

## RECONFIGURATIONS: CREATIVE CONTINUITY

There is an adage that the beginnings of new work are always to be found in an artist's previous efforts. The artwriter Adrian Stokes (1902-72) underlined the intertwined psychological and material complexity of this seeming truism: "We have our ways and means of keeping things alive: we forget nothing; and the deeper sources of our feeling are tapped by our environment.... The external world is the instigator of memory: the external world reflects every facet of the past: it is the past rolled into the present."<sup>1</sup> Steinman's 'reconfigurations' - her strands, shards, and magnetic tapes - began as an attempt to purge her archive of documentation of her earlier work. This process took an unexpectedly positive turn. As she writes, "the 'Strands' series ... is the afterlife of the process of destroying pictures." The externalization and distortion of her past artistic production accidentally revealed a line running through her work, her employment at different times and in different contexts of photography, digital information stored on disks, and VHS tape. As Steinman specifies, she realized that "glass, light and the dimension of time have been recurring elements in my work since my earliest video and multimedia installations."

Steinman's work is anything but predictable, ranging as it does from politically charged installation work to neon text pieces to outdoor public art; the photographic series in this exhibition are surprising and nuanced but also work to extend the process of reconfiguration that she recently discovered. We can imagine that Steinman's first recognition of the significance

of the shredded, crushed, or tangled materials that she had sought to discard was an epiphany of continuity, of "the past ... rolled into the present." If this new work was partially foretold in a recognizable but nonetheless individual way, Steinman also unintentionally participates in one of the founding legends of artistic creativity, that one can capitalize on the fleeting strangeness of one's own production. A relevant example is Wassily Kandinsky's claim in "Reminiscences" (1913) that he saw the way into abstraction by misrecognizing as revolutionary one of his own paintings that he had casually placed sideways against a wall in his studio.

In their visual precision and lushness, the elements reconfigured in these photographs insist on the present moment of a viewer's contemplation. We have to be struck by the detail made visible, the marks of shredding, crushing, or tangling for example, and by the emerging richness of colour, tonality, and texture. In a renewed but also for Steinman a typical manner, the simplicity of what we see discloses nothing less than creativity in action, the mute but startling negotiation of inner and outer environments, of the personal and cultural past and present.

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<sup>1</sup>Adrian Stokes, *Inside Out: An Essay in the Psychology and Aesthetic Appeal of Space* (1947). In *England and its aesthetes: biography and taste / John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Adrian Stokes, essays ; commentary, David Carrier*. Amsterdam : G+B Arts International, 1997. 95.