

CCA DERRY LONDON DERRY

Tricks of the Trade by Jan McCullough

Jan McCullough: 'Tricks of the Trade' exhibition full interview

What the film on our YouTube channel: <https://tinyurl.com/byte8kh>

(00:05) My name is Jan McCullough, and I'm an artist based in Belfast in Northern Ireland. I work mainly with photography, sculpture and installation. *Tricks of the Trade* is an installation of sculptures, structures and photographs which explore spaces of construction. The title of the show comes from a manual I have in my studio, the first chapter of which is called 'Time and money saving tricks of the trade', and I guess the title is also a nod to the kind of vocabulary of those DIY processes as well. I'm interested in the places where people construct, assemble and make things, and the rituals and rhythms of the work that goes on in those places.

(00:47) I have been photographing spaces like hardware stores, workshops, garages and sheds for a number of years, and for this work I wanted to translate aspects of those images into sculptural environments too. I had photographed a series of work platforms and step ladders a couple of years ago that were built specifically by people to fix certain parts of machinery. They were in a series of warehouses, and when walking through them, they were really tall. They were almost on stilts, like gangly, creature like structures. When I was photographing them, I found the experience of physically navigating around them in the space really interesting. They looked like a series of nests, and it was quite like a child-like experience of ducking under them and walking through them, and climbing over parts of them. Until recently the photographs I'd taken of them I used in sketchbooks to collage. I'd isolate certain parts of them by cutting them up and collaging new structures from them. But for this work, I wanted to physically construct them in response to and in dialogue with the images. I guess I wanted to recreate fragments of them in the space and recreate the experience of

walking around them too. I was also interested when building this middle gallery space and how I could navigate someone to walk round the structures – a bit like when I'm using a camera, I move my own body to position the frame of the photograph and to change the image. I wanted to see what kind of different viewpoints I could create within that structure.

(02:35) The materials I've worked with in *Tricks of the Trade* are mainly expedient building materials, and they're very much based on the photographs I've taken of the spaces. They're almost lifted out, a bit like a shopping list. I make lists of materials in the spaces and then begin working with smaller edits of them – formicats – and that kind of develops as it grows into a bigger space. For this show the materials include cut and torqued steel, boiled linseed oil, domestic emulsion paint, plywood, timber, and also a triptych of photographic prints as well which are on the walls and almost like notes inside the space. The colours I used in the installation are certain tones that were found in the spaces I've been researching. There were certain colours repeated in the machinery, and on the walls and floors of the environments as well. For example, the green in the first gallery is a mossy green, and it really reminded me of the external building yards and the outsides of these workspaces. It also has quite a chemical hue to it as well, like a cleaning product. The frames on the prints in galleries two and three reference colours in the objects from the spaces that the installation is based on, so 'biro blue', 'rust orange' and 'paint cloth lilac'. The pink shade that gallery three is painted in is called 'docket pink' referencing a receipt you get from a builder's yard.

I like the way materials inhabit a space, especially with smell. When you walk into these galleries you're hit with the scent of oil, timber and metal. That experience of placing you within an environment with a sense of smell is something I really wanted to explore a bit further, and something I worked on with Wendy Erskine in the accompanying text for the show. When you engage with what Wendy has written, I think that no matter where you are, you're dropped into one of those spaces, with the descriptions of the smells, the cold metal, the boiled linseed oil, and the dust sheets.

(04:58) Something I've always been drawn to is how we use photography to construct and imagine ourselves, and a lot of my previous work has been based around procedures for organising and instruction manuals. Whether that's physically constructing in a space, or looking at photography's role in the construction of identity.

(05:19) I made a work in 2015 called *Home Instruction Manual*. I typed 'how to make a home' into Google, and it led me to a chatroom online in which people were exchanging really detailed advice on how to make a home from scratch, or how to decorate their home. I printed off all the instructions and rented a house outside Belfast for two months, and set about carrying out their advice from scratch. It was almost like trying on different lives for size. Photography had this massive role for these people in this process of when the house was finished and photographed, that would be the home that looks good on camera. The end result of the project is a book-manual, in which the photographs of the finished house are paired with the instructions followed.

(06:11) A couple of years later I made a film about vision boards and the people who use them. In the film I followed a vision board party host called Kaya who hosts these parties in which people get together and cut up photographs from magazines and newspapers to manifest their ideal future lives. It was this kind of tactile relationship with photography and construction that really interested me. My own process as an artist quite frequently involves me making collages and mood boards in order to just think through research and connect certain ideas. I love that people use this as a tool for their lives as well.

(06:56) I originally studied photography at art college, and I now use photography in a much wider sense. Photography has always been - and continues to be - the backbone of my practice, even though the final object I present may not be a photographic print. In this show it's primarily sculpture. There's only a series of three very small prints in the gallery. For me the camera acts as a sort of instrument for dissecting and analysing space. They're more than records for me, they're the source of shapes and forms that I then go on to transform in later stages of the work. When

I'm documenting a space that I'm interested in working with, I like to use a powerful flash on the camera. It has this way of almost dissecting the space and flattening the panes of it. For example, if you photograph a pane of glass in a space with a flash it'll bounce the light right back at you and it'll flatten that object and blow it out in the frame. I quite often print and collage photographs as space dissecting and collaging over it in order to create and transform some kind of new spaces, new imagined spaces from it. I use photographs physically in my scrapbooks and sketchbooks; I cut and paste them as a way of working ideas out. I'll sometimes recreate small fragments of the photographs, whether it be a certain material that was in them, I'll recreate that in the space, or I'll kind of destabilise certain objects by cutting legs off to transform them beyond their original functional purpose. The photograph might not always be the end point in the process but it's always there as a way of working through it and seeing the space in the first place.

(09:03) I also think it's quite interesting that how we remember space differently and how the camera records it. I remember documenting the space that the middle gallery space is based on, which is a series of kind of work platforms and workbenches or stepladders. When I first photographed that a couple of years ago, I'd since been working with them in my sketchbook, and I think I remembered them differently a couple of years down the line. They'd almost melded with the collages and I remember them in a much tighter space and them being a lot taller than they had been, but it was just the way I photographed it and worked with them afterwards. It made me want to experiment with rebuilding it how I'd reimagined it in my head, but in the space. Before I made this work I had always photographed a lot of sculptural things but I really wanted to move to physically constructing stuff as well. When I was doing my residency at IMMA in Dublin, I was given this studio that was bigger than anywhere I'd worked before, and the work seemed to just expand into it, and I was suddenly working on a much bigger scale than ever before. When I came home half way through the residency because of lockdown in 2020, I really wanted to keep working on the scale that I had because I find it so exciting, but it just wasn't possible in the same space. In quite a DIY sense, I guess I had to just adapt to whatever I had so I was making projections onto the walls using an old school projector and

transparencies. It's funny how that influenced how I was working because it was so tiny it was really easy to change colours on them, it was really easy to change the way the structures were standing and composed, and it definitely had an influence on how I wanted to build in CCA when I got there. When I was installing in CCA, I really wanted to keep that way of working that I had been; quite ad hoc and responding to the space and building to how it felt when I was there around the structures.

(11:23) So while I had a lot of images and collages as notes with me when I showed up to install in the galleries, I definitely wanted it to be an organic process of seeing what the materials became in that particular space. I wanted to leave things quite open to naturally develop and be in dialogue with the galleries at CCA.

(11:51) When thinking about the exhibition I knew I had to provide some form of text to provide context for the viewer about the work. We ended up writing quite a simple gallery text, but I wanted something else that would expand the experience of the work for the viewer. I was really lucky to work with Wendy Erksine who is a brilliant writer from Belfast, and we collaborated on a piece called *Instructions on the Assembly of Workspace*. We had conversations about the types of spaces I was interested in when making the work, and also exchanging materials from the studio here like photographs, collages, paint cards, lists of words, kind of shopping lists. I really liked the concept that you don't have to be with the work to get a small experience of it. The text allows you to access that in your own house even. I think when you engage with Wendy's text you're almost dropped into one of those spaces that you might be familiar with. It's not a description of the particular space I've made but it's of a place you might have visited before. You can almost smell when you're reading it the steel and the oil and the wood. The text is designed to accompany the work but at the same time it exists on its own as well. We wanted to leave room for the viewer to bring their own experiences to it too. The booklet for the text was designed by Sean Greer at Nongraphic Studio. I knew I wanted the text to be a physical object that came from a DIY culture. We wanted it to reflect in quite a subtle way the research that had gone into the work and the colour palette involved. As for the research for the design, we were looking at a lot of kind of DIY packaging, the instructions you get with flatpack

furniture, the promotional posters in hardware stores, and the fonts and the colours involved with that.