

GOMA- Optimism Catalogue: By Abigail Fitzgibbons



‘Adventures in Perception’: Natasha Johns-Messenger’s Installation for the Gallery of Modern Art

Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.¹

Strong themes underlying Natasha Johns-Messenger’s practice are the inversion of inside and outside and the collapsing of space and preconceived notions. Although more readily identified with sculpture and installation, her works rely on the examination and subversion of pictorial conventions or visual “technologies” – linear perspective, the mirror, the window, the frame, and most recently periscope optics – to create a

¹ Stan Brakhage, cited in Anne Friedberg, *Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006, p.77

mobile and questioning spectator.² They are also fun, inspiring curiosity and wonder, suggesting an elusive Alice in Wonderland world beyond the mirror and outside the frame.

Johns-Messenger's practice is multi-dimensional. Best known for her illusory installations which permeate the viewer's physical and optical space, she has also created sculptural objects, prints, photography and a short film.³ An art historical lineage for her work can be traced through Minimalism, the Light and Space movement, Dan Graham's mirrored pavilions, Bruce Nauman's impenetrable *Corridor* works, or even the live feedback space of early experimental video; however, Johns-Messenger's works move beyond these works to offer new encounters and experiences. Now based in New York, she is completing an MFA in film at Columbia University and is fascinated with lyrical, narrative film.

Johns-Messenger initially trained as a painter, completing a degree in painting at RMIT University, Melbourne. Despite her love of painting (she mentions Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman as particular favourites for their consciousness of the framing edge of the canvas), she abandoned the practice feeling that it was no longer possible for her to say anything meaningful in paint. Extending her practice into three-dimensions, she took up the mantle of the postminimalist sculptors, reconfiguring and transforming their discoveries. She was recently the sole Australian artist to participate in The Hague's annual sculpture survey, which took the subject of American sculpture as a theme, and her work appeared alongside peers such as Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and James Turrell.⁴

Many of Johns-Messenger's works are based upon a subversion of the rational laws of the perspectival schemata, which posits an external, omnipresent spectator. This is suggested in the titles themselves, which include *Birrarung Look Box*; *Pointform*; *Automated Logic*, and *Through to you*. In *Zilverkamer 2007*, for example, an initial view of the installation shows a long passageway that recedes towards a distant wall, on which appears a circular shape containing the same floral pattern as the floor. However, if one attempts to enter this space, it is revealed to be an illusion, with vertical mirrors bisecting the passageway, diverting the viewer into unexpected

² Periscope optics are of course linked with military and submarine technologies. Johns-Messenger's use of this optical science indicates the often fluid boundaries between the fields of entertainment, art, science, government and the military in relation to visual technologies.

³ *Flame* was Natasha's first narrative short film as writer, director and composer.

⁴ 'Freedom, American Sculpture, The Hague Sculpture 2008', 6 June – 31 August 2008

walkways and passages, and throwing up reflections. As one critic has insightfully noted, her installations 'turn[] the perceptual piety of minimalism into a game of mirrors, with room corners that seem to bewilderingly unfold, expand and realign like the interior of Dr Who's Tardis'.⁵ *Zilverkamer*'s effect and configuration are particularly appropriate given its location: it was created as a site-specific piece for The Hague's 2007 sculpture survey and is located in the Lange Voorhout Palace, an 18th century palace housing the M.C. Escher museum. Escher is known for his graphic and meticulously worked optical paradoxes that defy logic precisely through carrying it to extremes.

Johns-Messenger's installations begin as schematic structures with mathematically calculated dimensions. Often they mimic or subvert a perspectival, pictorial space that the viewer would traditionally remain outside. Into these algebraically constructed rooms she inserts tricks and illusions. It is only when the spectator enters this space that it comes alive. Within this zone, the viewer's interaction with others breaks down visual, spatial and social conventions. Each person becomes a possible illusion and the viewer becomes as much a subject of the work as the walls. Johns-Messenger maintains that the viewer's reaction to her installations is never prescribed – some feel shy or confused, others don't feel well; some see exaggerated version of themselves. Others become highly self-conscious around mirrors and acutely aware of other people. Her work asks the viewer to continually re-address his or her established ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing.

Lens-based technologies such as the periscope (used in *Zilverkamer* and *Automated Logic*) and the camera obscura (used in Johns-Messenger's collaborative *Dark Light* 2008⁶) provide an apt metaphor for her practice. Such optical devices prefigure photography and cinema but were also used by painters in visualizing and reproducing the world. Both the periscope and the camera obscura employ the basic laws of perspective to invert space. They bring what is outside inside, by capturing a slice of reality, turning it upside down and projecting it in real time. In *Zilverkamer* the periscope collapses space, enabling the floors to be thrown onto the walls; in *Automated Logic* 2006 a piece of ceiling departs from its moorings and hovers, dancing to an invisible rhythm. These inversions play on the architectural structure of the buildings, operating

⁵ Edward Colless. 'Inside the fantasy world of the edgy'. (review), *The Australian*, 3 April, 2006

⁶ *Dark Light* was a collaborative project with Melbourne-based artist Leslie Eastman, known for his use of the camera obscura as part of his installations.

as a kind of window or cut which exposes its foundations and turns it into a fascinating riddle.

All of these elements will be at play in her specially commissioned project for 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism'. At the time of writing, this project is just a plan, a basic diagram of rectangles and straight lines which gives a sense of the constructedness and scale of the work, but none of the magical quality of experiencing her installations. It shares with a number of her previous works a carefully measured passage or walkway surrounding a hidden or secret area, the use of mirrors placed at angles, and a final aperture through which to view an inverted illusionistic space. It will also reconfigure and explore the viewer's space in relation to the gallery's architecture. Johns-Messenger's installations always convey some of the original experience she herself has of the site and they draw their colour, composition and materials from their surrounds. An element of institutional critique infuses her work and one of Johns-Messenger's concerns is to draw attention to GoMA's ambiguous status between a supposedly neutral 'white cube' and the reality of its architectural design which works against such an ideal.

Scientists working in quantum physics have recently begun to discuss seriously the theory of parallel universes, previously felt to be within the realms of science-fiction. This theory comes to mind when walking through Johns-Messenger's installations — their use of labyrinthine, enclosed corridors and rooms, reflective mirrors, occasionally eerie fluorescent light, and architectural cuts, all imply a place beneath or beyond waiting to be discovered. Johns-Messenger has described her work as existing in 2.5 dimensions – it is a kind of parallel or in-between world that is part sculptural, part optical, and part virtual.