

Wallpaper*

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



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The artist Liz Deschenes is currently receiving a mid-career survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, her hometown
(Image credit: TBC)

By Julie Baumgardner
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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.’

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.’



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