EILEEN QUINLAN
Campoli Presti, London

Whether you call it “new photography,” “new formation,” or, as Aaron Schuman wrote for frieze 170, constructed photography, Eileen Quinlan is exemplary. It’s not that new anymore. Alongside Anri Sala and Josephine Pryde, with whom she exhibited in MoMA New Photography 2013, as well as Walid Raad and Mariana Robinson, Quinlan problematises the idea — ubiquitously expressed in the curatorial treatises of John Szarkowski — that photography is after all a window onto the world of a “mind” that reflects a portrait of the individual who made it. Often, this work elaborates in sheer surface, marvels at abstraction, obsesses at materialising the photograph as object. Everything that swallows in the digitally extended depth of field favoured by artists such as Gregory Crewdson is glibly, gaudily pushed to the surface.

Quinlan’s exhibition at Campoli Presti, titled After Hours, playfully pursued the artist’s ongoing attempt to reveal what the photograph is in material terms, while achieving a certain dimensional confusion of external views and abstractions. Concurrently, at its Paris outpost, the gallery exhibited Quinlan’s Double Chance (2013) — a grid of 12 corned works of scumbled amber-coloured paste comprising two sets of six of the same image, interspersed. Twisted Mitsuko (2008–15) was this work’s equivalent in London show: 12 hastily lit, contrast black and white photographs of scrumpied mylar, displayed in the same way. Twist Mitsuko, Quinlan’s date span begins two years before next earliest work on display here, indicating that this perhaps spans the production of each set of six images and their later combination for After Hours. As such, it furthered Quinlan’s claim for the exhibition as a “field” in which to re-read and revisit pieces made over the past decade. A negotiation of linear relations, this reading frames the work as a complex interplay of motivating forces, a configuration of possible events.

Unlike Beatty’s cavernous photographs, Quinlan’s images, taken on large-format camera and Polaroid, depict an external world constructed entirely in the studio. Their measured abstraction rarely goes far enough to lose the grip of established games such as the nude, landscape, portrait, or still life. Yet, they do push at the edges of these genres. For example, the black and white dipthograph Coming of Winter (2016) stages a series of vertiginous topological collapses — of inside/ outside and scale. Dazzling abstract taints are frequently close-up of compacted ice stalactites that become, with perceptual readjustment, vast polar wastes.

In Good Enough (2015), a dipthograph of nudes distorted by vapour, water and glass — the material effects of decomposition are more intriguing than the fragmented body parts. Surface disruption — white dust flecks or great brushstrokes of leached light — index Quinlan’s darkness intensifies with the developing film. If, in our habitual viewing of photographs, we suppose the iconoclastic of what the photo is in material terms, in order to see what it is “of,” Quinlan’s facility, from laboratory to white cube, darkness into light, is a kind of liberation of material surface. The work flickers between depth and surface, subject and object.

Recalling an earlier work of Quinlan’s — Red Goya (2007) — Stand-in for Red Goya (2018) comprises two, white-framed mirrors reproduced at the same scale and dimension. Seen at an oblique angle, these hold the south-facing wall of grey colour, casting into tallines from other perspectives: they reflected the viewer amid a field of Quinlan’s works. Beyond this wall, in a separate space, was Twisted Mitsuko and, at a right angle to it, hanging on the eulalia grey wall, Fred Sensor (2015). Ironically, this dishel’s restless black ground, delf by noisy shocks of white light, made using a broken flatbed scanner, is just as affecting if not more so, a mirror than Stand-in for Red Goya, allowing for more discreet, less obviously narcissistic glances. Although there was minimal, total difference between the cornelious imaged black ground and the grey wall on which they hung, accentuating the border formed by brilliant white frames — their surface effects couldn’t be more different. The gaze finds no traction in Fred Sensor’s diagnostically hermetic image. Reflecting it in its glassy surface: me, Twisted Mitsuko, the gallery windows and, through them, trains, the city — too much world.

JONATHAN P. WATTS