

IN CONVERSATION

Seed of Memory: The Beaded Works of Erica van Zon

by Jane Groufsky

Textured glass windows, vintage floor tiles, the sheen of light on water: multidisciplinary artist **Erica van Zon** was first drawn to glass beads to depict these glistening subjects. Yet beading has now become an integral part of her practice and is just as likely to be used to illustrate a fried egg as a swimming pool. With an insatiable curiosity for technique and subject that could spool out forever if not reined in, it is no wonder van Zon has gravitated towards a material that has both inherently attractive qualities and built-in limitations.

While her formal arts training has taken place at multiple institutions, van Zon initially obtained a Visual Arts degree with a focus in sculpture at **Auckland University of Technology** (AUT). AUT helped her establish practical skills underlying her exploration in a wide range of media, not least the ability to properly stretch a canvas, which has been crucial to her beaded work. Adding to a practice that already incorporated photography, design, embroidery and various approaches to three-dimensional construction, van Zon was attracted to beading for its potential to depict glass itself. Her initial subjects were the different kinds of textured window glass in her building, but she soon embraced the technique across all her subjects. “Next thing I know I’ve beaded a Bahn Mi sandwich,” she says.¹

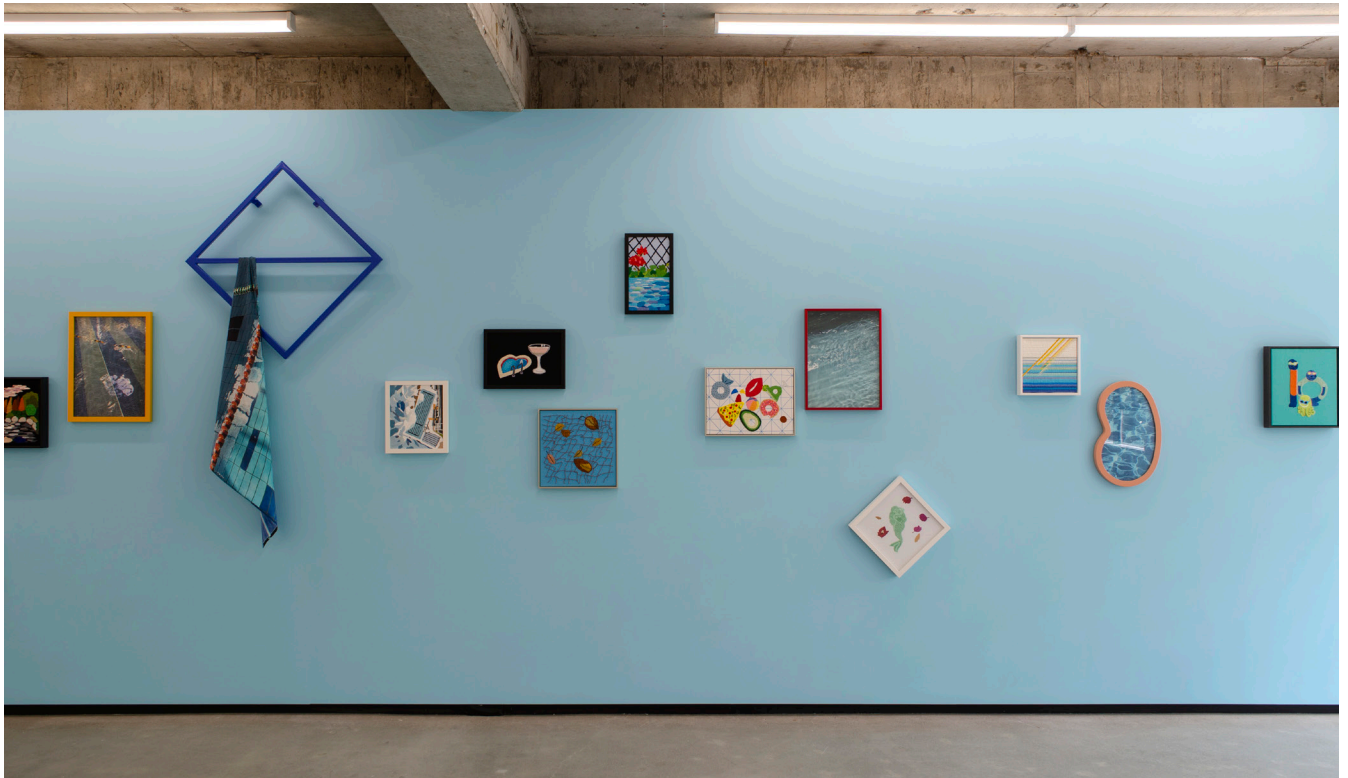
A voracious adopter of new methods, van Zon describes herself as the kind of learner inclined to “read the magazine backwards.” Early attempts saw van Zon sewing each tiny glass seed bead on individually, an extremely time-consuming process. To fill larger areas, she has embraced the technique of contour beading, infilling outlines by following the natural curves and lines. Somewhat resistant to doing things the “correct” way, van Zon uses ordinary sewing needles and waxed quilting thread which she has colour-matched to her beads. And this careful handwork is sometimes obscured: the



Erica van Zon, *Bahn Mi*, 2017. Glass beads on linen, 20 x 20 inches.
Photo: Richard Wotton, courtesy of Sarjeant Gallery, Objectspace and
Melanie Roger Gallery, New Zealand.



Erica van Zon, *Big Splash*, 2022. Glass beads on cotton, 15 x 13 inches.
Photo courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.



Erica van Zon, *Deep Deep Icy Blue* (installation), 2022. Photo courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.

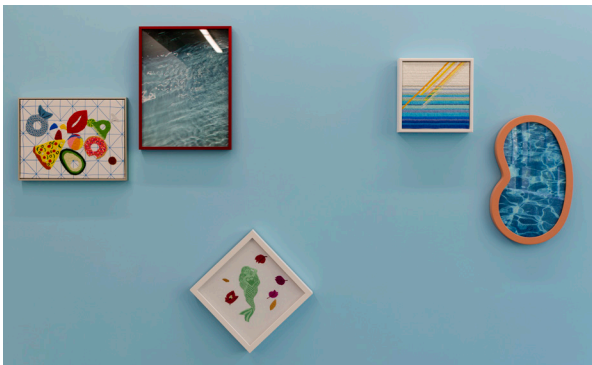
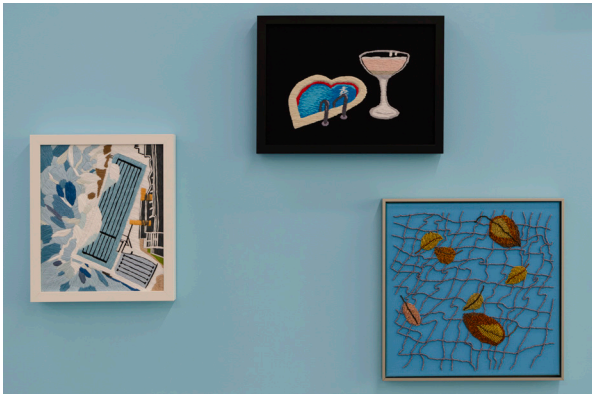
beaded moon of her 2017 work “Opal Moon” is deliberately mounted behind ridged glass, subverting the conventional appeal of beads made to glint and catch the eye.

As eager as van Zon is to break certain established rules, she is equally keen to insert limits into her own exhibition-making practice. With her endlessly varied subjects and media, setting guidelines for herself helps van Zon create a coherent formal structure within an exhibition. By choosing in one show not to utilise the walls, or in another to not use the floor, for example, her deliberate framing helps pull together disparate parts. Some of her rules are borne of necessity: the intense craft work of beading can be hard on her body and simply impossible to enact at a large scale. Once the framework of the exhibition is established, she is then free to create works of varying scale and technique with conceptual and thematic relationships.

In her most recent solo exhibition at **Jhana Millers Gallery** in Wellington, *Deep Deep Icy Blue*, the works were scattered vignettes on a single pale blue wall of the gallery. A collection of techniques depict van Zon’s encounters with swimming pools: the used sticking plaster languishing on the pool floor; a reinterpretation of **David Hockney’s** splash works, seen from



Erica van Zon, *Autumn Leaves on Pool*, 2022. Glass beads on cotton, 14.125 x 14.125 inches. Photo courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.



above and contour-beaded; the bittersweet sight of autumn leaves on the pool's surface as the weather turns cool. Drawing on real experiences—Van Zon visits her local aquatic centre frequently with her daughter—she has noticed an increasingly child-like quality emerging in her work since becoming a mother. Initially she didn't want to create art “about being a mum” but then questioned this impulse. “Why not? Why don't you involve your kids? This is the one time you can do it!”

The Czech glass beads van Zon uses are by their nature slightly irregular, which creates both limitations and possibilities. When used to depict painted pool lanes, as in “Swimming Pool” (2018), the lines are not ruler straight but a little wobbly, almost as if viewed through the distortion of the water. Sometimes the nature of the beads will force van Zon to break the guidelines she has set herself. For example, she intended to use regular rows of beads to illustrate a sixbar wrasse fish with almost scientific accuracy for a work in progress, but has let the beads dictate the outcome, saying “I had an almost computer-inkjet-printer-like plan for the fish in the beginning—all working on the same lines with different colours, but it ended up being more of a crazy patchwork situation to work with the nuances in the patterns on the fish.”

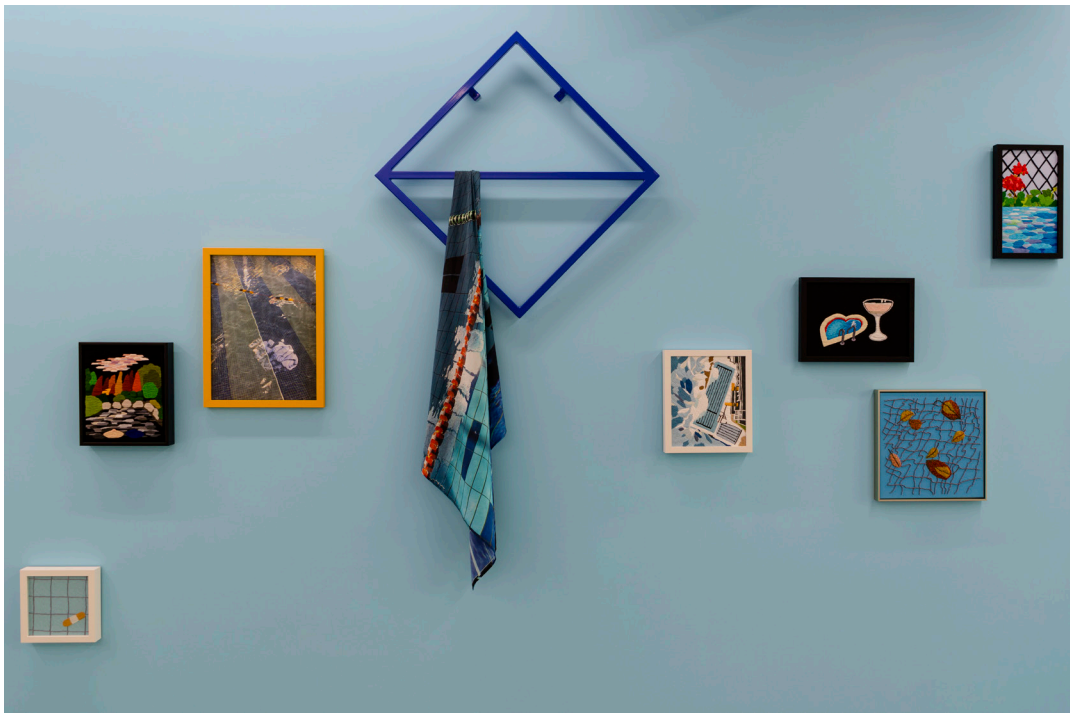
The word “nostalgic” comes naturally when observing her work. However, hidden in nostalgia is an unreliable narrator. “Opal Moon” was made soon after a 2016 residency at the **Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui's Tylee Cottage** in Whanganui and based on her recollection of the moon glowing through her bedroom window there. It was only upon a return visit later that she realised that her “moon” was, in fact, a streetlight. Her oeuvre is full of these moments where an idea becomes altered in translation. With beaded works that reinterpret and elevate the ordinary, van Zon invites the viewer to linger and smile over their own memories.

jhanamillers.com/artists/ericavanzon
melanierogergallery.com/stockroom/erica-van-zon/

¹ Erica van Zon, interview with author, September 22, 2022. All other quotes, same source.

—Jane Groufsky (she/her) is Curator of Social History at Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira in Auckland, New Zealand, where she recently co-curated Tāmaki Herenga Waka: Stories of Auckland, a major new permanent exhibition. Her research interests include printed textiles, fashion and decorative arts in a New Zealand context.

All left photos: **Erica van Zon**, *Deep Deep Icy Blue* (installation details), 2022. Photos courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.



Erica van Zon, *Deep Deep Icy Blue* (installation detail), 2022. Photo courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.

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