

Meet Dream the Combine, Winners of MoMA PS1's 2018 Young Architects Program

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Features



Jennifer Newsom and Tom Carruthers. Courtesy Martin Szabo.

Jennifer Newsom and Tom Carruthers of [Dream the Combine](#) were recently announced as winners of [MoMA PS1's 2018 Young Architects Program](#). Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the two run an experimental design practice focused mainly on public art installations that revitalize neglected spaces like an unused railroad track (*The World is Rated X*), a subway platform (*Space Destroyer*), or an abandoned fragment of Minneapolis' Skyway System (*Longing*).

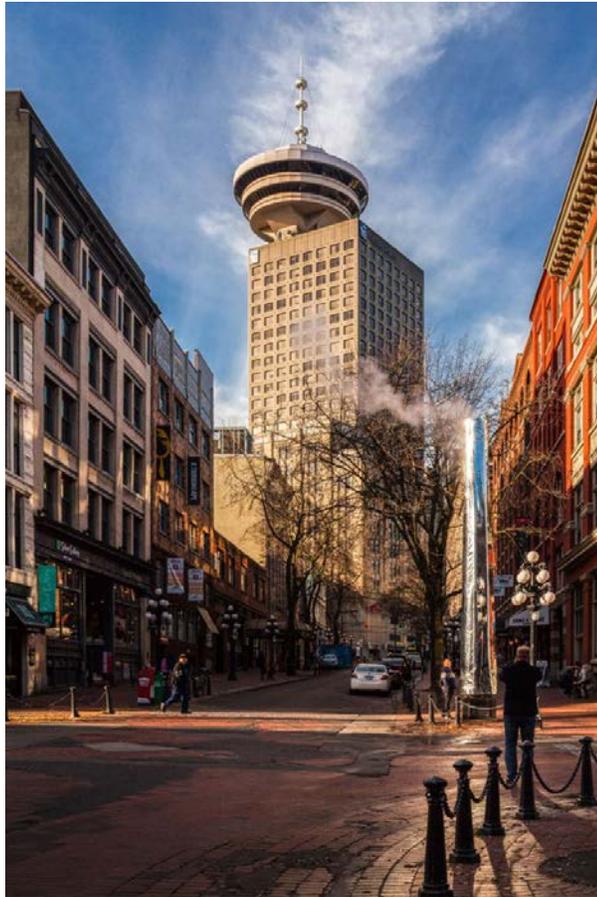
For this week's [Small Studio Snapshot](#), we talk with Newsom and Carruthers about their practice, their winning proposal *Hide & Seek*, their use of reflective materials, and the thriving art scene of Minneapolis.

How did you guys start your practice and what was your motivation?

We started working together informally in 2011 on *Space Destroyer*, a speculative project for the NYC subway that was exhibited at the New Museum's Festival of Ideas for the New City. A year later, we decided to return to Jennifer's hometown of Minneapolis. We started Dream The Combine in January 2013, just over five years ago.

We initially took on a wide variety of projects: from graphic design for a global consortium of scholars, to planning for a local school serving underrepresented students, to partnering with an architect in Vancouver, BC on the design of a 40-story residential tower. We moved to Canada for the latter, returning to Minneapolis in 2016.

While we were doing this client-driven design work, we were also making public art installations that have become the core of our practice. These build off of earlier interests in metaphor, figure/ground relationships, and cultural theory.



Make it Rain (2014). Photography by Andrew Latreille.

What is it like working in Minneapolis and how does it influence your work?

The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have been fantastic for the development of our practice. People here are incredibly supportive, and there is a strong design community that produces work of a high quality. There is also a strong investment in the arts and the quality of public space. The cold weather causes everyone to hunker down with an intensity of focus during the winter months.



Space Destroyer (2011), for New Museum festival of Ideas for the New City.

What hurdles have you come across?

Well, when you work with your spouse, you can't exactly badmouth your co-worker when you get home! We had to learn how to recognize each others' strengths and give each person the room to do their best work, all while maintaining a personal relationship and raising a family together.

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When we moved back to Minneapolis, we decided to clarify the goals of our practice and focus exclusively on installation-based public artwork. Those projects were getting the most critical response and fulfilling us in ways we didn't anticipate when we started.

You were recently announced as winners MoCA PS1's Young Architects Program. Was there a particular inspiration behind your winning proposal, *Hide & Seek*?

Lorraine O'Grady's performance artwork, "Art Is. . ." from 1983 has been a touchstone for us. Images of the performance, especially the way audience and dancer were in dialogue with the gilded frame and the frame of the street, have been inspiring as we think about ways in which bodies negotiate public space and the role architecture can have in that relationship.

What do you hope this installation with express about your firm?

We believe the relationship comes first. We aim to work meaningfully within each place and with the inevitables of each context. We hope this project underscores our commitment to working meaningfully in service of people, their interactions, and their investment in public space.



Clearing (2017), commissioned by Franconia Sculpture Park with support from Jerome Foundation.
Photo by Caylon Hackwith.



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Both your PS1 proposal and your previous art installations work heavily with mirrors and reflective materials—can you talk a bit about that choice and how it fits in with your process?

Mirrors are ambiguous - when you are faced with one, you enter into the illusion of space within its depths. Tom wrote a paper years ago about the role of vision in both the development of perspective and landscape gardens - our minds do not differentiate between the perception of depth in two vs. three dimensions. The eye goes to the far "distance" regardless. So the potential of the mirror, for us, is less about its material presence, but more about what it does in terms of perceptual, and thus experiential, effects communicated to the broader body through the eye. It works in service of a visceral experience that implicates our bodies' movement.

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One of the great abilities of architecture is its ability to be generous - to receive and to welcome. We are interested in a similar sense of expansion - of pushing through and outward - that the mirror can afford. As a kind of metaphor for openness, the mirror is a powerful tool when thinking about the politics of bodies in space. Jennifer talks with intentionality about this in the context of black spatial practice: a need for generosity, for expansion, for movement. A single mirror can be an apse; two facing mirrors can be a threshold, or, in multiple pairs, a space of switching. They become both/and situations that are portals to an imagined and infinite space.

Lastly, mirrors are wonderful invitations to activity by people of many backgrounds. They engage individuals and their movement, they inspire impromptu family portraits and un-self-conscious performances. Recently we have been inspired by theorists in Movement Studies about the histories of movement that are captured by mirrors. For us, mirrors have become a material that bears and expresses certain loads and simultaneities.



To a Constellation (2016), East Haddam, CT.

You guys currently do a lot of install projects. Do you have aspirations to work on larger-scale projects?

We like doing work that is accessible to multiple publics and bound up in the messiness of social spaces. We are interested in complexity more than scale. We'd love to do a permanent installation that allows us to address the themes that are core to our practice.

Is scaling up a goal?

There are many ways to "scale up:" in terms of people in our studio, size of the budget, square footage of the commission, and complexity of the project, to name a few. For many years, we have collaborated with engineer Clayton Binkley of ARUP, bringing on additional fabricators and support staff as needed. So the word "scale" has some specific meanings for us, perhaps more in terms of how broadly we are able to work simultaneously and less in terms of the relative size of the project.



The World is Rated X (2013). St. Paul, MN.



The World is Rated X (2013). St. Paul, MN.

What are the benefits of having your own practice and staying small?

Decisions get made far more quickly when working for yourself. We each have other work (Jennifer as an Assistant Professor at UMN and Tom with his metal fabrication company Jacobsson Carruthers) that pays the bills and allows Dream The Combine to remain experimental and take risks.