

# SPACE

## Sculptor

*Mary Miss infuses large public spaces with private resonance. At the tip of Manhattan, she transformed three barren acres into a sanctuary so peaceful even the Dalai Lama was pleased. By Gabriella De Ferrari*

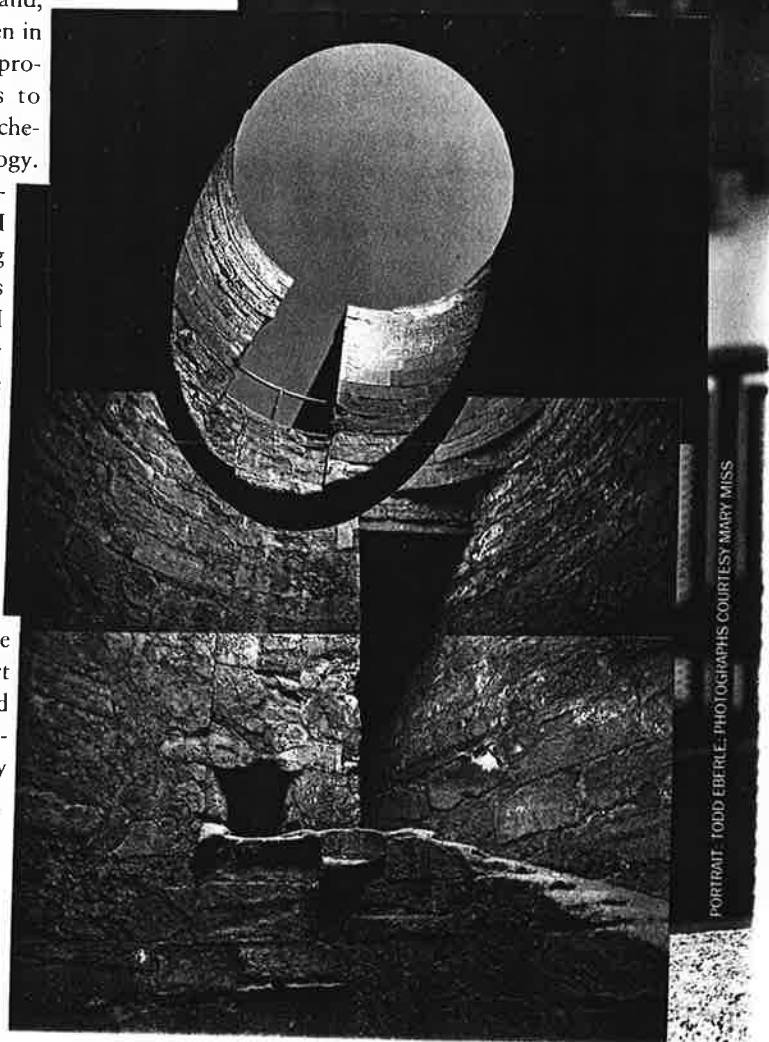
**O**n a busy corner of TriBeCa in lower Manhattan, in one of the rare buildings that has escaped co-op conversion and still speaks of what the neighborhood used to be, the scent of roasted nuts from a wholesaler on the first floor permeates the air. The fragrance drifts up four flights of stairs and into the cavernous studio that Mary Miss has occupied for twenty years. Here, in organized chaos, works the artist who is mostly known for having created some of the largest and best pieces of public sculpture around, among them Manhattan's South Cove.

Lately, Miss has taken up photography, employing a technique similar to that of her site sculpture, using an interplay of forms and images to create profoundly evocative environments. Now in two dimensions as well as three, she conjures her mysterious spaces, odd shapes that speak to one another, magical contrasts of shadow and light. Her foray into this field has worked so well that New York's Museum of Modern Art included her work in its New Photography 8 exhibit, running through early January.

Mary Miss is a tall woman in her late forties, slender and commanding. Today she is dressed all in black, with turquoise stones set into a pair of dangling earrings—her signature—providing the only touch of color. Her abundant salt-and-pepper hair crowns

a strong face dominated by inquisitive dark eyes. She moves comfortably, slowly, like a dancer, among an encyclopedic array of photographs, blueprints, maquettes, small architectural details and, most of all, books. Even in the drafting stage of a project, Miss continues to read, chiefly history, archeology and anthropology. "I'm sort of a closet historian," she says. "I look for the recurring architectural elements in different cultures. I want to find out why people settled on these forms: why these specific shapes? And what is their essence?"

Miss's career has been as unconventional as her method. One of the few female artists to gain prominence in the seventies when the art world baldly excluded women, Miss has organized her work in a way **Miss at South Cove, right; inset, untitled photo collage of an Egyptian well, 1989.**



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY MARY MISS



## Miss has developed some expertise in engineering, urban development and management—skills not traditionally found in a sculptor

extending into the water. The setting is tranquil, yet a turn of the head brings visitors back to the city's jittery skyline.

The parts that make up the whole of Miss's design are so well integrated and the transitions so unobtrusive that visitors hardly notice that the landscape has been transformed. South Cove, like Battery Park City itself, is, after all, an unnatural creation, an idealized, sanitary version of the disorderly metropolis. The ninety-two acres that compose Battery Park City are landfill "from the excavation of the site for the World Trade Center; the rest was dredged up hydraulically from the gravelly bottom of the Lower Bay," wrote Brendan Gill in *The New Yorker* in the summer of 1990, two years after South Cove officially opened. Even with this understanding, he goes on, "one is hard pressed to remember that [all of South Cove] rests upon a foundation of steel and concrete, laced with water pipes, drains, and electric conduits"—the typical urban infrastructure.

Like the rest of Miss's work, South Cove is rich with allusions to the architecture and sensibilities of other cultures and eras. Miss is an avid traveler, not only visiting the sites of her international commissions but also

constantly enlarging the vocabulary she incorporates into her work: a distillation of sights and sensations and a comprehension of how others live that she brings to the American landscape. She doesn't simply borrow from other cultures. Through extensive research, she translates her experiences into "places that function in the public domain but allow private experience—spiritual places that allow reflection."

"The best thing that happened at South Cove," says Miss, "was when the Dalai Lama was in New York and he chose my sculpture as the site to disperse the sand design created by monks in the Kalachakra ceremony. I am not an observing Buddhist, though I have a compelling interest in it. The significance of this event for me was that this man whom I admire chose my sculpture to use

**Skyways: above, a wooden-and-steel bridge at South Cove; right, steel viewing tower.**

in such a manner. I was so moved. This is what I wanted my sculpture to be: a place that is part of ourselves."

Miss long ago grew impatient with the traditional sculptural concept of a monolithic object in a room. She learned that "if I put pieces outdoors and spread them over larger spaces, viewers became engaged in a more extended way, which I really liked."

Unlike other environmental artists such as Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer, who have drastically altered the landscape to suit their work, Miss most often chooses to develop landscapes that incorporate existing elements. When she starts work on a project, one of her first steps is to talk to the people who live nearby. "I ask them, what are the most compelling things in the area?" For *Pool Complex: Orchard Valley* at the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, Miss built upon a ruined pool surrounded by an array of walkways. She added stairs, terraces, trellises, balconies, pavilions and more walkways, inviting people to wander through, to sit and to view the surroundings. Wrote *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith, "She runs through a veritable encyclopedia of vernacular carpentry and architectural forms which can stimulate an amazing assortment of associations, both collective and private." *Mirror Way*, a temporary construction for the courtyard of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, made subtle references to forts and ancient ruins, with stairs and passageways that ended abruptly, creating a series of tantalizingly inaccessible levels.

Miss attributes what she calls her "Western sense of scale and space" and her love

