

<sup>1</sup>/ VERTICALISM #8, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>/ VERTICALISM #2, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>/ VERTICALISM #7, 2008.

The works presented by Alison Bennett in *Verticalism* are both intriguing and deceptive in what they suggest about the photographer's interests. The images are composite photographs of a series of church ceilings, mostly Gothic in style, taken on the artist's first trip to Europe. They present this strange inverted landscape in a flattened, panoramic format. Individual images were taken using a simple digital camera, following which they were stitched together by a software algorithm, resulting in the slightly amorphous and frameless images seen on these pages.

On first impression, one might be forgiven for assuming that Bennett takes her photographs from the architect's standpoint, both in space and intent. Certainly she shares the architect's awareness of, and delight in, texture, patina, form and detail – these are very *architectural* photographs of architecture. However, appearances can be deceptive, and a greater familiarity with the artist's oeuvre suggests that the works spring from a different source.

When considered in relation to the rest of her folio, the *Verticalism* works are something of an anomaly in that they depict rather grand architectural spaces. Churches of the kind that appear in the exhibition were designed to impress themselves upon the viewer. The "money shot," to use a vulgar phrase that the property industry has borrowed from the pornography industry, was the view of the ceiling. The implication, of course, is that for salvation, one looked first towards God in his heaven. If you did so, then things were quite literally "looking up."

This is a telling clue and an insight into Bennett's motivation. Having spent some time in a wide-ranging discussion with the artist, I came to the conclusion that she has little interest in "seeing" the way an architect sees. Bennett is far more interested in the twin issues of occupation and interiority, a condition she explores in highly specific settings. As such, the *Verticalism* photographs owe more to the illiterate worshipper of centuries past than to the architect on the "Grand Tour."

The occupation of the interior by the penitent or pilgrim found its ultimate expression in prostration. In what might be a conscious or subconscious echo of this practice, Bennett has taken the photographs using a camera set to a timer and placed on the floor. Pragmatically, this overcame the difficulties of shooting without the aid of a tripod, which allowed the artist to occupy these sacred spaces in an unobtrusive and respectful way.

Leaving the tripod behind helps in other ways as well. During discussion, Bennett was at pains to explain her need to engage in a direct and honest way with the people who occupy, or have occupied, the spaces she photographs. I suspect that this is not just to gain the relevant permissions but to find a way to shuffle into the occupant's point of view. Her approach to this does not rely on charm, which she possesses in abundance. Rather, she simply engages with the subjects in a personal, and personable, way.

Bennett is able to listen and "speak" to the people she encounters, and – through some empathic personal

alchemy – those who are absent, but whose presence might still be felt. Through this exchange she is able to move into a shared space with the subject, figuratively at first and then quite literally – with her camera in her hand. As such, each project in her folio is linked explicitly to an occupant or community of occupants, whether they be official owners or tenants, or the temporary or transient users of a space – illicit drug users or graffiti artists.

Learning about the social and personal dimensions of the artist's broader project allowed me to see her photographs of the church ceilings in a different light, as the product of something other than a cataloguing process. It also caused me to think about contemporary architectural photography, and the influence of image making on design. Architects and other designers are currently heavily focused on image creation – on the money shot. An industry has been built around this idea. What would happen if the designer were to focus on standing in the shoes of the occupant to the extent that they were even willing to concede the high ground of taste or aesthetics – to sacrifice the money shot? Designers are trained to do this to some extent, but our empathy is professional, tempered by the limits of our willingness to abandon self-imposed aesthetic constraints.

While good designers generally acknowledge that constraints are essential, they are also quick to report that their client "didn't let them do this," or "didn't let them specify that," presumably despite their apparent knowledge of what might be best. This suggests that the designer's empathy

for the client may be limited to recognition of the potential liberties the working relationship can provide. This is an empathy safely codified, filtered through a set of criteria based on the question, "What can your needs do for me?" I can't help wondering what might emerge if we approached design in a different way.

It is fitting that the beautiful photographs shown in the *Verticalism* exhibition were taken with a non-professional camera. The artist might chafe at this oversimplification, but the common touch runs like a thread through Bennett's work. She possesses a love of the mundane and the forgotten rooms, the worn shells left behind by the marginalized – but at no time does she allow this to descend into visual fetishism or cliché. Bennett may be willing to "learn from Las Vegas," but in doing so, she won't be sidetracked by kitsch, or allow a voyeurism of misfortune to interfere with her pursuit of the traces of human occupation.

Bennett's empty churches are ringing with silence and yet they thrum with life. This sensibility is something that the conventional architectural photograph usually fails to instill, having been obsessively "cleansed" of all traces of inhabitation. By emphasizing their apparently sudden absence, Bennett invites us to become more aware of the people and personal moments those spaces may have contained.