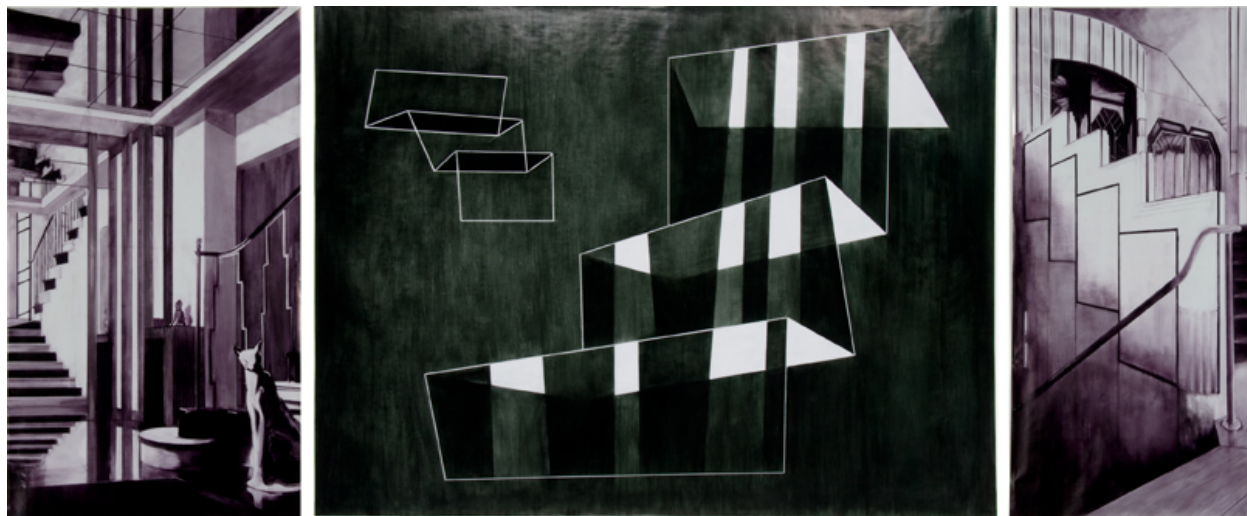


## *Rebecca Chamberlain: Instructions for Use*

By Alexander Nagel



1. Imagine the world of architecture and design that is called Art Deco or Moderne as a world of metal, mirror, and crystal: organic Gothic growth frozen in a cryosphere of infinite repetitions. Read Robert Smithson on it if you need help seeing it that way.
2. Remember that the spaces you are seeing in Rebecca Chamberlain's work are not simply architecture that has once been photographed but spaces that were designed from the first as pictures, stages where life is to be performed, under perfect lighting conditions. If you need a hand getting from the not very inspiring present to the gleaming past, listen to the Magnetic Fields song *Busby Berkeley Dreams*, hitting repeat as often as necessary. Witness those whirling stages, minus the song, minus the people.
3. Whether or not this finally returns you to Rebecca Chamberlain's work, think about déjà vu, and the strange sense it gives not just that you are inhabiting your own memory, but that you might actually be walking momentarily into a fragment from someone else's—a memory they did not get to have, or are no longer alive to have. A good figure for that is the episode Rabelais recounts of Pantagruel's crew sailing northern waters and (over)hearing the mêlée of yells and shouts and clanging of the previous winter's battle, held frozen in the winter air but now, with the onset of Spring, thawing once again into audibility.
4. Remember that though we are most often the ones to move from place to place, sometimes places move around, especially when it comes to art or things verging on art. Imagine moving into a room and filling it with an ancestor's furniture, or think of a Spanish Romanesque apse transported to a museum in Boston, or a tent pitched in different places with its carpets (Suetonius says Julius Caesar actually had stone pavements moved about with him on his campaigns so that the ceremony of majesty accompanied him). Think of what happens when you watch a film. Try looking at old paintings and sculptures not just as art objects but as vehicles by which places go on trips.
5. Read the passage in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* where he points out that the miniature is the very type of the work of art. Consider that the artwork is not only usually smaller than what it represents but reduced in other ways as well—from three dimensions to two, from many materials to one, etc., condensing the real and so in some ways like it but in other ways not like it.
6. Consider Rebecca Chamberlain's work as a gallery of reductions. Remember that black and white photos were once a condition of the medium; people in the 30s did not see them as black and white, just as photos. Contrast that with a painting (a painting just this side of drawing) made out of one colorful color, as if to insist on things in a state of transfer. Consider that the photos themselves were carefully framed from the start, but that they have now been further cropped. Even though you don't have the original photos for comparison ask whether this might make

the spaces more or less accessible. Look for the aspects of the architecture that remain spatial through the transfer and those that flatten out.

7. Notice that these images are on a thin, almost transparent support, more solid than tracing paper but not quite a canvas, not quite a panel. (It is vintage architectural tracing cloth from the early part of the twentieth century. A finite quantity of rolls remains.) Observe the distribution into diptychs, triptychs, and double-sided screens, and check whether your feet feel lighter on the ground. Think about how these folding, turning frameworks suggest a series of relays rather than any claim about thisness or thereness or here-and-nowness.
8. Consider a Lalique crystal vase, its formal patterns a distant memory of organic forms, anticipating and also surviving the flowers that might occasionally fill it, and compare it to Rebecca Chamberlain's version, cropped and flattened but not merely an image—part mirage and part object. Go somewhat carefully through your reasons for wanting to have one or the other, thinking in particular about the different ways in which you would not use them.

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