



DO NOT ENTER – TRANSCEND

**Gill Gatfield, *Glass Ceiling / Glasloft*
Women's Museum Denmark, 2015**

Over the past 30 years, the Women's Museum in Denmark has presented cultural history with a focus on gender equality and women's liberation. During that period, significant progress in the advancement of equality has occurred, and debate about gender rights and opportunities is now more active in the media than ever before.

The role of the Women's Museum is to provide a platform for debate on the intangible aspects of cultural heritage that touches the lives of all citizens; and to create a space for the audience to experience gender issues. Connecting history, knowledge, conversation and art, the Women's Museum provides new perspectives on what sex and gender mean in our society today. The goal is to stimulate an interest in gender history and ideology, and to ensure that young people grow up with the belief that equality of the sexes is a natural right.

In the spring of 2015, the Women's Museum first came into contact with artist Gill Gatfield who was building a new granite sculpture, *The Kiss*, for Sculpture by the Sea in Aarhus. Gatfield's work radiates gender consciousness, and aligns directly

with the Women's Museum's work and vision. Gatfield creates minimalist sculptures steeped with content. Her works are philosophical and beautiful, revealing scientific inquiries into human nature – in and with nature itself. Her abstract conceptual artwork appeals to the senses and simultaneously provokes an often political content.

Gatfield's art challenges the audience to reflect on what equality means in our society. In a fusion of the site-specific, the material, and the audience, she creates works that invoke deeper contemplation and touch on important but often taboo subjects such as: How does gender occur in our consciousness? What is equality? Do we have equality? Are we free?

Gill Gatfield's artist residency at the Women's Museum during the year 2015 was both apt and timely. In 2015, Denmark celebrated the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote – a milestone of democracy – and the national Women's Museum played a central role in the celebrations. The artist's involvement with the Museum at this time created a full circle - Gatfield is from New Zealand: the first country in the world where women won the right to vote.



Women's Museum Denmark

Gatfield creates site-specific sculptures. As she explored the exterior and interior of the museum on Cathedral Square 5, she absorbed the building's purpose and history. Built in 1857 as the Town Hall, long before women got the vote, this ornate brick structure sits in the heart of the city. From 1941 to 1984, it functioned as the Police Headquarters; and since 1984 it has housed one of the world's leading women's museums. This venue exudes power, democracy, and the achievements of the women's movement. It was here that Denmark's first female municipal politician worked; Denmark's first female police officer was trained; and so on. The building itself is, in effect, the Women's Museum's largest object.

Gatfield was fascinated by a small, upper level room set off the grand central staircase. As high as it is wide, this space has two doorways and forms an anteroom or passageway leading from the stair landing into the imposing Great Hall of the old Council Chamber. The small room's original purpose is unknown but it functions as an alternative entry to the Great Hall; a faster and more direct route than the main monumental entrance with its imposing carved doorway. In this transitional space, Gatfield chose to create a metaphor, a political concept presented as a sensory experience - a work of art. The title *Glass Ceiling* or *Glasloft* in Danish has an intriguing linguistic twist - 'loft' also means 'high' in English. She described the space as 'an obstacle and an opportunity'.

A glass ceiling is a metaphor; a political term used to describe an invisible and unbreakable barrier that prevents women from reaching the top levels of a career ladder or in political life, regardless of qualifications. The thesis is that economic, social and cultural mechanisms enable men to maintain overall power in society. Originated in the late 1970s as a feminist idea, the glass ceiling concept



Central staircase (top); Museum Great Hall



Glass Ceiling / Glasloft - two doorways (above)



Threshold (above), View from ceiling (below)



is now used to describe the barrier to equal representation for all minority groups at decision making levels in society. Gatfield's *Glass Ceiling* highlights the tension and ambiguity that underpins the metaphor. A glass ceiling is transparent and located high above. It is untouchable. At the same time, glass is a fragile material so synchronously with the perception of it as a barrier, is the impulse to crush it.

In her work at the Women's Museum, Gatfield has materialized the glass ceiling and crystallized the metaphor (literally and figuratively). The glass has been shattered and lies in thousands of pieces on the floor; a glistening pool, from wall to wall. Has the ceiling fallen down or is the room inverted? Or does this ceiling belong to the space beneath us?

The work sparks reflections on the illusion of the glass ceiling. Could women break through it, and what happens when they do? Will different barriers emerge? Although the glass panes are destroyed in Gatfield's work, a barrier remains - now in front and across, not above. The room is stripped of doors but the two open doorways are not enough. People can see across the room, but they cannot go through it. The obstacle has become horizontal, structural, and at our feet.

Gatfield makes the well-known metaphor palpable - the audience can experience it with their own bodies. The space previously used as a passageway, where people lingered or passed through, has now become an anti-room: you cannot enter; you cannot pass through; you cannot stay in it. The floored ceiling is dangerous, unstable and sharp. But the impulse to cross the room is strong - so strong that even a 'Do Not Enter' sign is not an obstacle for many of the Museum's visitors. The urge to break boundaries and rules and traverse Gatfield's *Glass Ceiling* seems as strong as women's urge to break the glass ceiling. The barrier continues to entice and challenge – whether intact or broken.

The Museum, the context, and an increasingly topical issue coalesce in *Glass Ceiling / Glasloft*. Combined with her use of materials and abstract form, Gill Gatfield gives artistic expression to a key issue in Denmark's commemorative year for gender equality. For those seeking higher goals, the work suggests we can do much more than enter the room. There is an uplifting sense of possibility in Gatfield's *Glass Ceiling* moving us to rethink structural frameworks and go beyond the limits.

Julie Rokkjær Birch
Curator
Women's Museum Denmark
2015



Gill Gatfield
Glass Ceiling / Glasloft 2015
broken glass, room
4.07mH x 4.07mW x 2.72mD