

Marble and Silk

“What you see is what you see”. So said Frank Stella in 1964, his aphorism full of promise about the clarity of abstraction, and its potential for allaying the problems of content with an experience grounded in the senses, or rather in one sense: sight. Like most aphorisms it is as interesting for its falsity as its truth. Liz Rideal’s exhibition *Splicing Time: Rome and the Roman Campagna* at the UCL Art Museum contradicts Stella’s proposition. How, when and where you see, and what you know, are all deeply implicated in determining what you see, as this exhibition makes clear. Dominating the room is *Encounter: Terme di Diocleziano (The Baths of Diocletian)*, comprising three vast blinds hanging over the museum’s three sash windows. A giant photograph of a different encounter between classical, sculpted drapery and free-falling or draped pieces of silk covers each. They create an exchange between image and object that is in a sense the opposite of abstraction. If Stella’s canvases (at least the type he was talking about in 1964) made the paint and the image into one thing, Rideal’s blinds work the other way, scattering single photographic stills into pluralities of elusive images. The translucency of the blinds spells this out, subjecting the printed photograph to the vagaries of changing light and weather, and setting up a rabbit-duck dilemma for the viewer. To look at these blinds is to be caught between seeing the photographic image and seeing through it, looking at the weave of the silk or at a muffled view of the UCL quadrangle outside. That exterior view is further complicated by the fact that Rideal took the photographs in a similar space—the cloister of the Charterhouse at the Baths of Diocletian—so the scene through the blinds is not a complete escape from the bonds of the images on them. Looking outside, you are still in their imagery, or at least in something remarkably like it, an entrapment with endless potential for understanding the currency of images, if not our relationship with history more generally.

Even without *Encounter*’s formal and contextual games, the images are themselves loaded with gestures towards their own fragility: the trickery of the stone fabric and the truth of the real silk both become equal as variations of tone rendered on a (real) fabric support. Ideas of layers and folds inform our understanding of what fabric is, and here those ideas are brought to the image of fabric too, calling up deep historical connections between cloth and photography particularly—the fabric shutters in reflex cameras or, before those, the old plate camera curtains that kept photographers in the dark. Fabric’s structurally embedded role in photography has long informed Rideal’s artistic project, from her exploration of the photo booth to concealing the BBC’s Broadcasting House, giving this historically loaded work another history, that of the artist’s work.

The history more explicitly on view, though, is a classical one. Staging these photographs in the Baths of Diocletian in Rome roots them in antiquity and evokes antiquity’s many encounters with fabric. The Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum are scarcely five hundred metres from Rideal’s exhibition; many of their pivotal figures—in their current headless and limbless state—now show little but fabric. Fabric has also been a preoccupation of arch-classicists like Poussin, whose debts to antiquity are well-known, and who seldom missed an opportunity to paint glorious passages of fabric into his mythological scenes. Often he did so in colours so ostentatious that they stood slightly apart from the rest of the painting, a visual splitting not so conceptually remote from Rideal’s *Encounter*. Many references are perceptible, but more significant might be *Encounter*’s capacity to describe the past more profoundly too: the blinds’ emphasis on the screen between the viewer and the real or unrepresented, direct world points to the difficulties of seeing old objects. They call attention to the filters we bring to the past and the partial, obfuscated quality of what we see as a result, using their own diaphanous layer to show two varieties of veiling—one resolutely static, the other dynamic; one opaque, the other translucent. By bringing these polarities together Rideal seems to comment on the notion of representation itself, and the alchemy it performs when one material becomes comprehended as another. Michelangelo famously described sculpting as an exercise in releasing a figure from within a lump of stone, seeing the capacity of the material to become something else as at least partly innate. In these images of falling silk, something similar is

happening in the shapes made by the silk's lightness and the air's resistance. The photographs capture a fugitive moment of release when the silk is little more than an exchange between air and gravity, and assumes its own form.

Splicing Time is in the UCL Art Museum, and runs alongside the *Legacy* exhibition of the mostly eighteenth-century printmaker Richard Cooper Junior. Richard Cooper Junior's are kindred works to the extent that they, too, address a classical past, from a Grand Tour context. One of the many fascinations of the Grand Tour was the quasi-fictional image of Italy it created, landscapes and views becoming as much a matter of collage as topography, subject to artists' imaginative embellishments. *Splicing Time* inhabits a similar space between documentary recording (these happenings in silk did occur) and imagination: such diaphanous subjects hint strongly at absences, leaving much to be filled in by the viewer. This is especially true of the *Monterano Capriccio* triptych of photographs. They show the silk set against backdrops of ruins, a perfect counterpoint to the fabric's falling and its lightness: they share with ruins their susceptibility to time and a vocabulary of absence, but the ruins endure where the breath-like moment of silk does not. The poetry and visual splendour of this imagery of lightness is what you see, but through it Rideal smuggles weighty reflections on perception, representation and the past.

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Liz Rideal's work was on show at the UCL Art Museum from January – June 2017