

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—spare 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."