



## Seventeen hours of daylight

*Gill Gatfield spent summer in Denmark working on two sculptural projects – both grounded in history yet engaging contemporary themes of gender and equality.*

**F**our tonnes of granite and two tonnes of glass made a memorable summer for me in Aarhus, which will be the European Union's Cultural Capital in 2017. Denmark is a land where people swim naked in the sea all year round, and where making clear-cut statements is de rigueur. The Danish Women's Museum has a giant banner on the wall outside, facing the gothic Cathedral and announcing: "Museums are awesome because everyone shuts the fuck up". It's a striking paradox – a nation that is characterised as polite and reserved also embraces the openly provocative and pornographic.

In Copenhagen, billboards on exterior walls of luxury department stores flaunt female flesh while along the road at SMK National Gallery of Denmark the exhibition *What's Happening?* revives avant-garde art and feminism in the 1960s and 70s. North of Copenhagen at Ordrupgaard Museum, architect Zaha Hadid's sensuous sculptural extension towers over Jeppe Hein's mirror labyrinth. North again, at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Henry Moore's plump *Reclining Figure* looks down on the steel limbs of Richard Serra's *The Gate*. There's no work by women artists in the Louisiana Sculpture Park, yet.

Two opportunities – an exhibition at Sculpture by the Sea Aarhus and an artist's residency at the Women's Museum – took me to Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city. For summer 2015, I was immersed in the diverse Scandinavian cultural scene with its cutting-edge architecture, clean design aesthetics, and progressive politics. My minimalist apartment was encircled by iconic works of art and architecture: Arne Jacobsen's mid-century city hall with its classic Roman clock and Olafur Eliasson's massive rainbow, a circular glass walkway, crowning the cubic ARoS Aarhus Art Museum – an international centre for visual art.

My journey to Sculpture by the Sea Aarhus began two years earlier. A visit to Southern France to see Palaeolithic cave paintings fuelled a desire to represent both the cave and the drawing in a single abstract gesture. I wanted to capture within a stone marker, the ancient and primitive impulse of mark-marking; to demonstrate connectivity while enabling freedom of movement. I arrived at the abstract x-figure, *The Kiss*, which makes a link to the past through a modern mark of love. To render and enable 'an embrace', this work needed to subsume the proportions of the human figure.

Opposite page and below: Gill Gatfield, *The Kiss*, 2015, black granite, 2 x 3m. Sculpture by the Sea, Aarhus, Denmark

Right: Gill Gatfield and engineer Peter Boardman discussing models of *The Kiss*

My intention was to develop a free-standing form consisting of two stone panels of equal proportions, interlocked at the centre. This pairing of two equal yet independent elements gives literal, sensory, and symbolic expression to a central conceptual premise of *The Kiss* – the partnership of equals. My method of construction would enact a kiss. The chosen material is black granite, an igneous primordial stone from the once molten core that connects continents and nations. Connectivity is central to the x-form. An x denotes universal human DNA – the genetic code shared by all women and men, irrespective of nationality, race, and religion. In open space and surrounded by nature, people could find intimacy and self-reflection in the wings of the sculpture.

I contacted quarries in three continents to source the granite. The size and quality of the stone, and the scale of machinery needed to make the work, limited the pool and ruled out the option of making the sculpture in New Zealand or Denmark. The stone I wanted would be difficult to extract because denser blacks are deeper in the quarry. Finally, an outsized block was quarried in India. As cutting and surfacing progressed, I incorporated natural features uncovered in the stone into the sculpture design. The process of consulting with New Zealand engineer Peter Boardman to work out foundation and installation systems brought my construction methodology to life. There was a constant flow of communication with the site team in Denmark about site selection, steel fabrication, shipping and installation. Finally, my four tonnes of mirror-polished black granite reached the Port of Aarhus in mid-May, just days before I arrived.

Half a million people visit Sculpture by the Sea Aarhus, a biennial exhibition under the patronage of Denmark's royal family. For 2015, the jury of academics and curators selected 56 artists from 24 countries. Thirty percent are women. Sited on a pristine coastline, every work had breathing space. *The Kiss* was constructed at Ballehage, a naturalist beach where locals swim daily in the icy Kattegat Sea. On white sand against the green forest backdrop with fresh spring growth, *The Kiss* marked a turning point on the sculpture trail.

Getting to *The Kiss* involved walking along a succession of beaches between Aarhus Bay and Marselisborg Forest. From this northernmost point of the walk, it was mesmerising to watch the waves of visitors moving along the trail. Giving artist talks, I discovered Danes take a thoughtful approach to art viewing and offer succinct feedback. I was told the sculpture is “a metaphor”; it combines “culture and nature”, “machine and man”, “idea and form”; and “it is beautiful”. People circled the stone. Hands reached out and touched it. Some tapped the granite in disbelief – it looked like mirrored glass or polished steel. Adults and children played. Couples kissed.



I saw *The Kiss* every weekend. My residency at Kvindemuseet/Women's Museum, a national museum promoting debate on gender and culture, gave me a base and a context to develop new work. I had a workspace, curatorial support, an assistant (with a Masters in Theology), a choice of exhibition spaces, and no timeline – except my return ticket to Auckland at the end of July. The museum was established in 1982 and has an international focus. Previous exhibitors include Ulla Diedrichsen and Yoko Ono. In 2015 Denmark celebrates its Women's Suffrage Centenary and the museum is at the centre of these events. The museum's “everyone shuts the fuck up” wall banner, went viral with over two million views worldwide. Equality is a hot topic, and daily conversations quickly become deeper discussions.

The museum building is the original City Hall, built in 1857, where women's rights were first contested and later exercised. The preserved interior exudes power and democracy. The museum's curator Julie Rokkjaer Birch described the building as “the museum's largest object”. This elegant 19th-century structure, with arts and crafts embellishments, became my muse. I kept returning to one small room with two distinctive doorways. Situated in the heart of the building, it's reached by climbing an imposing suspended stone staircase, and offers a





Gill Gatfield, *Glass Ceiling/Glasloft*, 2015, broken glass, room, 4.07 x 4.07 x 2.72m; (below) Women's Museum, Aarhus, Denmark



shortcut to the monumental Grand Hall where Denmark's first female municipal politician was elected. Despite its modest size the room conveys a sense of height. It opens upward creating a tower-like space, as high as it is wide. Mounted on a wall inside, a tiny sign on a fire alarm says – in English – “smash glass”.

A single window in the room looks down on a park commemorating Mathilde Fibiger, an activist and author who famously wrote in 1851, at the age of 21: “I grieve that I am not a man”. Outside the room, etched in the stairwell glass, Queen Margrete I rides across the landscape on a white horse. She was a visionary leader able to reign only under the authority of a male relative. These windows into Denmark's past and the signs on the walls generated ideas.

Denmark, like New Zealand, is facing a significant shortfall of women and minority groups in leadership roles. Energy is directed at penetrating the ‘glass ceiling’ – the metaphor coined by late 1970s feminists describing the invisible barrier facing women and minorities. Within the enclave of the Women's Museum, I began to question the substance and psychology of this paradigm. What if there is no glass ceiling? What framework is in place? I imagined the small room with a smashed glass floor, high bare walls, and the ceiling intact. I wanted to turn the room on its head, to shift the focus to structure and substrate within a quiet space.

I needed two tonnes of clear glass to fill the floor of the room up to the height of a single step. The step signifies both barrier and ascent – an aspirational step up to the glass ceiling. We approached the Glass Museum, recyclers and manufacturers, looking for glass which we could break on and off site. Bin loads of roughly broken glass were moved into the protected historic building. Glass dust is toxic. In the summer heat, with 17 hours of daylight and wearing full protective gear in the closed room, I chipped away at the glass.

*Glass Ceiling/Glasloft* was developed, constructed, and opened within three weeks. A three dimensional form, the work's dimensions were the internal skin of the room. Stripped of doors and light fittings, the room glistened. A mass of broken glass pressed against walls and thresholds and became an alluring bed of diamonds, filled with promise. Edgy and unsettling, it warned as much as it beckoned. Although the doors were open, the way forward was blocked. It looked dangerous yet people couldn't resist stepping up and into the room to occupy and wonder. For the Women's Museum, *Glass Ceiling/Glasloft* projected a future vision inside the house of history.

Before leaving Denmark, I bought a small replica Arne Jacobsen Roman clock so I could keep Danish time. You need 17 hours of daylight to absorb it all.