

Windows and Screens

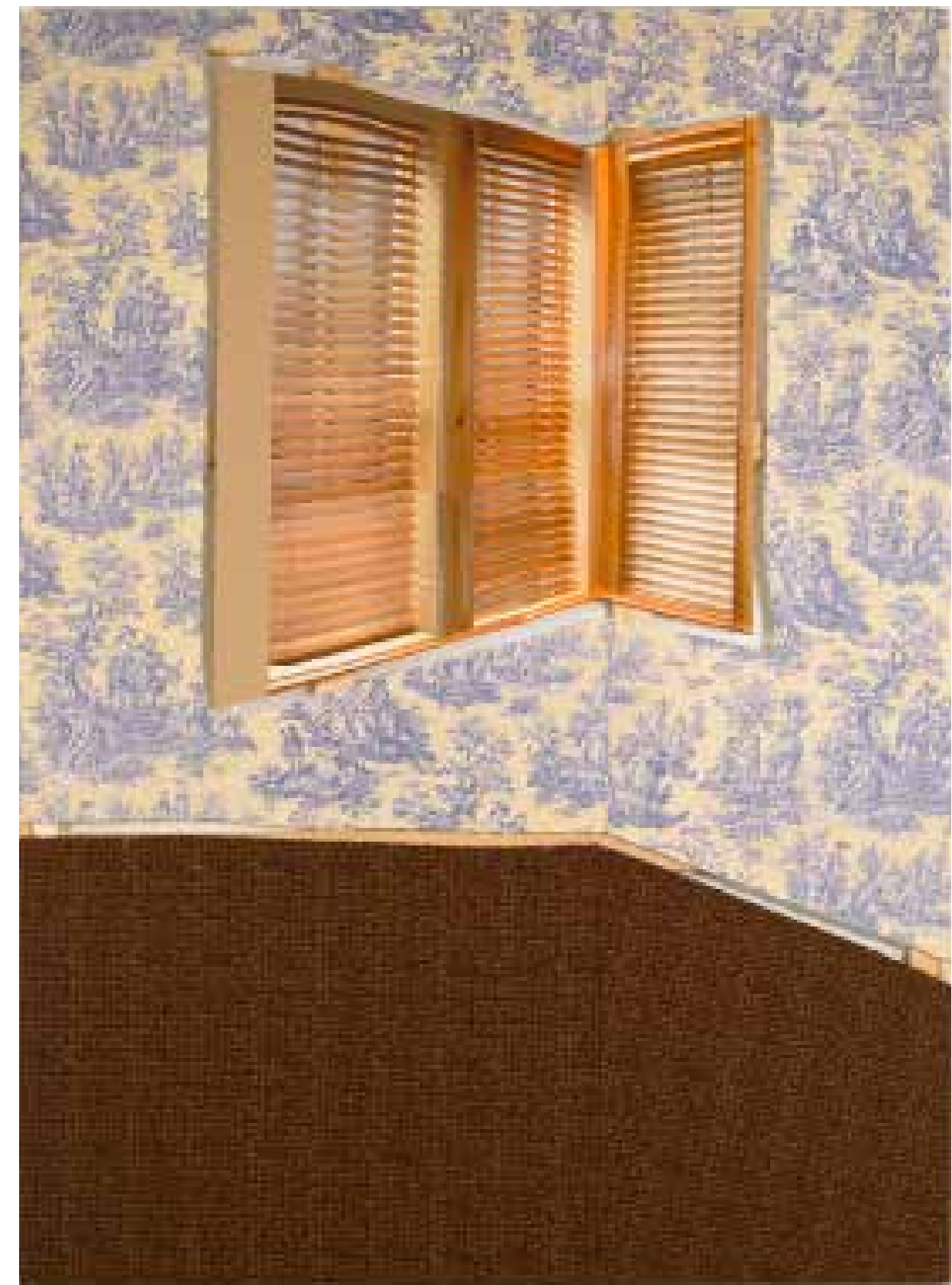


MEREDYTH SPARKS



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Industrial production, as Meredyth Sparks has noted, begins with the extraction of raw materials from their sources. These materials are then processed, fabricated into functional wares, packaged, marketed, and used until they become worn or outmoded. At that point, they may be discarded or reinserted into the production cycle as raw material.¹ The economies of industry and art have notoriously come in tandem since strategies of artmaking embraced manufactured objects as readymade materials in the early decades of the twentieth century. In Sparks's ongoing series of photographic collages entitled *Extraction*, she encroaches upon the arena of manufacture on a number of counts including her subjects, methods, and conceptual investments. Depicting ordinary household objects like radiators, windows, and screens, taken out of their functional context through the cutting and reconstitution of the pictorial field, these images are produced through techniques of digital photography and reproduction, making them not only *about* manufactured elements of the domestic realm, but *of* the very processes of capture, alteration, and distribution that define the industrial cycle.

And yet, Sparks's entire project is fundamentally marked by a labor-intensive, handmade quality. The most striking, if elusive, visual elements of the definitional canvases from this series are the hand-sewn gaps between areas of cutout image and decorative fabric through which bits of wall and stretcher bar become visible. Her method is photographic and immediate, and at the same time, belabored and crafted. This precipice between assumed operations is exactly where Sparks feels most comfortable. *Extraction* consistently teeters between positions of visual excitement and mundane repetition, or bland representation and illusory manipulation.

Since 2010, Sparks has been engaged in a strategic project of simplification and distillation. She came into her own as an artist around 2006 with a body of work pitting diverse characters from 1970s musical and radical culture, like David Bowie and the Baader-Meinhof activist Gudrun Ensslin, against icons of art history, like Suprematist Kazimir Malevich. In these works, Sparks applied shiny glitter, colorful swatches of vinyl, and reflective aluminum foil in the forms of modernist abstraction to appropriated photographs. The resulting compositions, which were often displayed in exhibitions that Sparks designed to emphasize the spatial and phenomenological aspects of bodily engagement, were bold and all encompassing. Sparks explains that at a certain point she began to think about removing some of the "noise" from her practice, which led to a process of reduction that eventually coalesced as the method she now calls "extraction." "The removed material... is conceived as cut from some (prior) whole that remains left behind. Extraction begins then by taking away from an image or object, while also in its very realization, intimating what remains."² While cutting had always been fundamental to her collage-based practice, the acts of separation and reconstitution were now essential. At the same time, Sparks's imagery

shifted from things known through celebrity and fandom to things known through familiarity and use.

As a sort of inverse to collage, extraction penetrates the pictorial surface of the digital images that Sparks features in her works, revealing the structure of the canvas and stretcher system while also suggesting an "underneath" or "behind" to the depicted forms. An instructive example, included in the Arts Club exhibition, is *Extraction (Garden Lattice/Wood Screen)*, 2012 (p. 9). As indicated by the title, this work combines a photograph of a wooden screen with an expanse of fabric whose trade name is "garden lattice." The photographic image has been scanned from a found source, manipulated via computer, and then printed on canvas. The depicted object, in this case a screen, is carefully cut away from the original context in which it was shown. Anomalies from the original photograph, like flash spots or reflections of light, are left in place. Sparks then stretches the printed canvas onto a rectangular frame and combines it with fabric cut in the shape of the missing room. She leaves a gap of a couple of inches between the canvas and fabric, exposing her neat stitches, along with the wall and stretcher bars and a play of actual light and shadow. In this particular work, a layer of fabric with an orange and burgundy *Chinoiserie* motif peeks out, hinting that some sort of boudoir exists behind the screen. The overall result is a pixilated reproduction of an over-stated object situated in a flattened yet intimate scene.

Garden Lattice/Wood Screen also plays upon codes of representation, combining a number of different systems that indicate material substance. The four-panel screen incorporates v-shaped inlays of dark wood that are filled in with horizontal strips of a grainy, paler wood. The screen sits upon a parquet floor with a pronounced pattern of concentric rectangles that competes with the screen for our attention. Using Photoshop, Sparks has extended the floor boards beyond the frame of the original picture in a process she considers a form of "painting," but which is actually printed from the digital file after she makes the changes on screen. The visual difference between the photographed and "painted" wood is a distinct dullness in the latter. Almost unnoticeable at first, these manipulated areas of color act at once as illusion and abstraction—realistic extensions of the room and flat geometric shapes. Furthermore, the pattern in the "garden lattice" fabric echoes the oilcloth that Picasso used in his iconic *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912 (Musée Picasso, Paris), a landmark collage that established tricks of the eye and semiotic puns as the material of art. As in the Picasso, Sparks's collage emphasizes the *trompe l'oeil* effect of the fabric's wooden lattice as it is paired with the many samples of "real" and "fake" wood in the screen and floor.

Similar combinations of garish kitsch and almost beauty appear in the related works *Extraction (Country Life Vintage/Window Shutters)*, 2011 (p. 3) and *Extraction (Palm Coast/Corner Window)*, 2011 (p. 7). Each of these compositions shows a corner window in a room with lovely, patterned walls and nubby, dark carpet. Repeating palm trees or pastoral scenes enhance the decorative character of Sparks's rooms, while the colors and textures of the floor fabrics are dated and coarse. The real pleasure of these two works, however, consists in Sparks's inventive selection and deployment of the window images. In

Palm Coast/Corner Window, Sparks has reproduced a basement window, presumably photographed at night since its pane is black. Insulating foam seeps out from the edges of the window frame, which is made of rough, unfinished wood. The palm tree “wall paper,” though flat against the canvas, is cut to shapes that indicate the corner of the room, which is further articulated by the foreshortening of the window frame. The retro-style room is at once decorated and under construction. We have the sense that we are sitting on the floor of our grandparents’ basement as it undergoes renovation. This subterranean point of view suggests behavior that is under the radar or outside the mainstream.

In *Country Life Vintage/Window Shutters*, the nostalgic aura continues. In this large-scale work, dated wooden shutters are left slightly open as if to show the sky. Sparks meticulously cut out the space between the slats, having added more areas of *trompe l’oeil* “painting” to the left edge and borders of the window casement. At first unnoticeable, these “painted” elements mimic the shape and hue of the revealed stretcher bars, drawing parallels between the object quality of Sparks’s works and the things they show. The conceptual act of changing the original to make it look like itself makes sense within the notion of “extraction,” where objects are removed from a context only in order to make that original situation more palpable or evident. Yet Sparks also relates the constructed quality of her work to a tradition in minimalist painting. There is an important spatial play established by the combination of wooden shutters and fabric that harkens back to the fundamentals of modernist flattening of the picture plane. The three-dimensional nature of the photographic image of the window conflicts with the two-dimensional infill of pattern in the pale blue toile, making it difficult to consistently read the space as either corner or wall. The oscillation between the flatness of the textile and the depth of the room destabilizes the scene and recalls the classic struggle to produce or subvert convincing space through painting.

The pictorial structure of these examples was established in an earlier series of “extractions” that showed a repeated image of a radiator with different combinations of striped or patterned fabric above and below. Sparks exhibited these in Berlin in 2011 under the title *Striped Bare*, making a punning reference to Marcel Duchamp, whose famed *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, or the *Large Glass*, 1915-23 (fig. 1, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia) is instructive in many ways. For the Berlin exhibition, Sparks explored the gendering of avant-garde practice through references to dada painter, poet, and provocateur, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, whose unruly behavior and outrageous sartorial flair positioned her as the counterpart to Duchamp’s reserve.³ In the *Large Glass*, Duchamp himself opposed masculinity and femininity through two pictorial fields that employ an idiosyncratic iconography of courtship. Above, there is the region of the bride who dangles her “wasp waist” and orgasmic “blossoming” above her admiring suitors, while below an elaborate “bachelor apparatus” or love machine converts ejaculatory fluid into gaseous “spangles.”⁴ Sparks’s bifurcated compositions similarly posit the radiator as a steam-generating contraption below a decorative, feminized sphere of patterned fabrics and thread. Her machine, however, seems particularly dormant as it repeats from image to image

without consequence or change. The radiator, a motif that Sparks continues to explore in current works (p. 16), represents a sort of domestic modernism. It is at once familiar and out-moded, common to many homes while seeming like a relic from another time. In a similar vein, Sparks employs the current technology of digital photography for images that echo the past.

Sparks also complicates and distorts the conception of transparency as it stands in Duchamp’s picture. Throughout *Extraction*, glass becomes opaque and dysfunctional as in the darkened pane of *Palm Coast/Corner Window*. Real transparency arises not through the materiality of glass, but instead in the areas of absence and gap where Sparks has left a space between the textiles. This inversion of transparency and opacity takes a dramatic turn in Sparks’s most recent “wrap-around” screens of lattice and wood (cover image and p. 5). Beautifully crafted and exactly cut out, these screens do not block our view of the other side, but rather intensify the delight of visual penetration through layered networks and gridded openings that are again printed on canvas, meticulously removed from any recognizable setting through cutting, and sewn to the stretcher frame.

The labor-intensive nature of Sparks’s cutting and sewing iterates the supposedly feminine character of domestic work as a retort to the undisciplined spew of masculinized paint that has characterized so much of modernism. The un-stretched screen and lattice-patterned fabric that hang loosely in The Arts Club

Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-1923. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 2
Meredyth Sparks, *Extraction (Bedroom)*, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

installation (p. 10 and back cover) slacken the modernist grid into a drooping form, once again playing upon traditional gender distinctions between hard and soft. An interest in so-called “feminine” work has been ongoing for Sparks, who in earlier projects focused on the industrialization of women’s labor in sweat shops like the Triangle Waist Company or on the skills of pattern makers. Her reclamation of such methods of production follows 1970s feminist critiques of the art world, but here is mixed with the banality of domesticity through the dated and pixilated photographs of furniture or architectural details.

The newest group of “extractions” has taken a slightly different turn. Rather than combining fabrics to create transparency and to defamiliarize space, Sparks has produced a number of smaller, black-and-white images that are composed of single photographs printed on canvas and stretched to a square-format frame. In this group, the contexts of the rooms are foregrounded, rather than removed, while individual objects recede in scale and attention. Now, without the juxtaposition of different materials, Sparks continues to make revelations about surface and depth through the placement and framing of the scenes. In some instances, cutouts follow the depictive information in the photographs. In a home office scene, for example, literal strips have been cut away between the slats of the vertical blinds (p. 19). The “inside” or “behind” of the picture plane is subtly referenced in a work like *Extraction (Doorway)*, 2013 (p. 21), which shows a set of double doors off a room or hallway with flowered wallpaper and extensive wood trim. In this work, Sparks has merely slit the canvas where one of the doors has been left ajar, a cut that is almost invisible but which nonetheless invites the possibility of moving behind the plane of the picture. In another example (p. 17),

a backlit window is completely removed, leaving visible a wide excerpt of stretcher bar that misaligns with the scene in both scale and directionality.

Other canvases in this grouping remain uncut, but continue to interrogate the possibilities of depth and penetration. In *Extraction (Bedroom)*, 2013 (p. 20), for example, the architecture of the room iterates the framing device of the canvas. Nestled into the pictorial space are the planes of two walls and ceiling, which each articulate a surface of the bed itself. Though there is no visible window, we see a bright luminosity on the back wall above the bed. A small sliver of the window, however, is strategically tucked around the edge of the stretcher bar, showing that the room is once again at basement level (fig. 2). Sparks thus plays the three-dimensional qualities of the physical art object against the depicted dimensions of the room as she carefully plots the wrapping of the picture around the frame.

In most of these pictures, Sparks has found possibilities for self-framing. That is, she has isolated elements within the scene that articulate an edge of or an avenue through the picture. Radiator covers square the scene, but also offer vents where the heat will escape into the room; moldings create thresholds between kitchen and family room (p. 18), but also mimic the limitations of the frame. The question remains, however, whether Sparks is proposing that something meaningful exists in or behind each scene. Does she intend for viewers to come to know something meaningful by following these structural clues?

A classic opposition between artworks that operate as “mirrors” and those that simulate “windows” was articulated by John Szarkowski in his 1978 Museum of Modern Art exhibition about recent American photography.⁵ For him, the essence of this dichotomy lay in the opposition between autobiographical and documentary impulses. The notion that a picture is *either* a renaissance view into a three-dimensional world *or* a modernist surface that throws us back onto ourselves underscored that binary formulation. For Sparks, however, windows and screens are no longer opposed. Both mediate our vision, suggesting that another layer may exist beneath the surface. Sparks contends that revelations occur not by getting through to something hidden, but in the constant shift between illusion and abstraction, or reproduction and invention.

Janine Mileaf
Chicago, 2013

NOTES

1. See flow chart reproduced in Meredyth Sparks, *Striped Bare* (Berlin: VeneKlasen/Werner, 2011), p. 6 [page numbers not sequential].
2. “Extraction: An Apology for Cutting,” in *Ibid*, p. 22.
3. For more on the life and work of the Baroness, see Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002).
4. This description is necessarily abbreviated; for a more in-depth introduction, see Richard Hamilton, “The Large Glass,” in Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York and Philadelphia: Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 57-67.
5. John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978).







EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

- Extraction (Country Life Vintage/ Window Shutters)*, 2011
(Altered) Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread
95 x 70 in. [Page 3]
Collection of Cathy and Jonathan Miller
- Extraction (Palm Coast/ Corner Window)*, 2011
Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread
90 x 65 in. [Page 7]
- Extraction (Garden Lattice/ Wood Screen)*, 2012
(Altered) Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread
75 x 53 in. [Page 9]
- Extraction (Bedroom)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Figure 2 and Page 20]
- Extraction (Bedroom)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Page 17]
- Extraction (Doorway)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Page 21]
- Extraction (Hunting Dogs/ Wood Screen)*, 2012
(Altered) Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread
89 x 63 inches [Not reproduced in catalog]
- Extraction (Living Room)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Not reproduced in catalog]
- Untitled (Loose Screen)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas, thread
Approximately 72 x 28 in. [Back Cover]
- Extraction (Office)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Page 19]
- Extraction (Pink Lattice Garden/ Corner Window)*, 2013
(Altered) Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread with fabric and dowel
Dimensions variable [Visible on Page 10]
- Extraction (Radiator)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Page 16]
- Extraction (Radiator)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Visible on Page 12]
- Extraction (Radiator)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Not reproduced in catalog]
- Extraction (Two Rooms)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas
22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. [Page 18]
- Extraction (Wrap-around Lattice Screen)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas, thread
59 x 70 inches [Page 5]
- Extraction (Wrap-around Wooden Screen)*, 2013
Digital print on canvas, thread
85 x 64 in. [Front Cover, detail on flaps]

MEREDYTH SPARKS

Born 1972, Panama City, FL
Lives and works in New York, NY

EDUCATION

- 2003 MFA, Hunter College, New York
1994 BFA, The University of TN, Knoxville

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Windows and Screens*, The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago
Accordion, Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris
2012 *So I will let it alone and talk about the house.*, Locust Projects, Miami
2011 *Striped Bare, Even and Again*, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York
Striped Bare, VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin
2010 *Extraction*, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York
2009 *Everything we have loved is lost.*, Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris
Gudrun Constructed, Projects in Art and Theory, Cologne
There's One In Every Crowd, Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels
2008 *We were strangers for too long.*, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York
2006 *We're treating each other just like strangers.*, Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Decade: Contemporary Collecting 2002-2012*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
Es gibt... Reflexionen aus einem beschädigten Leben?, curated by Christian Malycha, b-05, Montabaur
Out of Focus: Photography, Saatchi Gallery, London
2011 *Slap*, Maison des Arts, Grand Quevilly
Germany is Your America, Co-Curated by Michael Bracewell, Broadway 1602, New York
2010 *CAPC, ou la vie saisie par l'art*, Bordeaux CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art, Bordeaux
I am a cliché, curated by Emma Lavigne, Les Recontres d'Arles Photographie, Arles
Mixtapes: popular music in contemporary art, The Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College, Cork
The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl, curated by Trevor Schoonmaker, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2011); Miami Art Museum, Miami (2012); Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (2012)
2009 *Sound of Music*, Turner Contemporary Project Space, Kent
Sur Le Dandysme Aujourd'hui: Del maniqui en el escaparate a la estrella mediática/ From Shop Window Mannequin to Media Star, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela
White Noise, James Cohen Gallery, New York
2008 *Amy Granat, Nate Hylden and Meredith Sparks*, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
In Repose, The Debra and Dennis Scholl Collection, curated by Lori Mertes, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia
Recent Acquisitions, Gifts and Works from Various Exhibitions 1985-2008, curated by Bob Nickas, White Columns, New York
Sound of Music II, Frac Nord-Pas de Calais, Tri Postal, Lille
2007 Elizabeth Dee Gallery, with Richard Aldrich, New York
Just Kick It Till It Breaks, curated by Debra Singer and Matthew Lyons, The Kitchen, New York
2nd Moscow Biennale, invited by Nicolas Bourriaud, Moscow
2006 *Music is a Better Noise*, curated by Bob Nickas, PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City
Thank You For the Music (London Beat), curated by Johannes Fricke-Waldthausen, Sprüth Magers Lee, London
2003 *It wasn't midnight. It wasn't snowing.* Hunter College Times Square Gallery, New York
1999 *Summer Show*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
1998 *Bowie*, Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, New York

This publication marks *Windows and Screens: Meredyth Sparks*, the artist's first solo exhibition in Chicago. Sparks (b. 1972) is best known for layering materials like glitter, vinyl, and aluminum foil over images drawn from pop culture and the historical avant-garde. At The Arts Club, she has brought together new and defining works from her ongoing series of photo-based collages entitled *Extraction*, after a method of reduction that she has been devising since 2010. These works combine vintage textiles with digitally reproduced, found photographs of mundane objects like window frames and lattice screens. Seen here for the first time are a group of black-and-white, small-format canvases that elide the juxtaposition of fabrics and instead reframe interior scenes through cutouts and framing alone.

This exhibition could not have taken place without the active collaboration of Meredyth Sparks. We wish to extend our gratitude to her, as well as to Cathy and Jonathan Miller for lending to the exhibition. Elizabeth Dee was instrumental in the early phases of planning. The staff of The Arts Club of Chicago, as always, deserves thanks for its dedication and careful oversight of the project, especially Allie Foradas, Natalie VanOverbeke, and Ned Whalley. We are delighted to be able to present installation views of the exhibition along with images of individual works in this document, which was designed by Joseph Logan in collaboration with Sparks.

Janine Mileaf
Director
The Arts Club of Chicago

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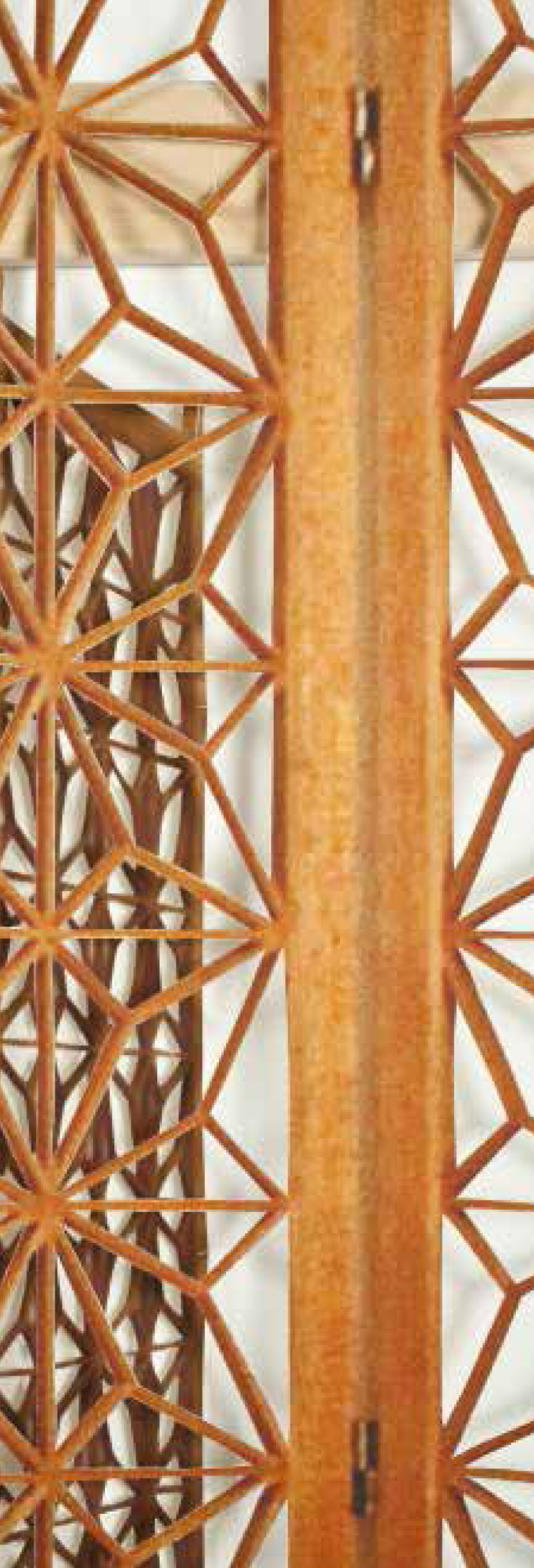
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