

The Silver Monochromes of Liz Deschenes

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In 1999 Bill Gates wrote, “As I was preparing my speech for our first CEO summit in the spring of 1997, I was pondering how the digital age will fundamentally alter business. I wanted to go beyond a speech of dazzling technology advances and address the questions that business leaders wrestle with all the time. . . . If the 1980s were about quality and the 1990s were about reengineering, then the 2000s will be about velocity. About how quickly the nature of business will change. About how quickly business itself will be transacted. About how information access will alter the lifestyle of consumers and their expectations of business. Quality improvements and business process improvements will occur far faster. When the increase in velocity of business is great enough, the very nature of business changes. . . . People have lived for so long without information at their fingertips that they don’t realize what they’re missing. One of the goals in my speech to the CEOs was to raise their expectations. I wanted them to be appalled by how little they got in the way of actionable information from their current IT investments. I wanted CEOs to demand a flow of information that would give them quick, tangible knowledge about what was really happening with their customers.”¹

His voice is filled with triumph and critique. It’s as though he saw the decade ahead with crystal clarity and, like a writer of speculative fiction, was able to actualize his vision into reality through his eminence as a broadcaster of thought to a very empowered class. Not only has digitization given us the conveniences of e-mail as well as the luxury of tracking

a UPS delivery—it has also given us the incessant gurgling of the cell phone, that little Tamagotchi ever in need of a tap or stroke. Digitization has made speed count more than ever. For Gates, velocity is the actualization of a dream—a kind of titanic fulfillment of a much larger intellectual and industrial project. After all, he's on top. His industrial production has implications that are greater than simply cultural. His work has literally changed space and time for subjects of the first, second, and third worlds. As a subject of global capitalism working in an engorged, albeit destabilized, space, I also shudder at the ring of this prescient quote.

Unfortunately, the increased velocity in the world and the further sense of precariousness we feel creates some rough patches. Such speed creates pathologies that are both minor and build over time, clouding our ability to think clearly. Ironically, the space of art—institutional, activist, or commercial—provides a sense of refrain—either critical, performative, or affirmative—from our daily grind. Yet it is rare that art-objects open up a space of philosophical questioning that addresses the pressing conditions of our time, as predicated by Gates's delivery to his fellow producers. Clock time is an institutional fiction; it is so embedded in our day to day as to appear natural. Yet Greenwich Mean Time was only internationally adopted in 1884, 113 years before Mr. Gates's prescient thought.ⁱⁱ First established to help synchronize train times in the United Kingdom, the demarcation of international time zones assisted oceangoing commerce, allowing vessels to work on a combination of lunar and Greenwich time, further assisting the transport of goods and bodies around the globe and across national boundaries. Time as a pure psychological phenomenon is real—the movement of the minute-register on my phone is

an institutional sign, globally synchronous and naturalized as much as the OCR font can be. Yet it's thoroughly taken as truth.

Photography, a technology closely tied to time and inextricably linked with global capitalism and its friend the image, consequently symptomizes the structural transformation in our economy more than other artistic mediums rooted in the nineteenth century. The sonorous conversation about film versus bytes is a direct analogy to the transformations in temporality Bill Gates saw coming years ago. Digitization becomes a shorthand for the apparatus of global capitalism, the beast that increases both the velocity and fragility of our lives.

The obsolete, artisanal, and focused technologies of black-and-white printing are employed in Liz Deschenes's silver monochromes. These works etch a line in time, raising questions with philosophical import that are only intensified by the hypertrophic backdrop of the global art industry.ⁱⁱⁱ Standing in the tiled-floor space of an Orchard Street storefront commercial gallery (once a former monastery), I wonder if these silver monochrome objects were exposed using moonlight from a Vermont night. Far and away from the maddening apparatus that is the city's youth-consuming engine, these pieces reflect quietude. Their silvery color—not color, actually, as that's something different—a language culled from painting. The silver is a dropout. It pulls itself away from the formation of a legible image and moves to the register of process. What appears as color is the accrual of silver onto the surface of a sheet of emulsified, charged silver gelatin fiber paper. The halidation of the paper is what makes it seem so material. These are the

substances of an older era—a group of technologies once employed to print the day’s news photos for the press. Now the same basic matter is used in the production of an object with specific structural properties. Although these works are made with multiple processes (printing, mounting, and framing to name only a few), the primary concern is the activation of the page with silver via artisanal photographic chemistry. When we see the surface, we see the production by which the work is made.

A key aporia in a photograph is the dialectic between the object as social and semiotic register of a moment (or moments) in time and the object as material sedimentation.

Photographs are a class of laminated objects that can’t be separated into binary parts.^{iv}

Although Deschenes’s silver monochromes are the sedimentary result of accrued material, like salt formations in the desert, the works still implicate the idea of the image—and all of its baggage—through its negation. This double play manifests itself in another dialectic: the space between being beholden to an object or the theatrical pacing related to a work. The texture of such a process can force us to turn our backs on the pieces as if we already know them or do not need to see them. Pacing the tiled floor of the Lower East Side exhibition space is as productive as being beholden to the piece.

The shimmery surfaces appear to have the watery accrual of photogenic drawings made by Henry Fox Talbot. This is not to say Deschenes’s monochromes reference the salted paper prints made at Lacock Abbey. The relationship is positional. Deschenes’s practice, like Talbot’s (if we can call it that), is located at a level of remove from the urban heat. Despite the artist’s base in New York City, the geographic production of these works

draws literal distance from the acidic engine of the city that never sleeps.^v Evocative of light more than of signs, the luminosity of the silver sedimentation buzzes with associational logic. There is even something of the first photographs of the moon in the works; the telescoping vantage within these frames points away from the here but not so much from the now. Photography's mysterious origins are not lost in the work, distinct at a time when digitization aspires to puncture and tangle traditional boundaries of the medium.

Perched autonomously outside of the imaginary ideology of images, the monochromes are able—through refutation, negation, and distance—to remain detached from the larger ideological productive labor that images perform, no matter what their position may be. There is a slowing down in Deschenes's work and a level of remove, which may be a kind of survivalist gesture—a move off the grid, so to speak. Is there a loss with such a gesture? I think so. The critical departure of metaphorically stepping out of the system is, on some level, a true impossibility—but that seems like old discourse. Yet as a devotee of the plastic plaques of a critical forebearer's *Industrial Poems*,^{vi} I can't help but question work that has a built-in slowness and an enticing nostalgia for obsolete technologies that is questionable on a surface level.^{vii} We are cybernetically encouraged to produce, share, and connect. After all, communication is the queen bee of production, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu.^{viii} Sometimes criticism is outweighed by more pressing concerns when speaking across generations. Hence, the question becomes: What kind of work is being done with Deschenes's gesture toward a space far from the maddening consumptive apparatus that is global capitalism, in all its toxicity and image-centric intensity?

The work that Liz has made using withering materials of a bygone era is executed with such elegance so as to seemingly draw a sharp line in contemporary discourse. Such resolution enables a new set of questions for artists of my generation, and I end up assuaging my own criticism as my negation is replaced by the way these objects affect the space of the room and the space of the subject. In spite of the impending pressures on advanced culture from all sides (including from within), these works create a space “to which we can come, and for a while ‘be free to think about what we are going to do.’”¹ The central question is constituted by a tension in the space, which is embodied and cognitive, material and imagistic. There is a pure line of inquiry into the fundamental aporia of photography: Is the work a sociological record or a material sedimentation of time, concretized through process? As in dealing with any good aporia, we are left contemplating. That is the work we do. Contemplation is the work that the viewer performs.

All said, the question is less about photography and more about production within the institutionally-bounded discursive field of art. The true work done by Deschenes’s monochromes is to investigate an ontological question about time via multiple dialectical plays within individual works. The back-and-forth between significant, interwoven complexities is critical of one of the largest imaginary institutions of our daily life: the clock. Only with its destruction will there be liberation. And we can only dream of such a thing, of being in a contemplative realm at a time of incredible velocity; of stopping the apparatus; of having the whole world at once sit out of its own game; for all of us to drop

out like the salient material that we are. This is only a dream, but all culture can do is create a new imagination for what the world can be. This is production, speculative and engaged.

ⁱ From Bill Gates's introduction to his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought: Using a Digital Nervous System* (New York: Warner Books, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Imperialism, oceangoing commerce, national and industrial growth were and are interwoven by a matrix of technology, warfare, and logistics. The discussion of Greenwich Mean Times here only touches on the vaster conversation about this complex, hegemonic construction. For more in-depth analysis, see Fernand Braudel's *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ A historical phenomenon emblemized by the multiple, annual art and lifestyle fairs every December in Miami—the pubic region of the art world.

^{iv} To riff off of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is to abuse a text that serves as the emotionally corrupt infrastructure of photography discourse.

^v At the time of this writing, Deschenes, who lives in New York, worked out of a studio in Vermont.

^{vi} The process of vacuum-forming plastic was a common mode of production for sign makers at the time when Marcel Broodthaers was making the *Industrial Poems*. That production process is considered obsolete now.

^{vii} There is an overabundance of nostalgic abstract painting in the world today. Many of these works are shown and garnering attention in Manhattan's Lower East Side, in close proximity to the gallery that show's Liz's work. The system of art is lubricated for nostalgia: The dealer can easily talk about these paintings because they look like older art, the collector "gets it" because it is something that he or she has seen before, the artist feels comfortable since it gives him or her a relationship to "history," and comparing contemporary art to older art is a trusty crutch taught in MFA programs. The job of the artist is to question—not to be boringly complicit with—all of these structures.

^{viii} From Pierre Bourdieu's superb text *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

^{viii} This statement appears in Robert Barry's *Marcuse Piece*, 1970, culled from quotations by the German philosopher and California transplant.