



Rough cuts and altered states

By tapping into architecture's power to affect the way we feel, Jennifer Mason's unnerving images of empty houses invite us to literally step inside these strange, imaginary spaces. Virginia Were reports.

American artist Gordon Matta-Clark used the word 'Anarchitecture' to describe his famous 'building cuts' of the 1970s – a series of site-specific works in abandoned buildings in which he variously removed sections of floors, ceilings and walls, then documented the dramatic results of his unconventional architecture using film, video and photography.

Sharing his interest in entropy, metamorphic gaps and leftover, ambiguous space is Auckland artist Jennifer Mason, who for the past three years has been photographing the empty interiors of houses and other buildings, then roughly slicing and patching them together using Photoshop to create new spaces, which have a similar sense of anarchy and perspectival dislocation as Matta-Clark's 'building cuts'. In them she attempts to find a new and fictional space within the fixed and finite parameters of a room.

Mason, who graduated with a BFA from Elam School of Fine Arts in 2005, first became known for her elaborately

staged photographs of banal, suburban interiors in which she used actors and props to create uneasy narratives and evoke feelings of suburban neurosis, but since then has moved on to digitally manipulated images, which are emphatically empty of human presence, and which tap into architecture's ability to affect the way we feel on a physical as well as an emotional level.

The shift came about when, finding it difficult to source interiors for her 'mini dramas', she photographed her late grandmother's empty house, manipulated the images in Photoshop and concluded that these new empty interior spaces were more compelling than the inhabited ones. She then began taking photographs of houses in removal yards, and her first exhibition of these images, *Spatial Disruptions*, was at Suite Gallery in Wellington in 2010.

In a text accompanying this exhibition, curator Bruce E. Phillips wrote: "...the series of images evokes a feeling of dread or disquiet. Some rooms seem to be plagued by an unnatural and potentially hostile shadow; others



Opposite page: Jennifer Mason, *New Spaces*, 2011, installation at St Paul Street's Gallery Three. Full colour images on 500gsm PVC

Above: Jennifer Mason, *Positioned to capture loads of sunlight*, 2010. Duratran in LED light box, 1189 x 841mm

Right: Jennifer Mason, *Pah Homestead Window*, 2012, digital print in LED light box, 1189 x 841mm. James Wallace Arts Trust Collection

feature half-open doors leading to menacing dark rooms. This surreal and haunting imagery suggests the presence of the paranormal without the obvious use of horror”.

Rather than seamlessly stitching multiple different photographs together on the computer, Mason opts for a rough patchwork of images, imperfectly joined and positively jarring in their violation of the rules of perspective. She likens this stage of the process to drawing or “digital doodling”.

Like her current favourite artist, British painter Francis Bacon, Mason messes up space, creating fictional interiors with perspectives that are irrational, contradictory and illogical. Like him she strives to provoke a physical sensation in the viewer – whether that is one of pleasure, calmness, discomfort or disgust – and in both artists’ works the body is central, even though it’s eerily absent in Mason’s more recent photographs.

Doors and windows create deep space in these works, allowing us to enter surreal dream-like spaces, which stand in for the unconscious and the imagining of an alternative reality where the normal laws of physics are turned on their head – a parallel to the art making process itself.

“There’s definitely a psychological component to my photographs – when you mess up all the corners of the rooms it affects your mind and how you feel,” says Mason. “These spaces are dizzying and confusing and, when



Right: Jennifer Mason, *Shard*, 2012, digital print in LED light box 300 x 400mm. Private Collection

Opposite page: Jennifer Mason, *Untitled #16*, 2010, Duratran in LED light box, 1189 x 841mm

Below: Jennifer Mason



you try to figure them out, you get an uncomfortable or uncertain feeling – the manipulations force you into that state. There’s a ‘house of mirrors’ effect and so, when things are bent and altered, you feel dizzy.”

Mason’s works defy easy categorisation, existing in a twilight zone – somewhere between photography, sculpture and architecture. In summer 2012 two of her large-scale photographic light boxes were included in a group exhibition at the TSB Wallace Arts Centre in Hillsborough, Auckland. Titled *re:photography* the exhibition featured photography, sculpture and video by six artists seeking new definitions of the medium, which has never been more fluid, splendidly varied and harder to pin down than it is now – a time which photography theorist Geoffrey Batchen has described as “post photography” a moment when photography as a separate medium may well be on the verge of disappearing forever (Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, 2000).

The exhibition’s wall text included a quote by artist Andreas Gursky, proposing that, “...since the photographic medium has been digitised, a fixed definition of the term ‘photography’ has become impossible”.

Mason’s two works, *Pah Homestead Window* and *Pah Homestead Door*, certainly underscore photography’s increasingly maverick nature.

Setting up an uneasy tension between the real and the fictional, Mason took multiple photographs of the gallery, a room with a lofty ceiling at Pah Homestead, and then recombined them to create new versions of the space before placing them inside the gallery. Because of their large scale, these two works invite us to step inside an impossible, magical space where we may be able to retreat from the world and hide – much like a child does

when they crawl inside a wardrobe or under a house.

Whereas domestic spaces are usually associated with shelter and comfort, the two convoluted interiors in the Pah Homestead works are unsettling and disorientating. Though they seem to coax us in, ultimately they’re uninhabitable: floors slope in different directions, tipping downwards in the foreground and slanting upwards in the background; lines where the walls join the floors and ceilings shoot off in different directions and don’t meet; and there are sudden, dramatic shifts in scale. In Mason’s images of uninhabited interiors, the body is always implicit; traces of wear and tear – a scrawl of graffiti on the wall, a magazine lying on the floor, scuffed and worn areas of carpet, a hole punched in the wall – all speak of former inhabitants and are details which snare our attention as we search for a narrative.

Like Bacon, Mason stresses that her works are not intended to be narrative or autobiographical; instead she wants the viewer to experience the raw sensation of the subject – whether that’s a feeling of calmness and serenity or one of danger and threat.

“Houses have different atmospheres: some are more peaceful than others. All have emotional atmospheres, even when they’re empty. I couldn’t just take an image of a room and leave it as it is – that would seem too simple.”

In her solo exhibition *Physical Structures*, photographic light boxes and framed photographs at Corban Estate Arts Centre in December 2012, the works were smaller than the two light box works at the Pah Homestead, yet they were equally impressive for their evocations of light, line, material and space. They were also psychologically potent.

This emotional edge is particularly evident in an earlier work, *Untitled #16*, 2010, which shows a child’s bedroom



with a hole in the ceiling and a sinister flight of stairs mysteriously disappearing in the back ground. Mason photographed the narrow, concrete stairs inside the gun emplacements at North Head and incorporated them into the image of a child's bedroom where they create a punctum, introducing a palpable and unexpected sense of menace and threat.

The work was made after the horrific crime of Josef Fritzl, who imprisoned and sexually abused his daughter in a concealed basement complex in his home for 24 years, was discovered.

A career highlight for Mason, who says she bears no allegiance to photography as a medium (in fact she is now making sculptures), was her first exhibition in a public gallery in October 2011. *New Spaces* was a site-specific installation at AUT's St Paul Street, comprising seven billboard size images covering the walls and in some cases the windows of the gallery. For this project she took about 5000 images of St Paul Street's Gallery Three, worked on them for more than a year in Photoshop, and when she was happy with the new composite images of the space, had them printed on PVC skins and installed them inside the gallery. The most physically and conceptually ambitious of her works to date, *New Spaces* came closest to her desire to engage more directly with architecture and, like Matta-Clark, to physically reconfigure a space (though in her case without the use of a chainsaw).

It was a bold installation, which warped the space, collapsing the boundaries between the real and the fictional and forcing the viewer to inhabit both the work and the space that contains it at the same time. It drew attention to the gallery as a void and a receptacle for artworks, ideas and propositions. The doubling of

the gallery space set up a curious reflexive relationship between viewer, gallery space and artwork, which mimicked the complex relations that unfold when we look at an artwork inside the white cube.

Last year Mason began studying for a Postgraduate Diploma at Elam, abandoning photography for the meantime and experimenting with small, biomorphic sculptures (some wrapped in beige-coloured medical fabric) which provoke a physical response in the viewer. "My photography had reached the point where it started to look slick and I loathe that point; I'm not a finisher and I love raw ideas and the process of experimenting."

In 2011 Mason's work *Room at the end of the hall*, was the Te Tuhi Billboard project, and in 2012 she won the Walker and Hall Waiheke Art Award with *Shard*, a lightbox that is a transitional image between photography and her recent sculptures. *Shard* is a captivating image of a piece of slate set in what looks like a desert landscape bathed in a rosy glow. The object's scale is impossible to determine making it reminiscent of the enigmatic monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Mason says her photographs and sculptures, like Bacon's paintings, are about "weird bodily stuff. He paints these horrible deformed bodies, which are also so pink and luscious; they look all squashed up. I think he's incredibly clever."

"With my work I want you to have uncomfortable feelings or good feelings, to be intrigued or to feel there's an itch to be scratched."

Jennifer Mason has been awarded the 2013 Auckland Festival of Photography Commission. The festival is from 30 May to 21 June, 2013.