

the PARIS REVIEW

Seceding: A Conversation with Liz Deschenes

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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.

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.