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Artist Mary Miss Speaks at Public Art Symposium Event Was Collaboration of Hamilton and Colgate Art Departments

Contact: Holly Foster
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September 11, 2006

Renowned public artist Mary Miss spoke to a large audience of Hamilton College and Colgate University community members in Hamilton's Science Auditorium on Sept. 8. Miss talked about her long career, in which she has blended sculpture, architecture and landscape design to create innovative works of art around the world, as well as her vision for the future of public art. Miss was the keynote speaker for a two day symposium on Public Art on Campus, sponsored jointly by Hamilton and Colgate's art departments.

Deborah Pokinski, associate professor of art history at Hamilton, was one of the organizers of the symposium. She began the event by speaking about the symposium, calling it a "special auspicious event" and praising the collaboration between Hamilton College and Colgate University. Pokinski then introduced Hamilton's Dean of Faculty Joseph Urgo, who introduced the speaker. Urgo spoke about Mary Miss's long and distinguished career, saying that she has "engaged with central questions of human-made landscapes," and has introduced alternative approaches for the experience and creation of art.

Miss began her lecture by saying that she was there to speak not as a theoretician, observer, historian, or critic, but rather as a passionate practitioner of her own art. She explained that she wanted to share her thoughts about the evolution of her work, as well as her thoughts on the direction of public art. The main thing she has been thinking and dreaming about, she said, is taking artists away from the role of detached critic, and instead making them actively engaged in the world through their work. While city, county, state and national programs for placing art in the public sphere have increased over the past few decades, Miss said, they have also sometimes limited the artistic process by relegating the artist to a narrow range of possibilities. To truly cross boundaries and integrate art into people's lives, she said, we have to find additional routes for artists to bring their work into our culture.

Thinking about her own work, Miss said that her main aim has been to redefine the relationship between built and natural environments and to change people's way of relating to the world around them. Showing slides of several of her past projects, Miss spoke about her goal of bringing viewers through the site on their own, without the structured guidance of a museum setting. To make the viewer an active participant in this way, the piece has to be both emotionally and physically engaging. Slides of Miss's work in Long Island, Lake Placid, Finland, and New York City's Battery Park City neighborhood showed how she leads people to interact with their environment in an unconventional way.

Another main theme of Miss's work has been integrating ecologically conscious design into public art. In Arlington, Virginia for example, Miss took

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part in the renovation of a 30-acre working sewage treatment plant. By making a piece of infrastructure into a public space with art and educational information, Miss felt that she could give people a better understanding of how their daily lives are connected to such processes.

Currently, Miss is working on part of a project to turn the 5000-acre El Toro Marine Base in Irvine, California into the Orange County Great Park. With that project, Miss said that her goals include meaningfully connecting the park to the wilderness surrounding it, and getting people to understand sustainability and their relationship to the environment in a new way. At the same time, she wants to use part of the park as a sort of "living laboratory" where artists, architects, scientists, designers, and others can come together to experiment with new directions for public art. Creating a space such as this where artists are the main focus can counteract society's fear and skepticism of the artist, Miss said.

Miss concluded by speaking about art on college campuses specifically. UC San Diego has one of the great collections of art on a campus, she said, but it is still in the model of a museum courtyard - a collection of pieces put onto the landscape. Miss wondered if there could be another model for bringing art onto college campuses, perhaps a way to give artists access to the people who are part of the campus and integrate their ideas into the work. She expressed her belief that colleges could allow artists to function differently in the world, and to give them a chance to go beyond the limited questions that are currently being asked of them.

Miss's talk was followed by a question and answer session, and a reception in the Emerson Gallery. On Saturday, the symposium continued at Colgate University with a panel discussion.

-- by **Caroline Russell O'Shea '07**

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