



Perfect Spaces: Paintings by Ben Johnson launches in virtual gallery at the V&A

London Festival of Architecture

Open from 16 June – 01 September 2021

www.vca.gallery



The V&A has teamed up with Make Architects to launch the Vault of Contemporary Art's (VCA) inaugural exhibition *Perfect Spaces: Paintings by Ben Johnson*. Transforming the museum's John Madejski Garden into a digital gallery, to coincide with London Festival of Architecture, visitors will access the experience via a dedicated website and navigate twelve sweeping pavilions, each containing the stunningly detailed works of artist Ben Johnson. Featuring artworks, additional content, a virtual studio tour and video footage, audiences will be able to view Johnson's process and works like never before. Created in meticulous detail, Johnson's paintings are large-scale interpretations of iconic architecture, from the Crystal Palace to Neues Museum - paintings that are sometimes years in the making.

Bringing their expertise in placemaking to the fore, Make Architects have collaborated with Christopher Turner, Keeper of Design, Architecture and Digital at the V&A, to ensure this new experience provides a heightened layer of experiential, visual and textual information to Johnson's paintings, so that the public can gain an unrivalled insight into his work. VCA is a new platform that will explore contemporary art but with a particular focus on architecture, cities and places – both real and imaginary. Given the expansive possibilities of the digital world, VCA will create innovative and collaborative partnerships with artists and institutions to host virtual events within digitally rendered environments.

Ben Johnson says that his paintings 'celebrate everything that I think is great in architecture and engineering. Not the ego of the architect, but the ambitions of architecture'. Often confused with photorealism, his paintings explore complex perspectives, sometimes constructed from impossible viewpoints and depicting lost buildings. With their crystalline light, carefully chosen framing, and solemn solidity, they show the powerful underlying geometry of the structures Johnson most admires. Devoid of people, but nevertheless

commemorating social places, his paintings seem timeless, perfect spaces in the renaissance tradition of the Ideal City. Together they tell a history of architecture from Johnson's unique viewpoint - a subject he has devoted 50 years to.

Johnson studied at the Royal College of Art in the 1960s, when it was based at the V&A, and his work is inspired by the museum's collections. One of the VCA pavilions explores these references and influences as well as Johnson's working processes in depth. Another pavilion is designed to house a captivating behind-the-scenes look at Ben Johnson's London studio through an interactive visit that invites visitors to explore the artist's tools and the day-to-day objects Johnson surrounds himself with when working.

The other pavilions are each dedicated to a particular work by Johnson, including *The Dome of the Rock*, *Alhambra*, *Crystal Palace*, *HSBC Building* and *Neues Museum*. These works are the result of intense architectural study, built up slowly over many months of observation and drawing, often combined with digital technology. In the pavilions, visitors will be able to learn about the buildings depicted in the paintings, and the artist's techniques, in short films by filmmaker Tapio Snellman.

Ben Johnson said: "When I came to study at the Royal College of Art, over fifty years ago, I would enter the painting studios through the V&A. I was overawed by the scale of the museum but also the breadth of the collection. This daily exposure to the collection formed the basis of my life's work. The museum became my tutor. It bought me to a world where architecture collaborated with craftsmanship to transcend the functional and offer the sublime. To this day I still visit it as a constant source of research and inspiration."

Christopher Turner said: "Ben Johnson's meticulous, detailed paintings of buildings, which mix traditional modes of artistic production with digital technology, are the result of 50 years of deep engagement with architecture. The first time I saw one of his canvases, depicting the swimming pool at Norman Foster's Willis Building in Ipswich, full of glamour and geometry, I had to seek out its maker. The resulting studio visit, a history lesson in architecture, led to this virtual retrospective".

Make approached the design of the VCA in much the same way they would one of their physical buildings, using placemaking skills to create an exhibition environment that is connected to familiar things – such as building materials and views outside – while making use of the flexibility provided by the digital world. The architects considered issues of scale, lighting, ease of orientation and even the materials (both man-made and natural) that comprise the virtual architecture, but also – uniquely for the digital world – the layers of content that could be embedded in individual exhibits. The overall result is a procession of distinct gallery spaces that offer infinite display and engagement possibilities.

VCA Project Lead, Greg Willis, Make Architects said: "Working in architecture helps you see the world in a very specific way, you appreciate spaces, light, scale and materials and how they layer to provide an experience. Translating this to a digital world has been fascinating, especially in collaborating with artists and galleries. It presents a wonderful way to explore the possibilities of this new creative stream and how architecture can enhance the experience for the digital visitors. We're so excited to see where it will lead us next."

With the explosion of online cultural offerings during the pandemic, Make Architects observed a genuine need for a virtual setting that provided a richer 'visitor' experience, both in terms of the information provided and the design and feel of the galleries themselves. Rather than replacing the traditional in-person museum visit, VCA is intended to offer a complementary experience that can only be had in the digital world. Post-Covid, virtual presentations of art will no doubt continue to play an increasingly important role for museums in sharing their collections and expertise in this way, as well as broadening opportunities for people to access and appreciate art around the world.

Ken Shuttleworth, Founder of Make Architects said: "This has been a really innovative and exciting project to work on and we are so thrilled to be launching it with Ben Johnson and the V&A. It started with a pilot exhibition in 2020 showing works from our Architecture Drawing Prize and it is so exciting to see how the digital arena can add another layer to how we see and experience art and architecture."

A virtual panel discussion will launch *Perfect Spaces: Paintings by Ben Johnson* on 16 June and explore the future possibilities of virtual exhibitions, the challenges of educating and entertaining museum audiences digitally, and the learnings of lockdown. Register at www.vca.gallery

Panellists:

- Ben Johnson, artist
- Christopher Turner, Keeper of Design, Architecture and Digital at the V&A
- Kati Price, Head of Digital Media and Publishing at the V&A
- Greg Willis, Make Architects

Chair

- Tamsie Thomson, Director of LFA

-ENDS-

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[#BenJohnsonVCA](https://www.facebook.com/VictoriaandAlbertMusuem)

Make Architects:

Make is an award-winning international architectural practice with a reputation for challenging convention and pursuing design excellence. The practice brings projects to life across a broad range of sectors and locations, pushing for innovation in each one, whether it's a small community-led scheme or a landmark new structure. This approach has produced designs for several noteworthy arts and culture projects, including a dynamic exhibition space for emerging artists in Hong Kong. Over the past decade Make's work has been enhanced by the talent and commitment of many other members of the creative sector, including artists like Kenny Hunter and Catherine Bertola – collaborations that have produced an array of

beautiful, inspiring public works of art. Make's founder, Ken Shuttleworth, has also been recognised for his skilled draughtsmanship over the years, earning him the nickname "Ken the Pen. In 2017 Make set up The Architecture Drawing Prize with Sir John Soane's Museum and the World Architecture Festival.

Instagram: @VCA.gallery



London Festival of Architecture:

The London Festival of Architecture (LFA) is the world's largest annual architecture festival and is exploring the theme of 'care' through a hybrid programme in 2021. The LFA's mission is to support London's architectural and design talent, enthuse and engage with the public, and find new ways to look at familiar places. In 2020 the LFA explored the theme of power, and celebrated innovation and design through its first ever digital events programme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2019 edition of the LFA inspired over 600 events across the capital, attracting over 800,000 visitors and a global audience of 138 million. A year-round programme of design competitions, design charrettes, campaigns and other activities also champions London as the best place in the world to practice and enjoy architecture.

Twitter: @LFArchitecture

Instagram: @LondonFestivalofArchitecture

www.londonfestivalofarchitecture.org



Ben Johnson:

Ben Johnson was born in Llandudno, Wales, in 1946. He studied at the Royal College of Art and has lived and worked in London since 1965. His first solo exhibition was at the Wickesham Gallery, New York, and he is best known for his paintings based on architectural spaces, some almost forensically accurate, others heavily manipulated. Over the past 46 years he has exhibited widely in galleries and museums across the world, including the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; the Art Institute of Chicago; Kunsthalle Tübingen; and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. His view of London was completed as part of a residency at the National Gallery, London, in 2010 and he is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects for his contribution to the public's understanding of contemporary architecture.

His work is included in the permanent collections of museums worldwide, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Regional Services Museum, Hong Kong; and the Government Art Collection.

www.benjohnsonartist.com