

Gender

By Sara Caron



Architecture can be a synthesis of meaning, form, and experience. It is a form charged, as Eero Saarinen said in 1959, with the responsibility to "shelter and enhance man's life on earth and to fulfill his belief in the nobility of his existence" (5).

The purpose of art, on a grand scale encompassing many media and practices, does the same thing. The collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum is lucky to be housed in two buildings, one completed in 1957 designed by Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen the other in 1994 by Santiago Calatrava, that both seek to enlighten and ennoble the spirits of their viewers and visitors. Both concrete structures, through separate approaches achieve an unexpected lightness. Saarinen's original building achieves this effect through balance and proportion, the Calatrava addition through color and form. The way the two spaces blend together, honor the lake, the artwork they house, and the city they're situated in reflects a particular mid-western humility despite their individual, monumental grandeur.

The Calatrava addition to the art museum confounds expectations. More than with the original Saarinen building, it is difficult to separate the building from the architect himself. The war memorial is more understated. Ego is more subdued. There is a way of seeing in terms of architecture that, as stated by Jos Boys, from a masculinist perspective "assumes the architect as objective observer and the building as the transparent expression of that gaze" (qtd. in Chaplin 136). Ideas of buildings as gendered representations are centered on psychoanalytical, symbolic readings of architectural forms as well as professional practice in the field. As in the art world women are startlingly underrepresented. It has taken until the end of the last century for female architects to distinguish themselves from their male partners and to be viewed as more than just muses (Chaplin 131). It wasn't until 2004, that a female architect, Zaha Hadid, was awarded the field's top honor, the Pritzker Prize. As Jerry Saltz reported in 2006 in the *Village Voice*, "of 297 one-person shows (at well-known galleries in New York throughout that year) by living artists... just 23 percent are solos by women".

The MAM's Calatrava wing has the personality but not the symbology. The low, yonic form does not make demands of its environment the way a skyscraper does. Though it makes a bold visual statement it is one always in concert with its surroundings. The curves of the building sweep up and around and exalt the volume and space within it. There is very little art actually displayed in this part of the museum, a fact that forces the viewer to confront their expectations of the institution, of their role in the space, and their notions of functionality. The questions the space asks provide the opportunity to re-judge the criteria by which art, architecture, society and culture are judged.

An aspect of Eero Saarinen's architectural ideology was a focus on time, on the present moment. He believed that his work should reflect where and when it was created (Saarinen 6). Feminist practices of revising history, attempting to reorder the male-centric canon of art and history and to reassign authorship, still reflect masculinist ideals. They rely on a reference to what they are revising and augmenting and operate from the same perspective. The entire analysis of history must be shifted so that "ultimately the discipline...itself is not defined purely in term's of men's experience" (Chaplin 130).

Santiago Calatrava's addition to the art museum does not fight against Eero Saarinen's war memorial, it embraces and offers a place to Mark Di Suvero's orange sunburst, it celebrates the "culture of Lake Michigan". The building gathers these influences up with it and moves forward in collaboration with them, opening, perhaps, windows to a new perspective. We cannot forget what has come before it but we are allowed to view the role of the architecture, and of the collection it holds, in a new way.

Works Cited

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