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Liz Deschenes

CAMPOLI PRESTI

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.

View of "Liz Deschenes," 2013.

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*