

natasha johns - messenger

'Reality is not always probable, or likely'
Jorge Luis Borges

Early in the course of her practice, Natasha Johns-Messenger completed a degree in painting at RMIT University, and despite the monumental scale, and the visual and material expansiveness of her current work, this background is evidenced in her ongoing proclivity to investigate, stretch and tear at the limits of real and representational space. Her works are often grounded in the formal and pictorial concerns of minimalism, but explode the picture plane – and the viewer/participant's sense of self and place – in transformations that are as spectacular and thought-provoking as they are disorienting and uncanny. Monochrome surfaces, architecturally scaled construction that mimics its surrounding environs, mirrored panels, live-feed video projection and photography have all been employed in various configurations by Johns-Messenger to present visual conundrums rich with paradox and intrigue; conundrums which highlight alternative configurations and narrative fragments that run parallel to the perceived present moment.

Pictorial, physical and virtual space are thus substituted, reconfigured and displaced, and the distinction between these various levels of representation become increasingly blurred and difficult to distinguish. In this way Johns-Messenger's installations both emphasise and problematise the inextricable relationship between the myriad modes of visual information via which we structure and define the world. In this process of optical unravelling, the viewer/participant's own presence necessarily completes each work; and in this tightly-bound triumvirate of self/environment/image, the more radical concerns of her project become evident.

Equally at home in the refined architecture of the gallery as in heavily-trafficked public arenas, Johns-Messenger's work engages the representational problems of art history whilst firmly focusing on the here and now, selectively modifying the visual fabric of the everyday. *Birrarung Look-box*, her work in the City of Melbourne's 2004 public sculpture exhibition *Skinned*, involved the construction of a riverside 'viewing box'. This device offered

four reconfigured and altered views of the surrounding landscape and the passers-by at Melbourne's Birrarung Marr inner city park. These alterations in the 'real' utilised the basic technology of the mirror to mimic the representational properties of photography and video. *Birrarung Look-box* manipulated and reframed the postcard-style views framed by the park's picturesque landscaping, whilst also suggesting the coexistence of surveillance and more intrusive visual technologies: a complex melange of the various ways-of-looking that underscore contemporary civic life. The site-specificity of Johns-Messenger's work lends it a democratic edge and suggests a commitment to accessibility beyond an art-world audience, whilst also communicating something of both the complexities and potential alternatives to our present situation.

By contrast, *Pointform*, Johns-Messenger's recent collaboration with Leslie Eastman, spectacularly modified Melbourne's Conical gallery through a succession of mirrored panels arranged in strips, which diagonally bisected the space. The seamless installation of these structures cast the interior architecture of Conical off in disorienting directions, extending and realigning familiar walls, windows and floors, whilst other viewer/participants could be seen in fragments - a floating head or a pair of legs here, a disembodied torso there - according to the mirrors' visual vivisections. The resultant spectacle transfigured Conical's self-conscious architecture, pitched by the gallery as a challenging context for site-specific installation work, into a giddy and vertiginous space with ambiguous boundaries. In effect, *Pointform* turned the visual logic of the gallery in on itself; splitting the visually-focused arena into a spectrum of possible worlds and thus hinting at the multiple potentialities beyond a seemingly fixed set of spatial parameters.

The collection of installations which Johns-Messenger has devised for *NEW06* combines the various elements of her practice, exploring and reconfiguring ACCA's monumental architectural space – with an intervening pendulum-form suspended from the ceiling – as well as the viewer/participant's own perceived image. On one hand, *AutomatedLogic* underscores Johns-Messenger's ongoing appropriation and reinvention of modernist visual language. But the installation also engages her more radical inclination to disrupt the easy flow of everyday visual

semiotics and empower the viewer/participant to imagine new and transgressive possibilities.

Some sections of ACCA's walls have been removed, excavated and rearranged to reveal the geometric, painterly grid of materials that form the supportive framework of the building itself – perhaps playfully referencing the kind of art one might expect to find in such a place, and then revealing itself as something which, although seemingly more mundane, provides a new insight into the conditions in which we are being invited to look. Elsewhere, a mirrored viewing device offers a view of the back of the viewer/participant's own head; whilst another provides an upside-down reflection, with eyes perpetually obscured. The careful linking of the viewer/participant's own physical and visual presence with the (literally) deconstructed gallery underscores the art museum's role as a kind of frame – no more or less than the irregular architectural field of Conical or the landscaped expanse of Birrarung Marr – which can be negotiated and approached in numerous ways, from the complicit to the contradictory.

In disrupting and redistributing the stuff of everyday life, Johns-Messenger's work reveals new insights into the environmental, artistic and social conditions that envelop us, and whose less obvious characteristics, internal contradictions and latent potentialities so often evade our notice. We are thus invited to look differently, in both a literal and conceptual sense; maybe just for the few moments in which we are immersed in the installations, but perhaps beyond, into a freshly re-imag(in)ed future.

BIOGRAPHY

born Melbourne, 1970

Natasha Johns-Messenger developed her site-specific spatial installation practice during a Masters by Research in Fine Art at RMIT University, completed in 2000. From 2001 to 2003 she was a studio resident at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces. Australian exhibitions include *Primavera* 2004, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney curated by Vivienne Webb, *Drift* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art curated by Bec Dean, *Skinned* at Birrarung Marr curated by Rose Lang, as well as other exhibitions at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia and the Canberra Contemporary Art Space. Johns-Messenger's international exhibitions have been held in New York, Tokyo, Bogota, and Taiwan.

Johns-Messenger continues her individual practice alongside ongoing collaborations with Leslie Eastman (including *Pointform* at Conical gallery, 2004) and the Open Spatial Workshop OSW with Terri Byrd, Bianca Hester and Scott Mitchell, recent winners of the inaugural *Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture*, 2005.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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