

Illuminate: The Recent Work of Gina Jones

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As the principal architect of Wellington-based company Accent Architects, established in 1995, Gina Jones has been an active member of New Zealand's creative community for many years.

But it was not until 2002, when a colleague suggested she consider developing her ability to sketch perspectives for clients, that Jones began the journey towards combining her architectural career with that of a contemporary artist.

That conversation led Jones to enrol in an art class, 'Drawing for the Terrified', at Inverlochy Art School, Wellington, and her resultant experiences compelled her to enrol in a further 13 art courses over the following 18 months. When a tutor advised her to consider applying for a Master of Fine Arts in painting the progression followed seamlessly.

This was not the first time Jones had contemplated moving into the 'fine arts' arena. 'When I left school I had originally wanted to go to art school but my father convinced me that architecture was better as a career (read more financially stable) and a good mix for my skills.'¹

Jones' early interest in the arts saw her primarily attracted to those genres that display a clear design aesthetic such as geometric abstraction and minimalism, and those historic movements that drew no distinction between art and design, impacting upon both equally.

'My work as an architect has a huge influence on my practice as an artist, particularly the influence of the Bauhaus and de Stijl movements. Moholy-Nagy, a Bauhaus teacher, expounded the fundamental elements of twentieth century Light and Space Art well before they became a field in their own right. These elements are all very important in my work.'²

Jones' first artistic experiments can be separated into two distinct styles. Initially she began to develop a painted series utilising the principles of geometric abstraction and drawing heavily upon the work of Josef Albers and Gordon Walters, amongst others. But she also began to create subtler, more ephemeral installation pieces that were determined by and integrated with their natural surroundings, manipulating such things as fallen autumn leaves or piles of driftwood to create transient, three dimensional compositions in the public arena.

Jones has always intended for her art to work on several levels simultaneously, impacting upon the viewer's environment in a more meaningful way than a single, purely visual encounter. With these early compositions Jones aimed to initiate experiences that would cause the viewer to reconsider their surroundings. Like Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, Jones used familiar, natural elements to create 'events' of sorts, encouraging a more active engagement where the viewer not only looks at the work but also occupies the work's space, even becomes a part of it. This desire is entirely in keeping with Jones' other role as an architect, where it is not only the shapes and materials used to create the

¹ Artist's email to author, 18 December 2009.

² Gina Jones, 'An Investigation into Perceptions of Time using Light and Space', unpublished essay submitted as part of Masters thesis, 2005, p.6.

finished forms that are considered, but also the spaces that those forms will inhabit and enclose.

It was with a series of 'Line' works that Jones first combined these trends in her art practice. With these works a combination of pine needles and encaustic were used to create different patterns and textures on canvas, their appearance adjusted by alterations in the quality of the wax. But despite her efforts, the work seemed to be lacking something. It was at this point that Jones conceived of incorporating an element of light into her work.

'[Initially] I had the idea of putting the encaustic works over lights so I went down to a local lighting company to discuss. In the end I put [them] over a standard lighting pan (600 x 600) and the work changed noticeably.... While I was down at the lighting company they showed me an LED [light-emitting diode] light panel which they thought I might be interested in ... my first LED light works followed shortly after.'³

With the inclusion of light Jones' work evolved markedly. Quickly abandoning the canvas in favour of industrial materials that both complemented the effects of the light and better harmonised with Jones' existing architectural expertise, her work assumed a more substantial, sculptural character. The qualities of such materials as polished aluminium, lacquered steel, corrugated iron, glass and perspex also allowed Jones greater control over the surface elements of her work. With the removal of extraneous details such as brush strokes and the imperfections of hand drawn lines Jones was able to create work with the crisp certainty of minimalism and the hard edges of true geometric abstraction.

From that moment, the vitality bestowed upon her work by paint was replaced by that of light. Furthermore, the inclusion of light also allowed Jones to create a full 'environment' for the viewer in a way her previous work never had. Again drawing on the oeuvre of Eliasson, to whose installations the manipulation of light is often crucial, Jones also began to research the work of American minimalist Dan Flavin, who for more than thirty years was engaged with artistic and experiential explorations of light.

Since this time, many of Jones' most successful works have incorporated LED light technology. In some instances this has been as straightforward as creating illumination that is hidden or revealed by cut out shapes within steel or aluminium reliefs. In more complex examples a form or pattern is sandblasted on to perspex, the sandblasted area then capturing and emitting light in much the same way as the diodes themselves. In a third series the LEDs are engineered, through a combination of careful positioning and mirrored perspex, to create the illusion of a third dimension, the lights uniting to form tunnels that appear to stretch far beyond the work into the wall behind.

The lights employed by Jones are often programmed to run through a slow colour change cycle, encouraging the viewer to stop and continue their engagement with the work until the full transition has been seen. While prolonging the viewers' interaction with the work, these effects also alter the work's environment as different colour frequencies cast more or less light into the surrounding area while the changing shades that imbue the space generate varying degrees of emotive response.

From December 2009 to February 2010 Jones held an exhibition at Aratoi, the Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton. For this, the artist's first solo exhibition at a public gallery, Jones took the opportunity to present simultaneously three different bodies of

3 Artist's email to author, 18 December 2009.

work.

The first followed on from earlier LED creations where a three dimensional illusion is produced from a panel of perspex, in the case of the works presented at Aratoi, the glowing circle, triangle and square evident when viewing the work head on become almost limitless tunnels of light when seen from an angle.⁴ While similar works have been wall-mounted, these sit within black stands that can be walked around, allowing the work to be considered from all sides. This creates an interesting dynamic by not only confirming unequivocally that the lighted 'tunnel' is indeed an illusion, but also highlighting the fact that, while the central element may appear somehow permeable, it is in fact a wholly opaque and solid object.

A second series the artist is engaged with involves the creation of abstract compositions from a large number of commercially-produced stickers positioned on a black gloss ground. One such work, *Untitled (Stickers 3x3)*, provided a surprising addition to the Aratoi show.⁵ Where Jones' other works form examples of sleek industrial perfection, created not by the artist personally but by a range of tradespeople to her specifications, this series draws the viewer much closer to the artist's own hand. We are aware that each silver and gold dot has been applied by the artist herself, but, more than this, the peculiarly reflective quality of the stickers means that, from a distance, as some capture the light while others do not, they appear as the smudges of fingerprints. When positioned close to a coloured light source as at Aratoi, the work also assumes an iridescent quality – the gold becoming a luminous chartreuse green while the silver moves between pale aqua blue and softly glowing amber.

Jones' most recent body of work was exhibited for the first time at the Aratoi exhibition and incorporates a new element: movement. *Untitled (Boys Night In)*, a large installation work, is created from a series of convex and concave circular mirrors and 121 second hand laserdiscs, laboriously located by the artist over a period of many months.⁶ A precursor to DVDs, laserdiscs are approximately 30 centimetres in diameter but with the same reflective, rainbow-striated surface of the more recent technology. When confronted with the work it is a disorientating experience. The discs spin slowly, sluggishly reflecting all around them (including the many faces of other spectators), while they, in turn, are reflected and distorted by the circular mirrors on the wall behind.

These rainbows and reflections create far subtler lighting effects than those employed by Jones' other work and open up endless scope for further experimentation. Jones continues to develop her artistic practice with many more ideas that will emerge in time. The ideology behind the art is likely to remain the same however, lending intelligence and coherence to each new exploration.

4 *Untitled (Circle)*, *Untitled (Triangle)* and *Untitled (Square)*, all 2009, one-way glass, sandblasted glass, aluminium, LED lights, 1890 x 700 x 108mm.

5 *Untitled (Stickers 3x3)*, 2009, Avery removable dots, lacquer, customwood, each unit 600 x 600mm.

6 *Untitled (Boys Night In)*, 2009, laserdiscs, nylon, metal clips, concave and convex mirrors, variable dimensions.