

# EILEEN QUINLAN AND LIZ DESCHENES

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WITH MATT KEEGAN

**MATT:** In both of your work there is a clear intention to make a viewer look longer and an awareness of constructing a relationship to a viewer, especially in terms of the scale at which both of you work, there's a human scale. We're not talking about Jeff Wall. We're talking about something where there's a physical relationship to a viewer. In terms of that idea of looking, where does that kind of interest stem from that leads to a photographic practice, or what are some other forms of looking that inform your decisions in photography?

**EILEEN:** I'm interested in what people expect from a photograph—what they expect to be looking at or what they think a photograph is or should be.

**MATT:** In terms of that idea of media specificity, is that a conversation that you had in terms of getting started, of people asking why you don't paint or why you don't work in another medium?

**LIZ:** I think what you talked about in terms of expectation, I think defying people's expectations of what a photograph is to present. Of course photography can depict, and does depict but that's such a small aspect of what it can actually do, but it has become 100 percent of peoples' expectations. It most certainly has been my long pursuit of defying those expectations. And is it about medium specificity? I've made it medium specific so that people will have a deeper understanding of what I'm doing. Did it have to be medium specific? Absolutely not, but I thought in order to have people understand what I was doing, it was really important that it be medium specific. My relationship to photography is obviously of many concerns that I've talked about, my interest in site specificity and the third dimension, those are not things that people necessarily associate with the medium but most certainly have been things that I've tried to articulate in the work.

**MATT:** Especially with your work Liz, you request that a viewer truly considers an image. You ask your

audience to consider green screen technology for example—to understand the screen, not just as a dissolve, or a space to be projected onto—but, to view it as a physical apparatus. This is medium specific. How do these concerns build from project to project?

**LIZ:** There's certainly the accumulation, and about that one specific project, I think that's something that Eileen and I have in common: asking the viewer to look at the apparatus of the media and mediums. I think that most certainly is an overlap, to ask the viewer to think about how these things actually are constructed.

**EILEEN:** Yeah, definitely.

**LIZ:** In your work, you're actually making constructions to ask people to think about the constructions, and for the green-screen project, I'm photographing some of the constructions on-site.

**EILEEN:** Obviously the green screen is like a stage where something else takes place, but the content isn't there in the case of your pictures. What I do with my work comes partly out of my exposure to commercial photography. Practitioners of it apply a lot of the studio techniques I use to products, but in my case there's no subject. It's only atmosphere. Liz and I share an interest in these devices. Her green screen is strangely expectant when it's photographed alone.

[Break.]

**LIZ:** I think part of my frustration with the way photography is considered is it has always been practiced self-reflexively from [Joseph Nicéphore] Niépce on, but it's not the way it's been framed or considered. So I think it's a matter of reconsidering how the medium has been framed. And I think it's been useful for capitalist economies to frame photography in the role of depiction.

**MATT:** And a quicker consumption.

**LIZ:** Consumption, and there's never a lack of images. There's always a larger supply and a greater demand. Part of what I find interesting about right now is the capacity to actually look at the history of the medium, because of the paradigm shift that we're living in from analog to digital technologies. I actually look at this as an opportune moment to reassess how its history has been constructed.

**EILEEN:** Liz and I are working in a non documentary tradition that goes back as far as photography itself does. There's always been a parallel history of grappling with the medium in a more—I don't know how to put it—abstract way or a less representational way. And it's definitely not something that's taught from an art-historical perspective. The "pictorialists," from [Julia Margaret] Cameron to [Alfred] Steiglitz, are lumped together and usually dismissed.

**MATT:** In terms of engaging the history of the media, and what you were mentioning before in relation to a late '90s understanding and consumption of photography- that work seemed to be all about production and creating an image that seemed absent of a history. Even if you look at someone like [Andreas] Gursky, who was discussed through his education with the Bechers- that statement was made, but the work was all about a present, present image.

I think that time period seems to finally be shaken off in terms of a contemporary photography exhibition. I think this allows for a more complex conversation about photography. I also think that looking at an image that is about an apparatus, allows for the site of the exhibition to also be understood as an apparatus. If the work is only about commerce, then the space is supposed to recede and the image dominates. If you're creating work that is about looking in a critical way, then as a viewer, you may start to look at the gallery and think about what the walls are providing, what the venue adds, and begin to consider these additional contextual concerns.

**LIZ:** I don't think it's a coincidence that Eileen and I have both chosen the Lower East Side.

**MATT:** And a gallery run by an artist.

**LIZ:** Yes, that's a *really, really* important point, a gallery run by an artist.

**EILEEN:** Are you suggesting, Matt, that when a photo puts its viewer in a place where they begin to consider their expectations around photography, the viewer is then, by extension, made aware of their expectations regarding the gallery itself?

**MATT:** For me, it is very foundational that both of your work is invested in slowing down the act of looking. Before we began recording, we discussed this pacing in relation to walking. And this sets up a pacing where

you have time to consider the work and its manufacture, as well as the installation and contextual decisions of the work. I don't know if I'm articulating myself clearly...

**EILEEN:** When the content of a work, and certainly of a photograph, is somewhat ambiguous, everything around it becomes loaded. I find that my photographs really don't work unless they're framed a certain way. I mean literally. It's always been important, except in the case of my Polaroids, which require extra protection, that my pictures are not presented under glass, that they're not matted, etc. My work is so much about the photographer's studio and the limits of the studio, of analog technology, that when I take it out into the world, I'm not quite sure what to do with it. Holding to these strict and somewhat arbitrary presentational forms is the only way I can make sense of transitioning my pictures from a private to a public sphere.

**LIZ:** I do think, in terms of how I work, and I think Eileen, you probably work in a very similar way, that the accumulation is really important. And I think if there has been an understanding recently about my position with photography and these things that I sort of mentioned, it's because of the repetitions and the accumulation and persistence.

**MATT:** Just to go to an early conversation that I remember having with Liz about the divide that once existed between the "art world" and a "photo art world." Since there has been a shift from this kind of ghettoized approach to viewing photography, does this integration lead to a lack of understanding or appreciation of an explicitly photographic history?

**LIZ:** That's such a hard question to answer. I know that I've always wanted a larger context that, as specific as my interests are in photography, I want it to reflect inwardly and outwardly, sort of simultaneously. In the bigger scheme of the ghetto-ization, that's a really hard thing for me to address, because as I said, obviously my work is all-encompassing of the medium, but at the same point in time, I consciously avoided keeping it just within the realm of photo-context. I was just asked to be included in a museum show, and it came from the Department of Sculpture and Painting, which I'm really happy when the work can break down the categorizations, this is going to sound sort of...I want it, even though it's entirely about the medium of photography, I want it to be inclusive of other practices and other ideas.

**MATT:** I think it definitely does.

**EILEEN:** Even though photography is accepted in the art world, it still can be very easily ghetto-ized. There are people who remain suspicious of what it can contribute to an arts discourse, despite the huge crossover success of the heavily illustrative photography that a lot of us who were coming up in the '90s felt oppressed by. For me too, it's been really important not to be in a photo-centric gallery, because I do want to be framed by artists of all kinds. My practice is somewhat bound up with photographic materials, but it's not limited to them.

**MATT:** For both of you, I think that the work definitely needs to be in those contexts, but I guess I was just curious if there was anything that was missed in that kind of specific context.

**EILEEN:** It's true that someone who knows photo history and knows photo materials can engage with aspects of our practices that may be overlooked by people without this kind of knowledge. We are photographers, among other things.

**MATT:** I think your work can be discussed in terms of sculpture or in terms of the idea of three-dimensional space, or a space beyond the image plane. Like the idea that the construction of that particular image is incredibly inhabitable and spatial, and I don't think about it just in terms of it existing exclusively as a photographic print, because the making of it is so present and inhabitable for me.

**LIZ:** I think that gets back, to bring this full circle, to your initial question Matt, about seeing and walking. Particularly with my most recent investigations, I've been interested in sort of re-creating the phenomena of three-dimensionality in the two-dimensional plane and extending beyond that plane, which does refer to walking. Because there's always something beyond our peripheral vision, there's the expectation of what you'll find beyond your periphery. So there was a very conscious attempt to re-create a specific three-dimensional experience in the new work.

**EILEEN:** Liz, the way your work was installed at Miguel Abreu's, it was a completely different experience from one side of the room to the other. Your walking point is a really good one, Matt. I'm also amazed at the way your work photographs, Liz, because it looks totally different in reproductions than it does in person.

**LIZ:** It defies reproduction. Isn't it funny? I think that refers to my years as an art photographer.

**EILEEN:** Your mirror pieces are the same way.

**LIZ:** The black-and-white series that you referred to earlier also defies reproduction.

**EILEEN:** We both have integrated our "non artistic" engagements with photography into our art practices. It makes sense to me to take these for-hire experiences and to transform them, reclaiming them.

**MATT:** I think that walking is all about being able to experience something, akin to the idea of a touch, versus driving by, which is about a quick capture. I think that if it's about positioning yourself in that space, whether it's in front of your construction table or if it's in front of this scrim that creates the *moiré* effect, that pacing to me is...

**LIZ:** About slowing down.

**MATT:** Yeah, it's a slowing down, which, of course, could be discussed in terms of a conversation of painting and I think that can be applicable, but there is something photographic in the idea of a particular instant. In terms of viewing the work, there is a particular pacing that has a cumulative effect.

**LIZ:** I like the theme of walking, if we're going to bring our conversation to completion, it's a really nice way to talk about the bigger sort of framing of the work. For both of us, it is obviously about getting people to engage with the work in a way that's different from how they're used to engaging with photographic work. I like, Eileen, how in your work, even though I know what scale you're working in, I know it, I have no idea when it's presented actually physically in the work what scale it actually is.

**EILEEN:** That's good. I've tried to frustrate that awareness, because I think in the beginning it was more clear, the true scale of the things I was depicting. I was showing more of the circumstances of the making of each image. Maybe it's more difficult now to physically orient yourself in relation to my photographs. It follows that my presence as the fabricator of these images has also been deemphasized. ■■