

EILEEN QUINLAN

AN INTERVIEW BY STEEL STILLMAN

Eileen Quinlan describes herself as a still-life photographer. Born in 1972, she has become well known in recent years as one of a cohort of photographers—Walead Beshty and Liz Deschenes are notable others—who, following in the footsteps of practitioners from Moholy-Nagy to James Welling, have been disassembling the layered apparatus of photography (light, subject, optics, chemistry, bytes, the material image) and finding new means of expression.

Often stunningly beautiful, Quinlan's work is surprisingly straightforward. She uses medium- and large-format cameras and studio strobes to shoot tabletop, house-of-cardlike worlds—angular constructions, staged for the camera's lens, in which propped mirrors reflect intensely colored light, deep shadows, bits of fabric, reflective Mylar, wisps of smoke, photographs, and, especially, each other. The resulting images offer kaleidoscopic views into indefinite and often infinite spaces. Little is seen of the studio where they were taken or of the photographer who made them, though sometimes she leaves clues: specks of dust, a fingerprint, a crumpled paper towel, or the edge of a can of beans used to buttress a mirrored tile.

Quinlan shoots on film and avoids Photoshop for reasons more practical than nostalgic—she was professionally trained in the analog world and still knows where to find film.

Overall, there is an unexpected sincerity to her process. Everything you see happened just the way it appears. The wizardry is all in the setup. Quinlan plays hide-and-seek with the camera (I've never seen it, but I know the camera is there, deep in some reflected shadow) and invites us to play along. To look at her pictures is to parse their construction—a game for puzzlers yielding endless pleasure.

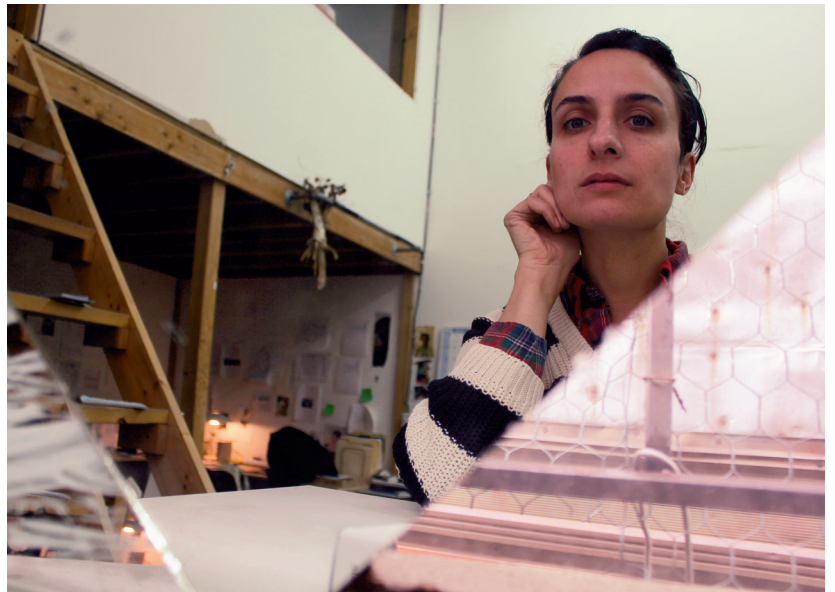
Quinlan grew up in Boston and in southern New Hampshire. She attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/Tufts University, graduating with a BFA in 1996. After moving to New York in 1999, she worked in advertising and fashion—and as an assistant to commercial photographers—before earning an MFA from Columbia University in 2005. In the last six years, she has had eight solo exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe, including her first museum solo, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 2009. Her work has appeared in dozens of group shows and is currently on view in "All of this and nothing" at the Hammer Museum in L.A. Quinlan was recently appointed co-chair of the photography department at Bard College's Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts. She is married to the artist Cheyney Thompson, with whom she has a three-year-old son, and lives and works in Brooklyn. We spoke in her Williamsburg studio on a cold night in January.

STEEL STILLMAN What kind of art were you looking at as an undergraduate?

EILEEN QUINLAN I remember coming across a book on Sigmar Polke in the library at the Museum School in 1991, and being struck by the liberties he took with photographic materials—solarizing and staining his prints, even burning his film. The spirits of Nan Goldin and Philip-Lorca diCorcia hung over the Museum School at that time—they had studied there in the late '70s—but I was looking for less diaristic or cinematic models, and Polke's irreverence excited me.

SS Did Polke inspire your interest in ghost photographs?

EQ It was more the other way around. When I was quite young, I discovered the images of the Cottingley Fairies—a suite of photographs taken in the 1910s by two cousins. Arthur Conan Doyle claimed they illustrated psychic phenomena—and ever since I've been interested in supernatural stories and how photography, even in the age of Photoshop, has been used to support them. I love the way the camera can



Eileen Quinlan in her studio, 2010. Courtesy the artist.

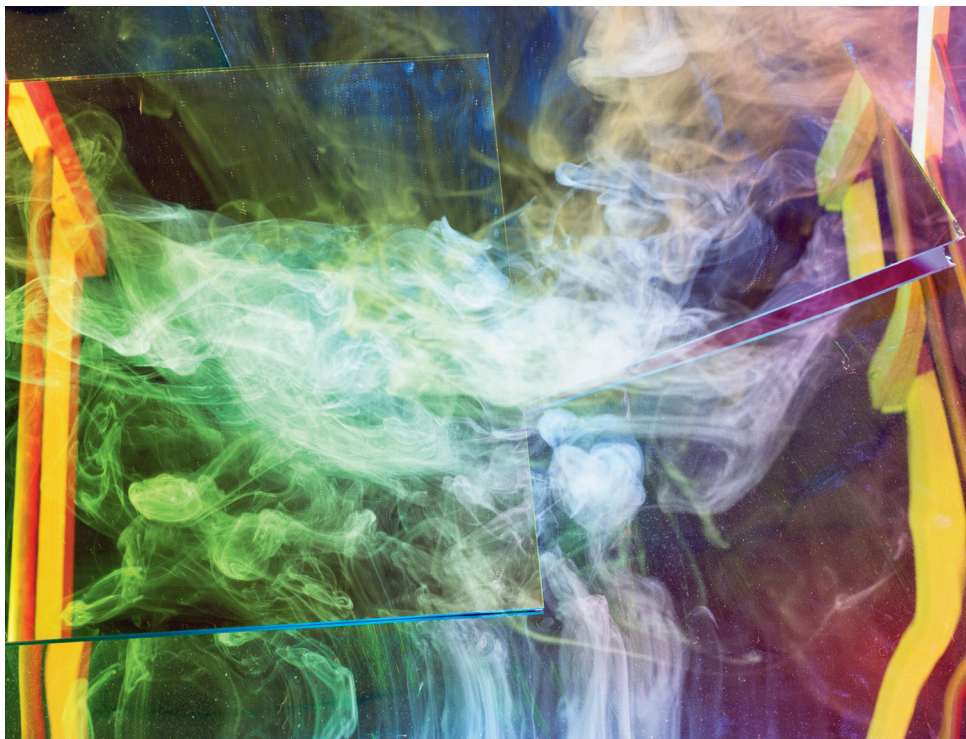
Opposite, *Yellow Goya*, 2007, UV laminated chromogenic print mounted on Sintra, 40 by 30 inches.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

make immaterial or unconvincing subject matter look real.

While working on one of my first projects at Columbia—I was taking simple still-life pictures—I began researching contemporary ghost photography. I discovered that the ghost rarely takes human form and appears more often as an orb or cloud, invariably caused by dust on the film or smoke from somebody's cigarette. As I searched, I stumbled on smoking fetish images, photographs of women in various stages of undress surrounded by smoke; these led me to make a series of not altogether successful photographs of smoking men.

I next tried photographing smoke by itself, and though I wasn't sure what I was doing, my teachers encouraged me to keep at it. I realized I could use mirrors—they doubled the volume of the smoke—and the commercial lighting skills I'd acquired working as an assistant. Gradually, the pictures became more complex and began to resemble commercial still-life shots. In those early



days, when people asked me what they were, I'd say they were product photography without the product.

SS This body of work formed the basis for your thesis show at Columbia and seems to have set the stage for almost everything you've done since. The title you used for this first series, "Smoke & Mirrors," was

important, too: it described the work and nodded to the sleight of hand behind all art production.

EQ I wanted it also to evoke the subtle, manipulative ways that abstraction is deployed in advertising and mass media. "Smoke & Mirrors" began as a project—I thought I'd just do a series of pictures and move on. But the more I made, the more layers I found to investigate; so what began as a project turned into a way of working. I still use the same setup—three lights, three or four colored gels, a small table and 2-by-2-foot mirror tiles from Home Depot. Eventually smoke became less important. And, as other series emerged, I began using different titles—several sets of images were named after perfumes, for example.

SS When I saw your second solo show at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York, in 2010, it seemed that something had changed—a rougher, less obvious beauty had come into your work. What had happened?

EQ I was feeling stuck and thought a little violence might help. The black-and-white Polaroid film I use produces very fragile negatives [color Polaroids have no negatives] and, despite my best efforts, they always get damaged. For a change, I decid-



Top, *Smoke & Mirrors* #10, 2005, UV laminated chromogenic print, 16 by 20 inches.

Left, *The Star on the Forehead*, 2010, gelatin silver print mounted on aluminum, 40 by 30 inches.

Opposite, *Highlands* #8, 2010, gelatin silver print mounted on aluminum, 60 by 48 inches. Courtesy Sutton Lane, London.

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ed to stress the negatives to the max—even to the point of letting the images fall apart. On a parallel track, I began rephotographing still-life photographs of flowers and other funerary ornaments, which I'd been shooting for years at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, and incorporated all these images into my setup.

I was looking for a way to get my hand into the work, to make it more personal, more meaningful. Death is a key to this series. I lost many of the older people in my life last year—between the two of us, Cheyney and I lost three grandmothers—and I was feeling very sad. These women were our last link to the early 20th century. Calling my show at Miguel's "Nature Morte" and titling all the images after works by artists or writers who are buried at Père Lachaise—*Star on the Forehead*, for instance, was the name of a Raymond Roussel play—became a way of mourning.

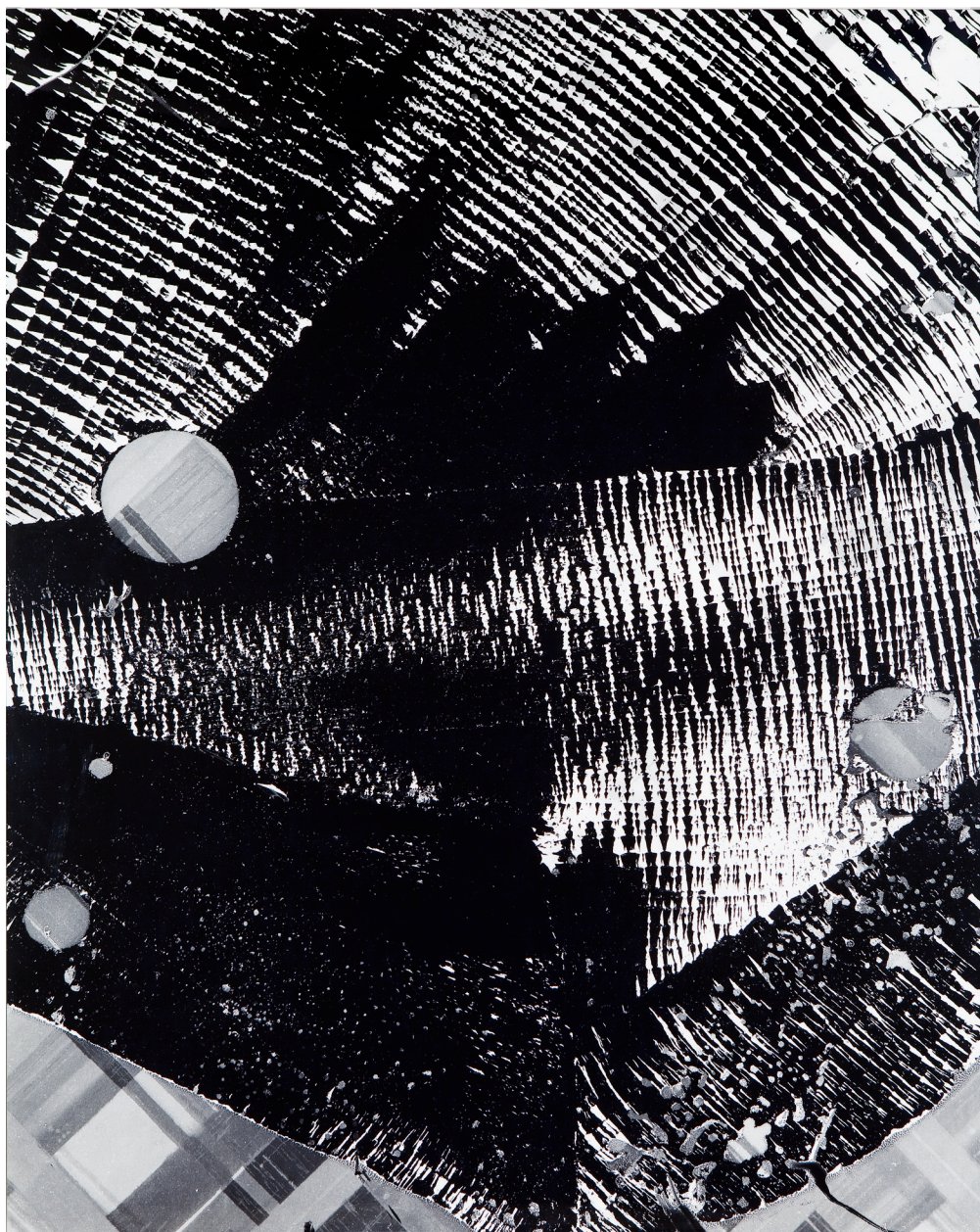
SS What will you show at the Hammer?

EQ There will be pieces from the "Nature Morte" series and others from a show called

"Highlands" that I did last November at Sutton Lane in Paris. "Highlands" included images of plaid that I made as a sort of homage to Alexander McQueen, the fashion designer who committed suicide last year.

SS Do you think of yourself as an intuitive artist?

EQ When I first became an artist I resisted intuition and poetry, perhaps because so many of my



teachers were skeptical postmodernists. But as time has passed, I've realized there is no way to eliminate subjectivity. Intuition and reason take turns. My process is open-ended—I make work first and edit it later—and my relationship to it changes all the time. I'd rather have my work accumulate references, even seemingly contradictory ones, than be about any kind of purity. ○

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.