatory, thanks to Alison Doane. *Page 51, bottom left* Liz Deschenes, Tilt/Swing #6, 2009, silver toned photogram mounted on Dibond, cm. 104,1 x 147,3. *Page 51, bottom right* Liz Deschenes, Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1), 2009, installation view, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (photo John Berens). All images © the artist, courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

Another History

MATTHEW WITKOVSKY on photography and abstraction



Opposite page: El Lissitzky, *Runner in the City*, ca. 1926, black-and-white photograph, 5 1/4" x 5 1/4". © 2010 Estate of El Lissitzky/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst.
This page: Liz Deschenes, *Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)*, 2009, six unique silver-toned photographs, overall 11' 4" x 16' x 4' 10". Installation view, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.



This page, above: Liz Deschenes, *Horizontal/Vertical Photograph #5, 2009*, silver-toned black-and-white photograph mounted on Dibond, framed, 56 1/4 x 36 1/4". Below: View of "Back Grounds," 2002, Galerie Nelson, Paris. From left: Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #3, 2001*; Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #3, 2001*; Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #4, 2001*. Opposite page, from left: Paul Strand, *Bowls, 1916*, black-and-white photograph, 13 1/2 x 9 1/2". Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Bez tytułu (Autoportret)* (Untitled [Self-Portrait]), ca. 1910, black-and-white photograph, 8 x 3 1/2". Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Bez tytułu (Autoportret, Zakopane)* (Untitled [Self-Portrait, Zakopane]), ca. 1910, black-and-white photograph, 7 x 5".



THERE IS NO ONE THING CALLED PHOTOGRAPHY. Photographs are images, but they are also things, and their meanings change with each material iteration: negative, digital file, exhibition print, magazine page, Web posting (not to mention the variations within each of these and other presentation forms). As Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1999—with pointed reference to Walter Benjamin's essays on the discipline—we must acknowledge "the self-differential condition of mediums themselves" and "the necessary plurality of the arts . . . a plural condition that stands apart from any philosophically unified idea of Art."¹ Nevertheless, the drive persists today to reestablish medium specificity, to find elements of aesthetic coherence that would draw disparate photographs together and unite them as Art, in a way distinct from other creative domains.

Defeated on the plane of the overtly figurative or documentary, this campaign for totalization has lately gathered its forces on the field of the apparently abstract. In fact, a spate of American-made exhibitions and publications has recently presented abstraction as the hidden telos of photography—now revealed as the world moves into a supposedly postphotographic future, where the indexical imprint of the real is replaced by the total manipulability of the digital. In this new visual regime, allegedly, abstraction at once eulogizes "a twilight art" and "rises" at the vanguard "edge of vision."² (More than a century after the artist Maurice Denis proposed that a painting is first and foremost a formal arrangement on a surface—and only secondarily a representation of the world—we are given an inverted variant of his judgment, with renewed eagerness: "All photographs are a translation of reality," we are told, and therefore the "abstraction of reality is always present in photography."³) A subset of mostly Austro-German proselytizers, meanwhile, led by curator- and artist-historians such as Ruth Horak, Gottfried Jäger, and Floris Neusüss, continues to promulgate the long-standing argument that the removal of depictive elements is the one sure way to guarantee photography as a "generative" rather than an "imitative" art form.⁴

Abstraction, however, is not photography's secret common denominator, nor is it the antidote to "traditional" photography—if photography has conventions local or long lasting enough to be thought of in that way. And it seems equally mistaken to suggest that abstraction is more relevant today because it offers awareness of photography's passing (and therefore of our own passage into a new historical age). Against present talk of extinction, we should remember that photography has since its first days always been "ending," its technological bases continually displaced through the action of (truly abstract) economic and historical forces, coupled with shifts in popular habits of consumption and social interaction. No matter how refined or forward-looking in its individual instances, photography as a class of imagemaking is profoundly marked by the enforced obsolescence characteristic of the industrial and postindustrial eras.

THIS RECOGNITION DEMANDS that we change our historical perspective on photography. To see what such an alternative view might look like, consider the work of Liz Deschenes, who since the early 1990s has engaged precisely photography's ongoing (rather than epochal) obsolescence—its inherently plural, mutable aspect. More specifically, the artist concentrates on forms of abstraction suppressed in conventional imaging systems: unwanted moiré patterns, disappearing "green screens" used in television or cinema superimposition, the color key employed to mark topographic altitude levels. In the first years of this decade and again in 2009, the artist fabricated a series of photograms under moonlight that she fixed with silver toning, flowed over the surface of the prints. The more recent works approximate the look and proportions of a set of mirrors. These are mounted on aluminum and floated without mats in the frame, so that they stand out as things; their monochrome surfaces offer recognizable if indistinct reflections of the setting before them. To observe them in person, then, is to give them their imagery while at the same time discovering a primi-



rive reflection of oneself. Gazing at this blurred self-representation, one might surmise that an anterior image has been swallowed through progressive silverizing of the surface, or that one's own image is likewise being consumed by a cancer of silver salts.

Underscoring the point was a recent installation at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York, which featured six such "mirrors" arranged in an oculus-like portal, reflecting each viewer in multiple, fragmented sections. The work, *Tilt/Swing* (360° field of vision, version 1), 2009, drew inspiration from a 1935 display design by Herbert Bayer that would permit the omniscient viewing of pictures in a 360-degree radius. But Deschenes's work, since it inserts mirrors where Bayer's original proposal called for images, presents us not with any kind of panopticon but rather with an intermittent circle of image-resistant objects. It scatters and deflects subjectivity while providing an inimitable encounter for the viewing self. And so *Tilt/Swing* investigates Bayer's historical model of opticality but with critical distance: Deschenes's photographic abstraction pointedly refuses to aspire to the status of the modernist monochrome in painting. Part of the artist's critique, in fact, rests on the dialectic between image (Bayer's absent pictures, say) and object (the thin, fragile rectangles lining walls, floor, and ceiling). And here is the crucial point for today: Deschenes's work offers a corrective to the current discourse around photographic abstraction, which too often celebrates work that is concerned "exclusively with looking at its own circumstances" (a favorite phrase of Jäger's) in an imagined bliss of medium-specific self-presence.¹

This problem is not at all new, of course. At the start of his seminal 1931 essay "Short History of Photography," Benjamin deemed the careless assessment of photographs according to a "technical and fundamentally antitechnological concept of art,"

A new "short history" of abstract photographs should form a counterpoint to the reigning emphasis on "pure photoreality"—paying emphatic attention to the body of the photographer and that of the viewer, each of which is animated by language, humors, and desires.

remarking that the confusion of technique and aesthetics in photography criticism could only "legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he [is] in the process of overturning."² Still, given our changed historical context nearly eighty years later, Benjamin's text must be taken not as orthodoxy but rather as precedent. In that spirit, then, I propose to sketch a "short history" of abstract photographs that—like Deschenes's—forms a counterpoint to the reigning emphasis on "pure photoreality" and "photography of photography." The works in this history (culled, as Benjamin's was, largely from recent exhibitions and literature) pay emphatic attention to the body of the photographer and that of the viewer, each of which is animated by language, humors, and desires. At stake is the photograph's existence as image and as object: qualities that artists across the past century have deployed in complementarity or in productive dissonance with one another.

FOR THESE REASONS, my history does not begin with the canonical works made by Paul Strand in 1916 (such as *Bowls* and *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*), which Jäger has dubbed the first photographs to be titled as abstractions.³ The producing body—and the dependence of photography on other technical and material supports—was rigorously excluded from this masterful study in graphic patterning. Instead, I'll begin a few years earlier, with the radically damaged self-portraits of the Polish writer and artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. One picture, dated circa 1910 and apparently among the earliest he made, shows the author in a mock swoon of despair, trapped between two swaths of cloudy, yellowish light. A rude strip of brightness at the left border suggests a blistered mirror, its bubbled silver no longer capable of reflecting the human likeness; flaring up from the bottom right, a matching wedge in the same jaundiced

tone threatens to immolate Witkiewicz's sinking visage, as if in proof of the contention that cameras consume the essence of those they portray. A spectral window ripples in the background, dissolving in this metaphoric furnace. To make another, better-known self-portrait, Witkiewicz struck the glass negative with a hammer and nail after exposure, then removed several fragments before printing, to yield a head rent asunder by the void.

Witkiewicz's prewar portraits were perhaps the first photographs to present the self as vitally threatened by the representational apparatus—yet also inhabiting that apparatus, to the peril of both the body and the system in which it is enmeshed. It is as if the material self lived, corroded, on the print or pressed within the fragile thickness of the plateglass negative. These images (like the one by Strand) are not truly abstract; rather, they call on abstraction to visualize the fraught encounter between subject and machine. Such a model of partial yet trenchant abstraction was taken up in various ways during the era of experimentation between the world wars. Among other examples, there are the photograms made in 1922 and after by László Moholy-Nagy, explicitly conceived, as curator Leah Dickerman has recently reminded us, to assert the primacy of the haptic within the optical domain.⁸ There are the multiple-exposure prints of El Lissitzky, the most famous of which, *The Constructor*, 1924, likewise equates hand and eye as body parts seemingly embedded in the constructive field.⁹ Then, too, there are the dizzying, stomach-churning plunges from towers and balconies conjured by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Moholy-Nagy, and their legion of followers, who briskly reversed centuries of perspectival habit whereby staircases and other swiftly rising structures were depicted reassuringly from below. Abstraction is thus equated with disorientation: a visceral experience of dislocation that puts the viewer "on the spot."

Such perpetual unrest is echoed in more fully abstract photographs of the interwar decades, which open onto multiple media and emphasize material or physical instability. The photograms of Christian Schad, produced (along with a series of closely related relief sculptures) between 1918 and 1920, are marked at their edges by nicks and scissor cuts and across their surfaces by the deposits of unlikely treasures gleaned from the trash can. Here, the photograph becomes at once a picture of recycled castoffs and a piece of flotsam itself; it transforms mud into gold while paradoxically insisting on an indelible grit. And these diminutive bits of paper evince a Dada fascination with "scrappy abstraction" that continued in some instances into the Surrealist years. Photograms made by Serbian Surrealist Vane Bor in 1928, for instance, have as their props smashed glass and sundry items that, in some cases, form disquieting patterns of undifferentiated matter. A second Serbian example, equally obscure and just as fascinating, comes from the Belgrade journal *Surrealism Here and Now*, whose 1932 editorial "In Front of a Wall. Simulation of the Paranoid Delirium of Interpretation. Survey" consists of six written interpretations of a single finial view (itself repeated six times) of a decaying plaster surface: The etiolated image would be impossible to identify



In the era of experimentation between the world wars, certain works equated abstraction with disorientation: a visceral experience of dislocation that put the viewer "on the spot."

without the texts and the Daliesque title. (To name that image, however, is to literalize its opacity and impenetrability. The authors' descriptions only further the picture's odd, evocative combination of obdurate resistance and soft rot.)

To show just how far photography can stray from the image, from pictorial composition, I might mention a subgenre of photographic abstraction from the same year, that involved poured or spattered emulsion. Roger Parry, Maurice

Tabard, and Miroslav Háek each tested the procedure (in 1929, 1935, and 1935–37, respectively), examples of which (minus Háek's) are included in the currently traveling French exhibition "The Subversion of Images: Surrealism, Photography, Film."¹⁰ Such works demonstrate that a photographer can create indisputably nonobjective compositions, images of *no thing*, and as such are radical by definition. However, they may also be seen simply to substitute emulsion for pigment, in a move that does not invade the realm of painting so much as become domesticated within it.¹¹

Man Ray, by contrast, has been justly celebrated for a wide range of abstractions grounded in the sensate body—and in this context, we might look anew at such highly familiar works, seeing them not as domestications of but as operations on the physical subject: streetlights registered by a pinhole camera as a heaving, drunken fog; Lee Miller's neck modeled through soft-focus close-up in the image of a Brancusian swan; Meret Oppenheim's recumbent body dissolved through solarization into an erotic puddle; Kiki de Montparnasse, arms crossed above her head, transformed in a series of increasingly nebulous prints into a hovering phantom of desire. Benjamin's pronouncement on photography of the 1840s, guided by the work of David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, seems curiously applicable here as well: "The procedure itself caused the subjects to live their way into, rather than out of, the moment; during the long duration of the exposure, they grew into the picture." The fusion of subject and object in Man Ray's work seems just as complete, grounded as it is in technical choices that make bodies or places appear both in and out of historical time.

In the years immediately following World War II, Man Ray's close friend Marcel Duchamp took the relation of erotics and abstraction onto a new and exemplary terrain. Abstraction hides everywhere in his culminating masterpiece, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* . . . , 1946–66—starting with its threshold element, a deracinated side of battered wood that Duchamp pictured in an early photograph as if it were a remnant from a Kurt Schwitters *Merzbau*. The work's principal "attraction" is, of course, the misshapen body that lies beyond the door. Peeping at that nude, one cannot fail to be aware of the barrier portal. Having done this once, the reverse holds equally true: The figurative body and the abstract door can never be apprehended simultaneously, but they are always grasped together in the mind.

Photography is not abstract in *Étant donnés*, but it is wedded to abstraction. As the remarkable exhibition held last summer at the Philadelphia Museum of Art made clear, the background landscape is essentially an abstract pattern generated by cutting and combining



Opposite page: Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape), 1946, surrealist. Bochner, *Surface Dis/Tension*, 1968, black and white photograph on photographic canvas, 43 1/2 x 43 1/2". This page, from left: Marcel Duchamp, *In the Manner of Delvaux*, 1942, collage on cardboard, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2". © 2010 Estate of Marcel Duchamp/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Mel Bochner, *Surface Dis/Tension*, 1968, silkscreened composite black and white photograph mounted on board, 72 x 68". Jan Dibbets, *Perspective Correction—My Studio II. 3: Square with Creamy Floor*, 1969, black and white photograph on photographic canvas, 43 1/2 x 43 1/2".

elements from souvenir snapshots Duchamp had taken at a Swiss mountainside resort.¹² This procedure developed organically from the earliest studies for the piece, first a collage titled *In the Manner of Delvaux*, 1942, and then *Twin-Touch-Test*, 1943, designed with Frederick Kiesler for an issue that year of the Surrealist magazine *VVV*. In each of these works, an erotically charged photograph is surrounded by abstractions of ungainly or banal construction: a bit of cracked and pleated tinfoil on a blank sheet, or a grille of chicken wire. The lexicon of midcentury abstraction (gestural cutout, monochrome, grid) surrounds images better suited to girly magazines. This conjunction of conventionally opposed visual codes infects abstraction with voyeuristic desire. It also frustrates desire through ersatz materiality: It is not the bodies but the folds of shiny tinfoil and the actual metal grille that are asking to be stroked.

In a subsequent preparatory study, Duchamp molded his distended nude figure in wax and set it like a giantess astride the Swiss waterfall, flanked by a jigsaw of landscape photographs. This photocollage with wax relief, dated circa 1946, is inseparable from the notorious *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape), which Duchamp created in the same year by masturbating onto a sheet of Astralon. Absent its title, *Paysage fautif* is a fully abstract composition. Yet, like a photograph, its meaning is fundamentally determined (or overdetermined) by the question "What is it of?" The answer refers back to the Swiss scene, whose Amazonian inhabitant was Duchamp's lover and model at the time. Looking and desiring are here the very bases of abstraction. Like the door and the view, the Swiss and the "fautif" landscapes simply need each other. That visceral dependence remains, barely sublimated, in the final work, where one's eyes dart incessantly between the nearly flattened sculptural figure and the surreal photographic backdrop.

IT'S INTRIGUING TO CONSIDER that in 1946, the same year Duchamp began readying *blanc chamois* for transport to Philadelphia, Mel Bochner launched a series of investigations into perspective and scale in photography. These quickly moved from the rendering of rec-

In Duchamp's *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape), looking and desiring are the very bases of abstraction.

ognizable objects to the manipulation of the photographic system such as it was in Bochner's day: camera, photosensitive paper and photo tape, and Masonite support. In *Surface Dis/Tension*, 1968, the greatest of a group of works in this vein, Bochner transformed an orthogonally gridded tabletop into an irregularly shaped, vertically oriented, oblique image of wavy lines and shaded inflections, a deformation achieved by stretching, soaking, delaminating, remounting, overprinting, and sawing away at a progressively crumpled sheet of photographic paper. The signs of handling are unmistakable, even if the resulting composition resists decoding. Bochner also foregrounded the color variance between filtered light and chemical pigments in a number of related works titled *Crumple*, driving home the point about materiality and manipulation—and thus calling to mind the corporeal maneuvers of Duchamp's project. This is less "photography on photography" than photography "on" the status of representation—and its objectification in, or as, a work of art.

A wave of new work in the years around 1970 continued this mode of abstraction, interrogating photography as an analogue for perceptual experience. Jan Dibbets's classic "Perspective Corrections," 1967–69, to cite just one example, present geometric forms that appear rectangular (and parallel to, or even with, the surface of the picture plane) but are in reality trapezoids receding in space. Such work tested the indexical fidelity of the photograph even before indexicality had become a dominant theory of photography. The status of photography as an imprint of the real is not so much the issue here; rather, in a kind of counter to *trompe l'oeil*, it is the relation of the picture to its objecthood that matters: what we look into versus what we are looking at.

Ignoring such discoveries, the abstract photography that proliferated in the '70s and '80s largely contented itself with bigger and better-produced images. For more than thirty years now, abstraction has been an encrusted subspecialty of artistic academe. Amid such calcification, the artist James Welling has forged a career of great intelligence that progresses continually in and out of abstraction; his recent *boîte-en-valise* retrospective at Donald Young Gallery in Chicago

suggested him, indeed, as an interlocutor to the photophilic Gerhard Richter. To see the rainbow hues of one of Welling's "Degradés," 1986–2004, in proximity to his chromatically filtered view of the Farnsworth House, to compare his photograms of bluish water with the blue winter light of a New York cityscape, or to watch his move in the '70s from proto-Richard Prince advertising appropriation to his long preoccupation with drapery, is to comprehend the degree to which he has substantively investigated the spectrum of abstract to figurative—and not any presumed break or opposition between the two.

THE HISTORY I HAVE BEEN SKETCHING does not fit neatly into contemporary conversations. Indeed, the broad and sudden surge in attention to photographic abstraction may well mark a shift in critical discourse rather than in artistic practice. One suspects that underlying the dominant new talk (and its fixation on the digital) is a distinctly old-fashioned conception of creativity. Manipulating pixels can seem a close cousin to applying touches of paint—closer, at any rate, than releasing a camera shutter. This logic also recalls abstract painting, the pinnacle of modernist achievement according to that same notion of creativity. If Benjamin objected to evaluations of photography that used a retrograde pictorial equivalent of the ancien régime, his protest gains new force when one considers how closely today's admiration for abstract photography recalls the mid-twentieth-century obsession with "opticality" in painting.

In and of itself, photography that is generated or aided by computers will not likely change this trajectory of photographic convention, which delights in marrying shopworn aesthetic criteria to newfound technological possibilities. Historical forces outside of art might accomplish the task. The structures of capital have undeniably grown more abstract in our time, as George Baker has elaborated in a series of lucid essays. So, too, have social relations and avenues for political representation.¹³ As Baker has emphasized, however, outwardly abstract photographs are not necessarily those that best reveal the terms of these historical shifts. Indeed, such pictures more than likely analogize the failure that Bertolt Brecht, as cited in Benjamin's "Short History," saw in the Krupp-factory photographs of the 1920s: surface recordings that reveal nothing of the functional conditions of our present situation.¹⁴

This is not to say, as Baker does, that photography as a class of visual production has been transformed willy-nilly into abstractions of abstractions—no more so, first of all, than other kinds of art, which since the industrial era have all been commodities grounded in technologies of the readymade. Nor is it to say that actual, visible abstraction in photography is an unworthy subject of inquiry. Rather than being dragged along in a helpless echo of shifting forms of economic exchange, photography as used in art can still be put to work in ever-changing ways on the relation of images to things—and, by extension, of images to people.

This kind of endeavor would begin with the relation of the photograph to itself—of its image to its object, a link that has been central to the provocative and critical abstractions of our short history. Outstanding examples in recent photography have staged this relation in a revelatory way. Moyra Davey's

Copperhead Grid, 1990, resurrected in 2008 for exhibition at Harvard University's Fogg Museum and then brought to Murray Guy gallery in New York, zeroes in on insignificant objects of exchange—a dollar's worth of common pennies—to concentrate our attention on their intimate handling and the resultant scarring or obliteration of the "little Lincolns" on their face. A densely hung, even-sided grid of ten-by-eight-inch photographs shows each circular coin cropped tightly in a rectangle around the presidential profile. This is the anti-Rushmore and, as has been noted, the anti-Ruff: a vernacular portrait type presented not in a monumentally sized print, face-mounted to Plexiglas, but flattened behind one hundred awkward little rectangles of the same material and held to the wall with brads.¹⁵ Face-mounting to Plexi was, it appears in retrospect, the art world's answer to the rise of the computer screen as a vehicle for luminous, untouchable images. In contrast, Davey's photographs uphold the value of desultory things, casually posed yet dignified objects worn down by touch.

The move is conceptually brilliant: linking nominally worthless paper and metal objects while contrasting their mode of circulation to that of paperless capital flow. *Copperhead Grid* may thematize the twinning of abstraction and atavism praised by Baker as the productive future of "photography after photography," in an age governed by finance capital and its attendant crises—the penny is likely headed the way of the analog camera.¹⁶ (Again, there are parallels to the past: In an oft-cited passage of his "Short History," written after the 1929 crash, Benjamin opined that "it would not be surprising if the photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the pre-industrial heyday of photography had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry.") Or, prophetic qualities aside, the piece may be most relevant for the ways in which it models an interchange between individuals and systems that persists across shifts in our technologized world. Not a grand demonstration, but one hundred acts of minor or insignificant resistance accomplished through near passivity. The move from figuration to abstraction, emblemized in the variously disfigured faces, occurs through absentminded or accidental personalization of random bits from the larger currency pool, rather than any conscious effort. Even their eventual withdrawal from circulation—the ultimate level of abstraction—happens obliviously; pennies are not misplaced, they simply go missing. But the material retains its bite, to follow Davey's punning title, at least as long as it stays in the system. A sympathetic viewer could see in these scarred surfaces a gathering of dispossessed, nominally identical ciphers who are in reality highly individuated.

One of the stars of the current abstract scene, Walead Beshty, likewise makes explicit the relations of labor between images and people. Beshty produces his "Multi-Sided Pictures," 2006–, by folding lengths of chromogenic photographic paper, cut to the measure of his body (for example, his outstretched arms), into three-dimensional geometric forms. He then successively exposes the sides to localized light sources that are sequenced according to the spectrum of primary emitted (red, green, blue) or reflective (cyan, magenta, yellow) colors. (Beshty





Christopher Williams, *Crumples*, 1976, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams. *Copperhead #1*, 1980, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams. *Fabricator (JD)*, 1981, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams. *Black, Red & White*, 1982, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams. *January 4th*, 1983, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams. *January 4th*, 1983, color photograph, 48 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. © Christopher Williams.



and Bochner had regular discussions when Beshty was Bochner's student at Yale, and these pieces bear an evident debt to the latter's *Crumples* and other early works.) The "Multi-Sided Pictures" emphasize light and paper, but also photographic materials and procedures, as specific elements to be borne in mind by the viewer. This information is conveyed in lengthy descriptive titles, in the manner initiated by Beshty's older Los Angeles colleague Christopher Williams. On reading in these titles such precise descriptions—of the paper used, the colors, the number of sides, the date and location of exposure—one becomes intensely aware of the object as something incommensurable with its representation, whether in language or as an image.

Beshty insists on the manifest physicality of photographs: Any "division between the 'picture' and the 'material' is unnecessary and fundamentally specious," he has written. It is also dangerous, for an exclusive emphasis on transmissible pictures cannot but reinforce the hegemony of today's image world as an unassailable screen of pixelated units.¹⁷ The exhibition of these pieces is intended to be specific as well—an aspect of production made manifest in what Beshty calls "industrial portraits," nearly life-size color photographs of those involved in framing, installing, or creating the various showings of the work. The portrait photographs have, however, been kept out of sight at some exhibitions, masking the artist's (perhaps too evident) point that it is impossible to "generate" an image without labor. Beshty sets up a dialectical encounter between sentient bodies and an unthinking, "massifying" mechanical apparatus, to invoke the terms of Vilém Flusser—a thought-provoking endeavor even after decades of

avant-garde investment in that dialectic.¹⁸ (A recent exchange between Beshty and Baker, each concerned with defining an interventionist mode for photography that is not bounded by a conventional divide between "abstraction" and "illusion," bears the stamp of Flusser's ideas and marks a high point in recent writing on abstraction.¹⁹)

"There is no photograph that is inherently more photographic than another": so Beshty wrote last year in explaining his ideas.²⁰ The works by Davey, Beshty, and Deschenes—to keep to the present-day examples in this short history—are each singular, and they elude categorical pronouncements about "the medium." None of them claims to define photography, abstract or otherwise. As one measure of that singularity, each of these works is exceedingly difficult to reproduce, for different reasons. Davey's is too large to fit legibly in a book, Beshty's is too subtle in its folds and creases, and Deschenes's "mirrors" are simply impossible to capture, in any light. Their lovely surface irregularities and handling marks disappear in print, leaving the impression of

lackluster monochromes divested of any reproductive, mirroric function. Yet perhaps what is unrepresentable is not so much the images as the labor invested in their making: One can only appreciate this labor when viewing the works in person. This kind of contact between image and body is remarkable. Can one speak of things that are antiautomatic yet wholly defined by ritual encounter and an originary presence? Such cases seem to pose a conundrum in the history of photography inherited from Benjamin. □

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The link between the image and its object has been central to the provocative abstractions in this short history, and outstanding examples in recent photography have staged this relation in a revelatory way.

The New York Times

Art in Review

ART IN REVIEW

Liz Deschenes: 'Tilt / Swing'

By Karen Rosenberg

May 29, 2009

Miguel Abreu Gallery

36 Orchard Street, near Hester Street, Lower East Side

Through June 14

Liz Deschenes reminds us that photographs are all made of light, paper, chemicals and time, in different proportions. In her second solo show at the Miguel Abreu gallery she continues to distill the medium, with some help from past artists and thinkers.

Ms. Deschenes splits the difference between the window and mirror functions ascribed to contemporary photography by the legendary Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski. In a previous body of work she made moiré-like photographs of perforated paper held up to a window. Her current works are reflective photograms, made by exposing sheets of light-sensitive paper to the night air and then fixing them with silver toner. Essentially they're photographs of nothing.

This has been done before. But Ms. Deschenes arranges six of these photograms in a ring that circulates light between the gallery's floor, walls and ceiling. This unconventional installation refers to an exhibition design by the Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer, said to be "an inclusive picture of all [viewpoint] possibilities." It also draws attention to the gallery's atypical (for the neighborhood) sanitized architecture, with its white tiled floor and gridded light fixture.

The photograms will continue to oxidize during the run of the show, but for the moment they work as fun-house mirrors. Looking at your blurry reflection in one of the tilted panels makes you feel weightless, as though you've become part of the photochemical process.

The New York Times

Art in Review

ART IN REVIEW

Liz Deschenes: 'Registration'

By Roberta Smith

May 18, 2007

Miguel Abreu Gallery

36 Orchard Street, near Hester Street, Lower East Side

Through Sunday

Difference is all in Liz Deschenes's new work, which continues to explore the overlaps among visual experience, the camera and eccentric photographic processes. In this case what results is a form of nonaggressive, photo-based Op Art.

Her latest images start with an 8-by-10-inch black-and-white negative of a sheet of perforated paper photographed against a well-lighted window. The negative is duplicated and superimposed, using an enlarger, without being strictly aligned. Each of the seven 54-by-40-inch color prints made by this method has a unique moiré pattern that is low-tech yet weirdly alive.

Up close you see the shifting degrees of agreement between the two layers of dots, which fluctuate noticeably across each surface. From farther away the patterns pulsate and ooze. They suggest modernist monochromes, greatly magnified, in a state of erosion; natural light, granular and glowing, seen through half-closed eyes; or a screen of leaves.

The reign of black-and-white pulsation is disrupted by "Red Transfer," a diptych of two smaller dye-transfer prints in solid, saturated red, which you come to realize are slightly different shades. In the age of mechanical reproduction, repetition is harder than you think.