

Rose DeSiano Holds a Mirror Up to Nature

A deceptively thoughtful sculpture series engages with Randalls and Wards Islands' erased and less visible histories.



Louis Bury October 21, 2017



Installation view of Rose DeSiano's "Island of Empirical Data and Other Fabrications" (all photos by Toby Tenenbaum)

Randalls Island and Wards Island occupy a liminal position in New York City's geography. Nestled in the armpit between Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens, the formerly separate, but now conjoined islands are probably best known as the landmass over which the Triborough Bridge passes. The islands' location, low population (1,600), and ample acreage (520) have made them into a local recreational hub, complete with a golf center, tennis center, horseback riding academy, picnic areas, track and field stadium, and more athletic fields than any other New York City park. But their spaciousness means they have also been repositories for those elements of

civilization deemed unwanted, including, at present, two psychiatric hospitals, a wastewater treatment plant, and several homeless shelters.

For the Randalls Island Park Alliance's and Bronx Museum of the Arts' annual FLOW exhibition, Rose DeSiano has installed a thoughtful sculpture series, *Island of Empirical Data and Other Fabrications*, that engages with Randalls and Wards Islands' erased and obscured histories. Situated at two separate footbridge landings, the installation consists of several approximately 8' x 3' mirrors, arranged upright in rows on the grass. Most mirrors are partially covered with photographic images — animals, flowers, ferry boats, colonial British soldiers, Native Americans, buildings and construction sites — that allude to the islands' histories. In many cases, those images, affixed to the mirrors with adhesive tape, extend across multiple mirror panels in the manner of a diptych or triptych.



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The sculptures' conceit and materials are straightforward but their visual effects are complex and surprising. From a distance, the rows of mirrors create the illusion that DeSiano cut out pieces of nearby earth and sky and re-glued them, a touch off, to the landscape. Up close, the superimposition of historical images onto the mirrors — grimy and streaked from being outdoors — allows the past and the present to visually co-exist. DeSiano adds to the sense of estrangement by distorting the scale and perspective of the historical images. The sculptures hold a mirror up to

nature — and culture — in a quite literal sense but the works embrace their own artifice rather than striving for straight mimesis.

Given the nod to “empirical data” in the title, as well as the esoteric history depicted in the sculpture’s photographs, a directory or index of the images’ provenance would have been helpful to orient viewers. But the title, which seems to promise solid facts, then undercuts that promise by calling such supposed sureties “fabrications,” is another of DeSiano’s aesthetic feints. *Island’s* function is optic rather than informational. Standing at the islands’ pedestrian thresholds, the installation exists so that visitors can see themselves seeing it. In so doing, it encourages them to reflect for a moment on a corner of the city that continues to be easy to look past.



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[Island of Empirical Data and Other Fabrications](#) continues on Randalls Island and Wards Island through November 2017