

# Megan Jenkinson

b.1958

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In 2005, Megan Jenkinson visited Antarctica as part of the *Artists To Antarctica* programme. Imagine the shock of arriving on the polar continent: all that space, all that whiteness, all that emptiness. Because the contrasts of ice and sky are so stark, your eyes play tricks. Without trees, buildings and the usual landmarks, you lose your sense of scale and distance.

For Jenkinson the trip was inspiring, but also challenging: “It’s such an alien environment and no matter how much effort you put into visualising the place before you go there, it’s really not as you imagine”. But even before she arrived, Jenkinson was clear about what she hoped to achieve in Antarctica. She wanted to analyse the atmospheric effects of the landscape and produce works about its light and colours.

Antarctica is famous for its aurora: luminous displays of colour in the upper atmosphere, some 81 to 161 kms high. These mesmerising colours – usually pale pink and green – appear on clear cold nights and last several hours. They’re produced by the solar wind – a stream of electrons and protons coming from the sun – as it collides with gases in the upper atmosphere.

Jenkinson’s *Atmospheric Optics 1* explores the idea of the aurora. But look again. What at first glance appears to be the real thing – the aurora – turns out to be a sumptuous green curtain, irradiated with light. Jenkinson subverts our expectations by juxtaposing the windswept landscape of Antarctica – grand, threatening, awesome – with something intrinsically homely, domestic, comforting – the humble curtain.

Because Jenkinson was in Antarctica in summer – a time of perpetual daylight – she didn’t actually see the famous aurora she had read about: “So what I’ve done is visualise a lot of the things I didn’t see: the aurora pictures for example... I’m interested in this gap between description and what you actually see with your eyes...”. There is a long tradition of artists travelling to distant lands to carefully document what they see in paintings and photographs. Jenkinson turns the tradition on its head, consciously documenting what she *didn’t* see. Her project is one of imagination, not science.

Jenkinson has been playing with the conventions of photography throughout her career. Back in the 1980s she made intricate photo-collages, pasting floral arrangements onto two-dimensional urns in a play on the conventions of the

still life. More recently, she has experimented with lenticular photographs: images that contain some kind of eye-catching animation or three-dimensional perspective, or even both. You’ll have seen them on postcards, pens, gimmicks and mouse pads, but probably not on gallery walls.

Today we live in an era of manipulated images. Every Hollywood blockbuster goes through a digital gateway between filming and release print; every model for a make-up commercial has her wrinkles tweaked out of sight. But what about in the art world – does anything go there, too? In fact, some of the world’s leading art photographers – such as Cindy Sherman and Andreas Gursky – routinely manipulate their images. Meanwhile, purists such as Edward Burtynsky insist on traditional methods. Pundits argue amongst themselves: are digitally manipulated photographs equal in status to ‘pure’ photography? What do you think? Does it matter?

## Jill Trevelyan

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp](http://www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp)

[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)

[www.jonathansmartgallery.com](http://www.jonathansmartgallery.com)

### Articles:

[www.artnews.co.nz/previous/28-2/28-2-profile.html](http://www.artnews.co.nz/previous/28-2/28-2-profile.html)

### Books:

Shand, P. (1997). *Under The Aegis: The Virtues By Megan Jenkinson*, Fortuna Press, Auckland.

### Web search:

Aurora

Edward Burtynsky

Andreas Gursky

Cindy Sherman

