

ARTFORUM

Liz Deschenes

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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