

“Experimentation can provide a wealth of inspiration.”

Interview with Jennifer Mason

With “New Spaces”, New Zealand photo artist [Jennifer Mason](#) created a dazzling spatial installation which transformed the actual gallery space. Questioning with the viewers’ perception, her works are an optical play with space, spatiality and how we perceive it – the more so when the space in question is a gallery whose rooms we are used to discreet and “white-cubish”.



Being her first show at a public institution – at the [St Paul Street Gallery](#) in Auckland –, she took about five thousands images of the empty gallery space from many different angles – the space being very complex and difficult to grasp because of its odd shape. Then she spent a while playing with the images in Photoshop to look for new ways to experience the space, to make corrections or improve the gallery two dimensionally.

It resulted in seven images which were exhibited in the gallery itself as billboard sized PVC skins to cover entire walls or cover windows and take advantage of their light.

Jennifer Mason studied at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland, New Zealand, finishing in 2004, alongside with a Bachelor of Arts at the same time with a major in Art History and Women’s Studies. For the final year of her undergraduate degree in Fine Arts she spent some time at Stony Brook University, New York. After finishing her degree, she has been working as an artist based in Auckland. Even though she had a commercial photography business for about four years, it has always been her artistic work to have taken the majority of her time, luckily, as she says: „I think to some extent commercial photography can be bad for your art practice as you start to learn too many ‘rules’ as it closes your mind off from fresh ideas.“ Her works have been part of group shows at artist-run spaces as well as in had numerous solo shows in Auckland and Wellington at dealer galleries.

Email-ping ponging with deconarch.com, Jennifer Mason tells us how “New Spaces” came about, what inspirations keep her going and why she prefers to call herself an artist, not a photographer.

all photos (c) Jennifer Mason

- for a full presentation of “New Spaces” please check out

[deconarch's Virtual Exhibition!](#) -

INTERVIEW

The gallery project “New Spaces” is a multifaceted approach to deal with space and our perception of it. How did it come about?



For a period of time I was working with images I had taken of rooms in houses that had been removed from their original site and had been transferred to a lot ready to be re-sold to new owners. It was a great source as the rooms were empty, and it was relatively easy to gain access to them.

I would go in and just get as many photos as I could of different angles of rooms. Then I would head back to the studio and begin to sort through them and experiment with cutting, pasting and transforming. It was a lengthy process of trial and error to see what effects could arise from altering them. Patterns would form and I found I could use line, space and light to create illusions.

Then after a period of experimentation I became dissatisfied with the process and I began to think of what it would be like to make the images literal, if I could alter these spaces themselves instead of just the photos of them. With a limited budget I thought about re-exhibiting images of a space back into the space itself and if that could take me closer to what I wanted to see. In a way I wanted to suggest a better version of the space that existed and to see if I could turn it into reality. A desire to change things without the budget to make it reality.

“New Spaces” is a visual play with, a transformation of the actual gallery space of the St Paul Street Gallery in Auckland ...

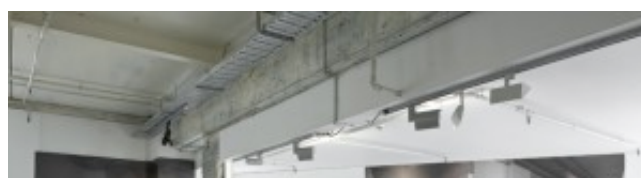


To some extent making art at home then placing it into a gallery is a very dislocating process. It's a dislocation that we always excuse so that we can imagine it moved again into our own homes. I wanted to engage with a space in the same way a builder would when they renovated your home. To look for possibilities to change the space around them.

However the ideas I had were not completely based in reality. I liked the way the lens on a camera would distort the room. How confusing perspective was and the way that light sculpts objects. I liked the idea that maybe if you looked hard enough a space might appear that wasn't really there, a hidden space that you could crawl into.

So I looked for a great space to play with. I discussed the idea with the director at St Paul Street Gallery in Auckland and the project went ahead. It's a very strange space. It wasn't a square which I had been used to dealing with and its ceilings, floors and walls weren't consistent either, so it was a difficult project to work on. I ended up taking about 5 thousand images from every angle I could conceive, including taking photos from a ladder and lying on the ground looking up.

I worked with these images for a long period trying to find new ways of presenting a strange space. The images themselves not only had to work as stand alone images but I also needed to think about how I could place them back into the space. The difficult part was that the space had many windows and not a lot of wall space. So that's when I thought about wrapping walls and windows, in a sort of cover up. I also wanted to play with the available light, to reflect it back onto itself.





It resulted in seven images which I exhibited back in the gallery itself. I used billboard sized PVC skins to cover entire walls or cover windows and take advantage of their light.

What are your interests in your work? Your photographic glance is not bound to architecture only.

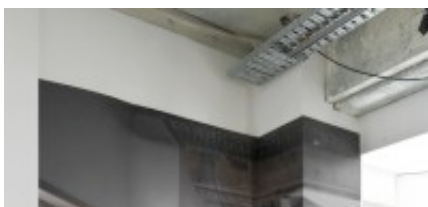
I guess overall I jump around a bit. But photography is usually at the core. Subject wise I have a broad range from political to formal visual concerns. The latter being my current interest. Last year I started researching modernism in art and became interested in the way it references its medium rather than trying to hide it.

And why, among others, the particular focus on architecture?

I like to work with architecture for two reasons.

The first would be its formal characteristics. A photo of a regular room as four walls, a floor and a ceiling. There is loads you can do with that in photoshop. I wanted to work with straight lines and rooms have loads of those. They also have consistent colour and the way the light hits the walls and floor etc give it sculptural qualities. Essentially it's a cube and in terms of thinking geometrically it's spot on.

The other motivation arose from what's going on in my life personally. I recently purchased my own first home. Up to this point I had only been renting. Once you own your own place you can't help but start thinking about renovations. I wanted to add an extra room in the house but didn't want to extend the outside of it. So thinking about how we could squeeze an extra room in internally got me thinking about structure and if its possible to find a space where one doesn't exist. If you could create new space from just looking hard enough. I ended out expanding into our attic space which encouraged me to continue on this idea. Maybe I could create new spaces in existing spaces by using photoshop.



Where do you find your motives, your inspirations?

I spend loads of time at the computer just playing around with visual content, more than seeking out inspiration.



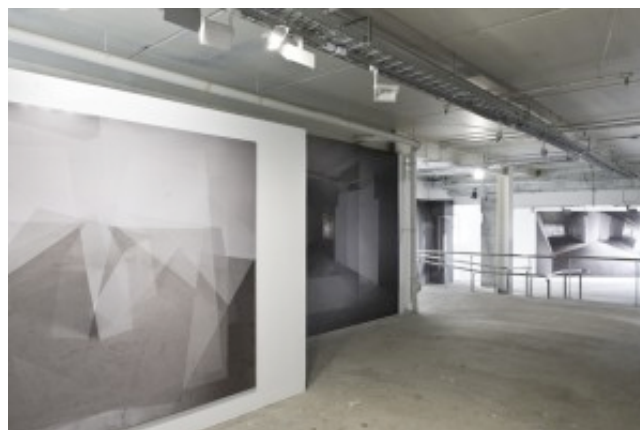
Experimentation can provide a wealth of inspiration. However I am universally interested in visual culture, films, television, magazines, books. I also find creative thinking such as that in philosophy can equally be inspiring to break out of old ways of looking at things.

You prefer to call yourself an artist, not a photographer – so let's combine both facets and say your approach is that of a "photo artist"?

It's a terrible thing to say but I really only began using photography as I wasn't enjoying painting as much as I should. I found it too slow and got frustrated that my drawing skills didn't come easy. I use photography as I find it quick to get the image I want then I can experiment more easily in photoshop. It's all for convenience, I suppose. I'm not a big photography fan, I couldn't list camera specifications or get excited about using large format film cameras. I prefer to refer to myself as an artist as opposed to a photographer.

How is your working process?

The working process is so important for me. If it's not enjoyable and stimulating you aren't going to keep it up. I guess that's what put an end to my painting aspirations all those years ago. I'm also a pretty sloppy person. I most enjoy the experimental stage of a project, shooting is a chore and putting the final touches on is also. But when you initially get the images back to the computer and bring them up and start cutting them up it's great. When I find something new or put something together that makes sense visually it's exciting. I work quickly at this stage and hours can go by without me noticing the time passing. Shutting out the external world and really getting into the images is very stimulating. I work in the attic I created which has no windows and I usually like all the lights off. It's at this time I get into the formal structure of the transformations.



Are there role models, influences, inspirations, ... which inspire your work?

I was always fascinated by people that get influenced by others that can quote off a list of exciting names. But I've never worked like that. I like very few other artists, I'm sure many artists feel that way. I'm mostly influenced by music, film or literature, but still couldn't give you any definitive names or styles. I think at the end of the day you need to inspire yourself or it can't really be authentic.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently working on some still lifes. My practice never takes a break and I usually move on to new things quickly but I always see a logical thread to the changes. I liked the straight lines in architecture so much I have been working in a small scale with wooden blocks and other small object with basic shapes. I have been photographing them with coloured cards to mock up small geometric compositions. I photograph it and then mess with it in photoshop. It's an exciting change of subject matter and has even more emphasis on formal qualities such as line, shape and colour.

Jennifer, thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us!