

Christine Sciulli And Her Monumental Installation At Smack Mellon

By *December Projects* - Jan 31, 2016

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ROIL, Christine Sciulli. Photo: Etienne Frossard

[Smack Mellon](#), situated in Dumbo, Brooklyn, is one of those rare gems that never disappoints. The exterior of the gallery is so tame, you wouldn't expect this wild raw space within. Prepared for a new, exciting discovery, I walked in and up the cold concrete steps. The gallery was silent and dark. I was greeted by this cave of majesty and stood in awe of the monumental, all-encompassing cloud-like form floating before me. The installation poured into every nook, cave and passage of the vast exhibition hall.

Entrancing projected circles of white light danced in a frenzy on the fabric masses, echoing the roiling steam that once powered the surrounding factories. What does one do here? The urge to walk through it and take a closer look was overwhelming. This colossal site-specific structure *ROIL* produced by artist Christine Sciulli, creates a totally immersive experience and reflects on the function of the building as a boiler house. Talking to Sciulli only heightened my excitement for this body of work and reminds us how art is vital for the human character.

Art Report: It's really interesting how you're very site-specific in what you do. What is it about the space or the past that made you want to retrace the history?

Christine Sciulli: In my site-specific work I'm always looking for a given. I think that's why I enjoy it. It's like "here's a problem" instead of "here's a white box—what are you going to do in it?" The spaces themselves always suggest something to me and this piece actually fits really well because I've been working on rhythms and circles, expanding and contracting in space. Often there are times people have asked, "Is that smoke?" or walk into the gallery and wave their arms. I've also had people walk out because they felt they were going to fall over and hit the ground. The magic thing was that Smack Mellon came to me and asked me to submit a proposal. I walked in and I was completely amazed by the scale—it was so unexpected. So from there I learned about the history of the building and the coal dropping down and churning energy. It seemed like this body of work had finally found a real home.

AR: The space is vast, the ceilings high. It must have been a challenging installation to realize.

CS: It was about engaging this piece with the space. I knew I wanted to go really high but I was terrified. I came here completely afraid of heights, knees weak, heart pounding...[Deputy Director] Suzanne Kim is all about realizing vision and helped hang the structure and then the fabric. The next morning I walked in and for some reason I was totally cured—I went up! I had nested in the space and felt comfortable. I had built this web of strings and fabric so I felt that there was this lower level there to catch me. It broke it down for me. I realized it's so much easier to live life without being afraid of anything. Then your head can be really clear, and you just do what you need to do.

AR: The sheer width of the piece and the projection of circles onto the fabric makes it feel like it's alive—there's this energy. How did you come to create these circles?

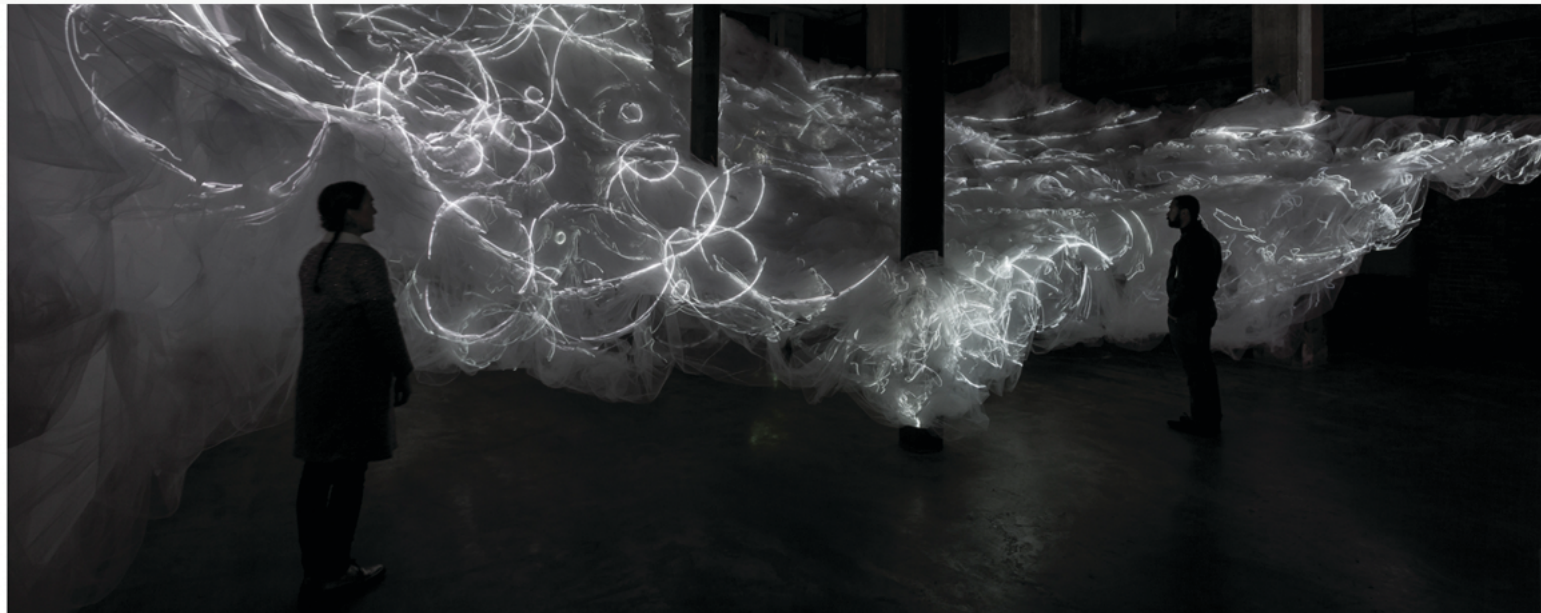
CS: They're circles projected in a space. I had working videos in here during installation so I kind of had an idea of what was going to happen, but it wasn't until the fabric was installed that I could really work with the video. There was a push and pull aspect. I have to start with the space to have the inspiration to know where to go, playing the video to start with was important. You can't hang the fabric without seeing the projection. I didn't want it to be repetitive so each projector has its own video and then the videos are synced.

AR: You studied architectural engineering—I can see that in your body of work. What was it that swayed you from the architectural engineer route to become an artist?

CS: (laughs) It was a practical degree—I changed all my classes. When I told my parents, they said, "You can come home and do that!" Then I got a scholarship. I was always doing black and white photography and in architectural engineering there's something called 'illumination engineering,' so at least I could work with light and come to understand it. At one point it just became the challenge of doing it and doing it well. When I graduated and came to New York, I worked with an amazing lighting company. I was part of the Art Students League and always had a dark room. I went to Hunter College for my MFA. I did everything on my own terms.

AR: There's this duality between the lack of light and then the light you've created.

CS: It's really old school, it might as well be a flashlight. Back to the engineering question, it's quite simple it's just math and the mapping of circles as they're caught in space. In a way, when you describe it just in words to somebody, it's really dry, but during the opening people would walk up to it and work it out and see the tulle and projectors. I like the duality that it presents.



ROIL, Christine Sciulli. Photo: Etienne Frossard

AR: *You have a very distinct style, where do you go from here?*

CS: I worked with lines for a while so maybe another shape, but I do imagine doing a public art piece before I put this body of art to rest. Trying to do something that's not so ephemeral and maybe a painted white mesh. I think what I really enjoy about it is being so free and liberated—I do it all myself. I think it would be really interesting for me to do a public art challenge where I'd have to "pre-think," design it and somebody would build it. That's something I haven't concurred yet. I haven't figured out how to make it something that can be sustainable. Working outside is interesting, you can take advantage of the scale.

AR: *Talking about outside projects, you're doing the Wadden Tide in Denmark this September. What do you have in mind for that?*

CS: At [Wadden Tide](#) I'm inhabiting a World War II bunker. Hitler built this Atlantic Wall all the way from Norway down to the coast of France. The bunkers are like a tourist attraction. The one that I'm looking at is a searchlight bunker (very apt). There's this giant searchlight so I'm planning to metaphorically shatter it and break it into small LED marine buoys that are lit up and scattered. I'll then fill the bunker with sand and dune grass so that people walk on top of it, instead of inside it, occupying it in an alternative way. It makes a bit of a statement. This little place in Denmark just accepted 400 Syrian refugees so I feel, I want the piece to be in some way about tolerance and make it relevant. There's no electricity, so everything I do here has to be solar powered, which is a colossal challenge.

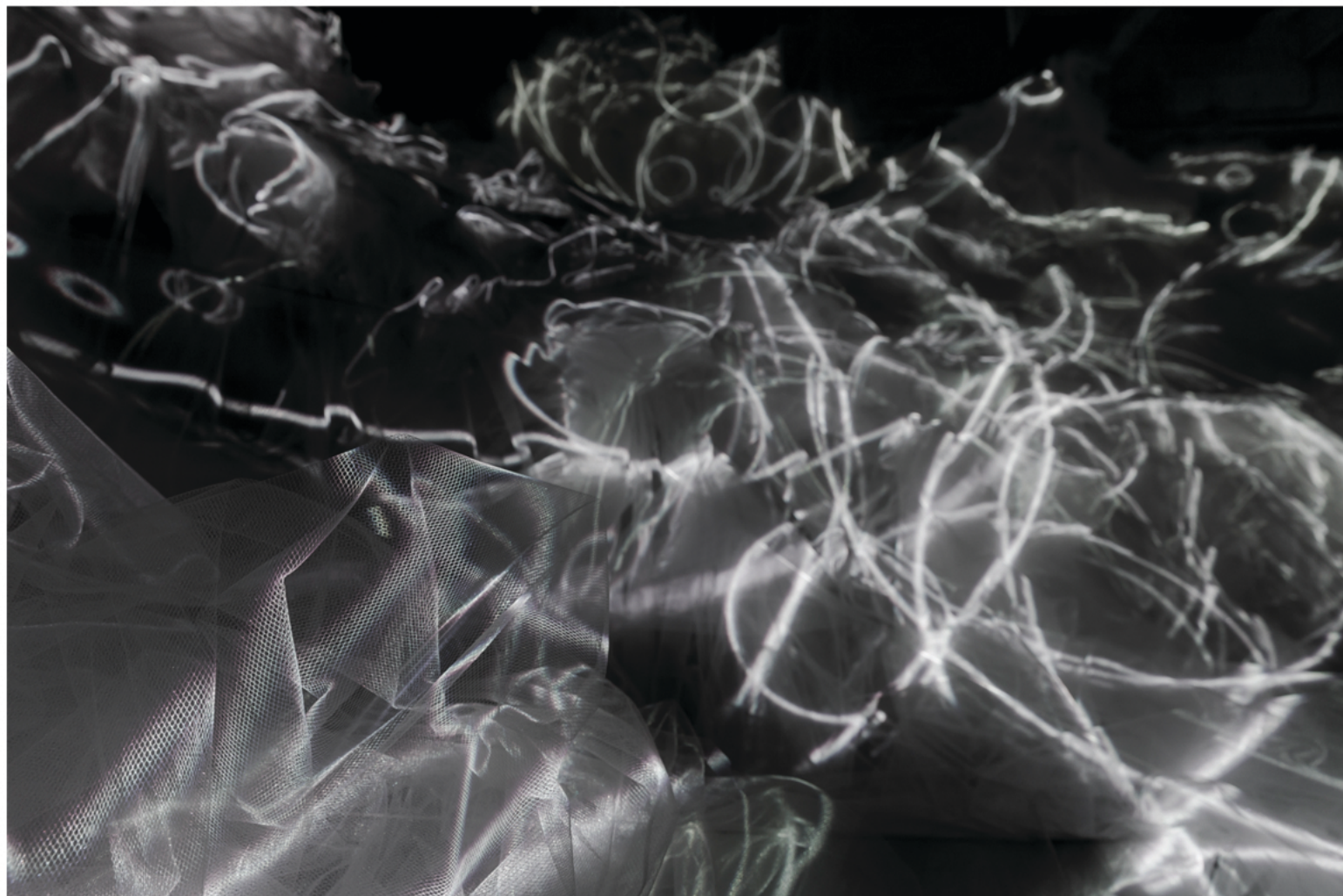
AR: *What do you feel is your role in society as an artist? Where do artists come in?*

CS: I think that's a really good question. One thing I've found, because I used to do more messaging types of work, once I started going into abstraction and these math-based projects, I realized what people really need is a way to go into their own headspace. Not so much escape but just to be engaged in their own headspace. With this body of work, I love to see people inhabit the different cabins. Maybe the artist triggers something in them, but it's important to me that people can come in and detach from whatever they've brought in with them.

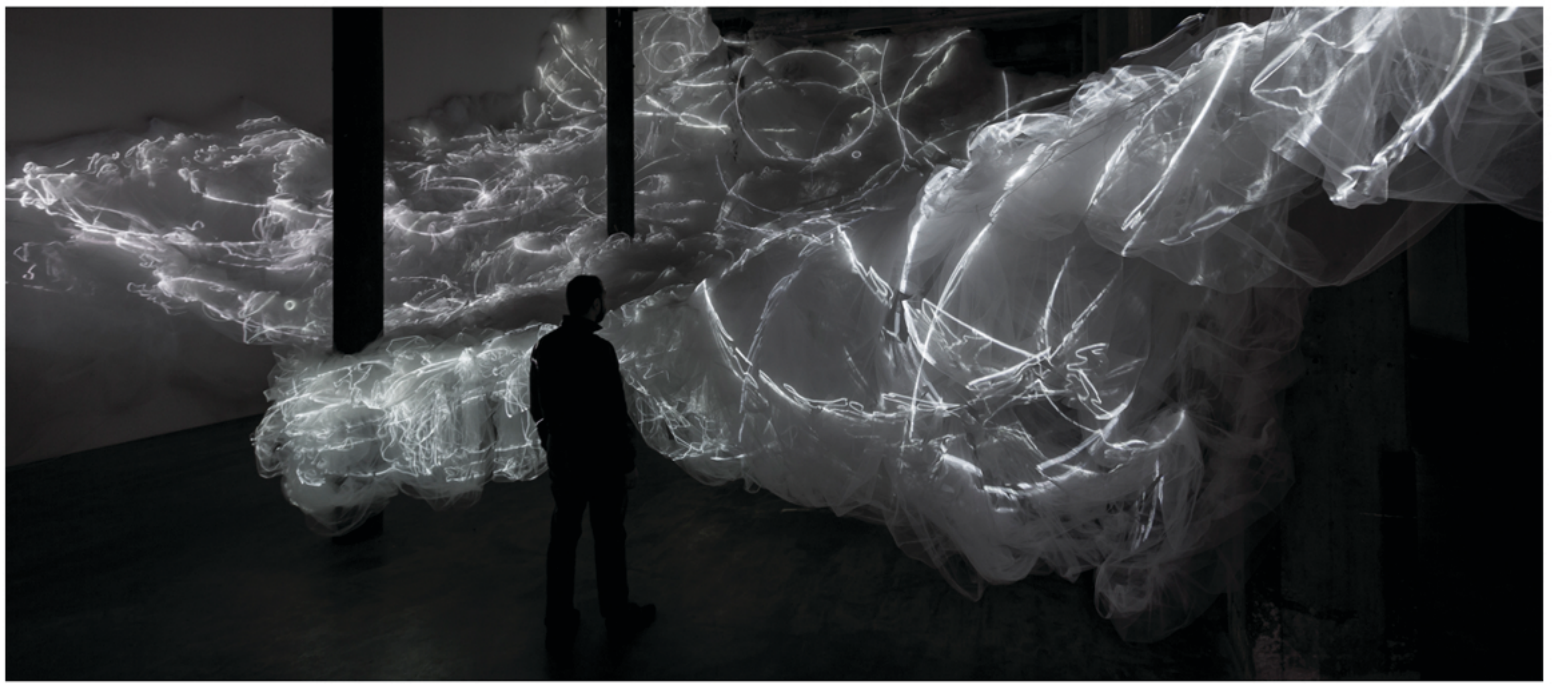
ROIL is currently on view at Smack Mellon through February 21, 2016.



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December Projects

Amy Purssey and Christina Lee founded December Projects after meeting in Basel, Switzerland, bonding over eerie likemindedness on art-dealing and star signs. Brain-mates in curation, the written word, and bleu steaks. Lovers of aesthetics and the strange and unusual.

