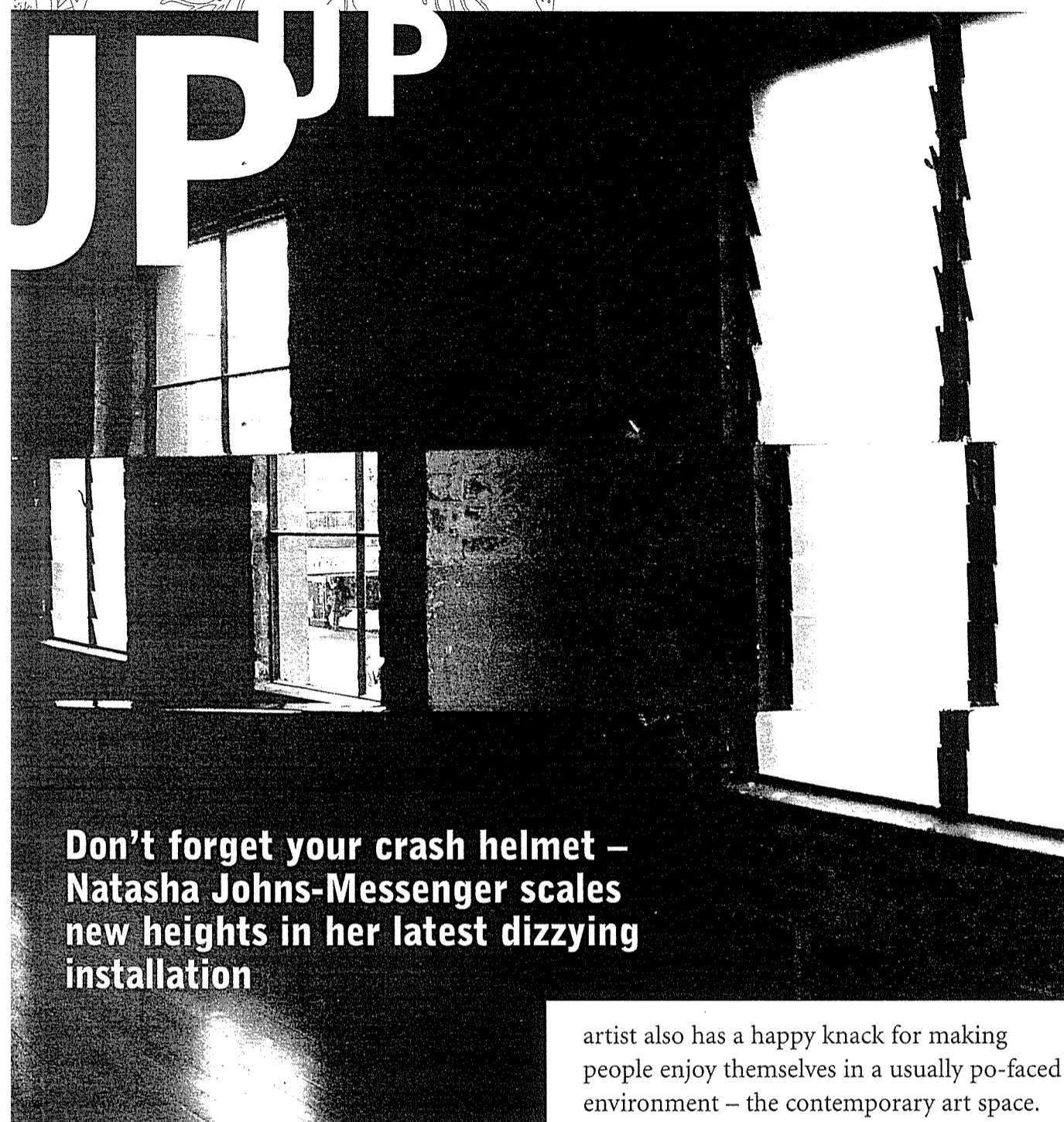


## AND ASTRAY



**Don't forget your crash helmet – Natasha Johns-Messenger scales new heights in her latest dizzying installation**

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Passing through a Natasha Johns-Messenger installation, it's clear how tenuous visual perception can be. She takes architectural cuts and angled mirrors to create labyrinthine interactive Op Art, or what she prosaically calls her "three-dimensional spaces rearranged in Photoshop". Her installations emphasise features she has spatially warped, such as floors, ceilings or windows. There have been collisions on site, but nothing too serious. "I have this weird, useless talent for estimating," says Johns-Messenger. "It's essentially simple, optical maths."

In her next work, part of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's annual emerging artists' exhibition, *New O6*, Johns-Messenger has taken inspiration from the humble periscope. Viewers will feel like they're looking down at the gallery space from its ceiling 20m above. Somewhere between an Escher sketch and a vertiginous hall of mirrors, it will be more unsettling than her previous crowd-pleasers.

Aside from the unintentional head-butting she has occasionally caused, the Melbourne

artist also has a happy knack for making people enjoy themselves in a usually po-faced environment – the contemporary art space. With her first installation, at her Melbourne studio in the mid-'90s, she frankly didn't expect people to have such a good time. "Initially I just set them up and walked through them myself," she recalls, "and then when I had the first opening, people were laughing and getting right into it. That it also happened to be fun was an accident. Obviously there's a lot of contemporary art that's mostly about entertainment but that's not at the core of my work. It just happens to be entertaining."

Though her installations appear seamless, Johns-Messenger likes to keep her spaces fairly raw. She builds straight from sketches, without resorting to CAD. "Even though it's kind of architectural and has to be precise, I also like it to be a bit loose, just so that I can tweak it and create a more balanced little world," the artist says. She studied painting at RMIT University before moving into three dimensions in her third year. After completing her degree in 1994 she moved to New York where she was turned on to the site-specific work of Michael Asher and James Turrell. Her early experiments involved placing photographs of floors and walls around a space. At one stage she filmed a

window, boarded it up and projected the film back onto it. Another trial involved rebuilding certain architectural features elsewhere in a space.

Mirrors proved a more viable option and became instrumental in commissions at Gertrude Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne's Conical Gallery, Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art and now the ACCA. What interests her about them is their capacity to act as real time images. "It's not as removed as, say, a live video feed or a photograph," she says. "It's the most immediate virtual space that you can have. They're quite magical things as well and have so many connotations but that's not why I use them." Does she find herself repeating the way the mirrors are positioned in her work? "In almost every show I find something new," she says. "In the show in Sydney the thing that I did differently was to bring the view of the Opera House around the corner and into the space. That was very difficult optically because I had to make a shaft that was anamorphically corrected. I haven't had to deal with a space as tall as this one before. It's really the height of ACCA that I'll be using in a real way."

Alex McDonald

### STATE\_date:

*New O6*

14 March-14 May

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,  
Melbourne

[www.accaonline.org.au](http://www.accaonline.org.au)



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### 1 Natasha Johns-Messenger

*Pointform* (collaboration with Leslie Eastman), 2004, Conical Gallery, Melbourne.

### 2 Natasha Johns-Messenger

*Picture This*, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004. photo: David Johns, courtesy of the artist