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by Jan Garden Castro

# Territories

An Interview with Mary Miss

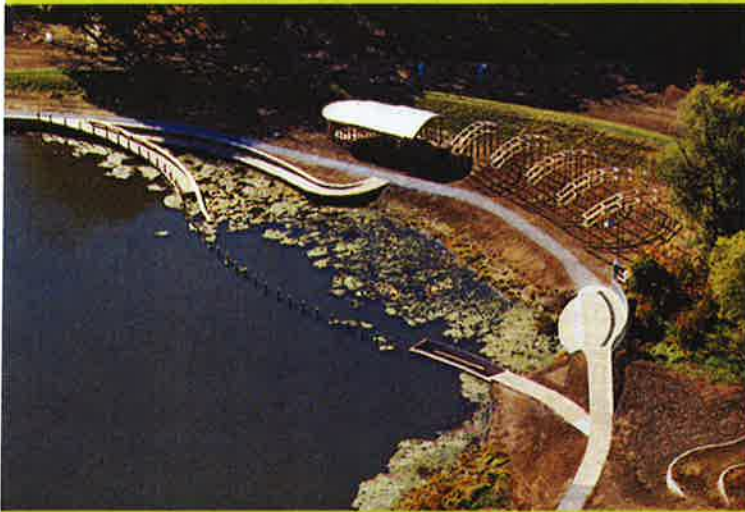




*Mary Miss addresses urban place-making in our time by combining art, design, archaeology, landscape architecture, and urban planning. Miss insists, "My role as an artist is to open up new tracts of thinking and to explore new territory." Her minimal solutions invite viewers to participate in sifting the layers and history of a site by walking through it, viewing it from different perspectives, sitting at varied elevations, and otherwise "reading" its topography. Among her successful projects to date, the seven-acre demonstration wetlands for the Des Moines Art Center and the two-and-a-half-acre South Cove Battery Park project feature walkways and viewing platforms that variously frame each site and simultaneously invite viewer participation. Works-in-progress include the Federal Courthouse project in St. Louis, the Union Square Subway Station in New York City, and a riverwalk along the Milwaukee River, which incorporates a storm water treatment project.*

**CAD rendering of  
concept design for  
Milwaukee  
Riverwalk, 1998.**





**Top to bottom:**  
**Greenwood Pond, Double Site, 1989–96.** Aerial view of 6.5-acre site. **South Cove, Battery Park City, 1988.** Aerial view of 2.5-acre project, a collaboration with Susan Child, landscape architect, and Stanton Eckstut, architect. **Jyvaskyla Project, 1994.** Detail of 2-acre site in Finland. **Opposite: University Hospital Project, 1994.** Aerial view of 1-acre site.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *Over the years, have you changed your criteria for working with public art?*

**Mary Miss:** When I started working in the late '60s, the notion of being a public artist was laughable, because that meant making something to decorate the front of a building. That was as complex a definition as you could imagine. Through the process of doing projects over a period of time, this territory emerged as a rich and viable area of investigation. It was like redefining what art could be and trying to define a different way for artists to operate in the world.

**JGC:** *Your working method seems to involve plenty of on-site research. Could you discuss the stages of research for a project?*

**MM:** Whenever I'm going to a new place, I spend as much time as I can going around the city and understanding the place geographically, historically, socially, physically, in as many ways as I can. I always meet very interesting people who are curious and eager to share the information they've got. This process of researching is one of the most important aspects of the work—finding out what is there and then deciding what the focus will be.

**JGC:** *You have said that making art is closer to film-making than to monument making and includes layering various areas of expertise. Could you elaborate? How does this notion apply to public art?*

**MM:** I'm describing a method of working that I've developed over the years and that I find very appropriate to my way of proceeding. Since I'm working mostly in the public domain, that's where I've seen its applications. The thing that I'm most interested in as an artist is finding a new territory to explore or define in some way. Working with others who have very clear areas of expertise is rewarding in that it allows you to enter territories and look at things in a way that you hadn't done before.

Early on, the notion of collaborating with architects seemed important because of the kinds of projects I wanted to work on. As the projects have evolved, it's not just architects or design professionals; it's also botanists or archaeologists or writers. There are many different areas that you can look to, depending on the project. Because of the complexity of our time and our future prospects, we have to become more creative about how we're proceeding in dealing with our lives and everything around us. This layering of information is a working process that addresses that need for me.

**JGC:** *In contrast to working with architecture, what are some discoveries in the area of working with wetlands and indigenous plants?*

**MM:** I'm not singularly interested in issues of ecology, for instance, or creating wetlands or urban archaeology. What's interesting to me is going to a situation and finding out what's there to base the work on. In the early work, it was really the physical properties of the site: a steep hill or what you could see in the surrounding area.

Over the years, it's become a more complex investigation. For instance, I'm now working on a project along the Milwaukee River. I wanted to focus on the river and make people understand how the river worked, what its history was, what its possible future was. One of the things I ended



to stop and reflect upon something in the busy chaos of city life provides a breathing spot, a brief intimate engagement.

up focusing on was storm water treatment: how devices could be placed along the river to send clean water from the street runoff into the river. This is a demonstration project and is not cleaning all the water that's going into the river. But it's a new way to start thinking about the river.

In that same project, I'm really interested in the way the infrastructure of the city intersects with the river—the bridges, highways, deep tunnel system—and how you can bring people's attention to that.

**JGC:** *How long have you been working on the Milwaukee project?*

**MM:** Since last May. It's about a half mile of riverfront walkway. What's particularly interesting about this project is that I'm not coming in after it has already been started. For instance, architect Lee Harris Pomeroy had been working on the Union Square subway project in New York City for a year or more by the time I came in. I had to find where I could fit in.

**JGC:** *That's an even longer range project.*

**MM:** Right. It was started in 1993 and won't be done until the year 2000. In the Milwaukee project, I was asked, as an artist, to take the lead role—to define what it will be about—and that's quite unusual.

**JGC:** *Did you consult engineers?*

**MM:** Yes, people from the department of natural resources that have expertise in storm water treatment, hydrologists, fish ecologists, botanists, army corps-of engineers, historians. Taking all of this information and layering it together has been rewarding. From the earliest projects that I did, even when they were fairly small things I was building myself, I was interested in embedding a kind of reference or content into them. It's not intended as a didactic reference. I am more interested in getting people to read layers into things instead of reading a singular sign. It's a process of building up layers of references—some people will get some parts of it, others will put the information together in ways I hadn't expected. That's the thing I like about this.

**JGC:** *How do you develop the concept behind a project and engage the viewer to interiorize it, as in the Union Square site?*

**MM:** The start of a project is not necessarily prosaic. The elements end up defining themselves based, to a tremendous extent, upon the restrictions of a situation. I spent the first three months of the Union Square project being told "No." I couldn't do this, I couldn't do that. I kept suggesting things. I investigated the connection of the subway station with Union Square Park above, a planned new entry, and many other things, none of which were viable due to structural reasons, engineering, maintenance, safety, or cost. I didn't want to do something that was going to be overwhelmed

by its context. Because of the restricted space and conditions, nothing on a very large scale could be done. Finally, I noticed the spray-painted red lines around areas to be repaired in many different stations. I thought: that's interesting. Given the complexity of the station with its lights and signs and advertisements, maybe something repeated throughout this mazelike space could have some effect on the place or get people to look at it differently, to reflect upon it.

The subway system is extraordinary. People are moving fast, day after day through this complex system. The structure of the place itself is very interesting. There is one area where the Lexington Avenue line comes in; bridges cross above so that the pedestrians look down on the trains. I



ended up putting red inserts regularly into the railings surrounding this space. So if you are standing on the platform and look up, you see these markers above you. Or if you're walking by, you see the repetition. You're framing out that whole area.

Then, in each one of those red inserts, when you look into it, there's an opening with a mirror on each side and a text describing something you're seeing straight ahead of you. It might be the old grates, the unusual glass tile on the wall, the safety banding on the edge of the platform. It's a detailing, a calling out, of all of the structures and spaces that are visible in the station but taken for granted. Getting people to stop and reflect upon something in the busy chaos of the station is of interest to me. It provides a breathing spot, a brief intimate engagement.

**JGC:** *I love the idea that the viewer is also reflected in the mirror that is showing her the image.*

**MM:** Right. It can be corny if you're not careful, but it engages the space and the people in a very immediate way.

**JGC:** *Water is a feature in your lake projects in Des Moines and St. Louis and your riverside site in New York's Battery Park.*

**MM:** Yes, I have been fascinated over the years in looking at how this changing, often invisible element meets, overlays, infiltrates the built environment. There is this great curiosity



**Top to bottom:**  
 project model, Milwaukee Riverwalk, 1998. Detail of Milwaukee Riverwalk model, aerial view into stairwell. Alexander Library, 1993–94. Wood, steel, cast stone, and marble. View of half-acre site, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.



**Opposite: Athletic-Alumni Facility, 1995–97. 100 chairs, aluminum, wire mesh, and plantings. View of project at the University of Houston.**



that I have to this day about the way the built environment and the natural environment come together/collide/intersect and how we may redefine this meeting point.

As I proceeded, in many projects water came up as a possible focus. For example, in Milwaukee a series of early 20th-century industrial steel lift bridges—major engineered structures—cross the river. The edge of the river itself is defined by buildings that go directly into the water. And then you've got the river, which is made up of all the sources that feed it— a watershed upstream, all of the storm sewers running off into it. There is a whole system that's supporting the river that is incredibly powerful but not visible. The river itself looks pretty much the same all the time but it's not. Sometimes it's flowing upstream, sometimes it's flowing downstream, sometimes it's cooler, warmer, the elevation changes, what's living in it, all of those unseen things that don't overtly state themselves—that's one of the things that's attracted me to this project— showing how the river is part of everything around you.

**JGC:** *In the case of Chouteau's Pond, you plan to resurrect a pond that used to be in the center of St. Louis.*

**MM:** I'm referring to it. If you look at the history of the pond, you find it was photographed often. In the 1890s, you see bucolic scenes along Chouteau's Pond, and yet, probably by that time, it was fairly contaminated. People were living in terrible conditions at certain parts of the edge of the pond, and there were outbreaks of cholera and typhoid. The pond became an industrial cesspool. Finally, it had to be drained.

As I was researching, I found the edge of the pond ran across the site on these old maps. I decided to define the pond's edge with a walkway and a swath of plantings of grasses and trees; at the same time, a strong visual connection was made between the present-day curves of two adjacent highway ramps and the old line of the pond. When I was asked to expand upon the project, people wanted a water feature to be introduced. I'm not really interested in making fountains, so I thought about referring back to Chouteau's pond not only with the edge but also with a pool that could be made. I decided the street water runoff could be the source of water that was brought in and treated. I got quite interested in this in the Milwaukee project, and I could see its application here. It seemed appropriate to refer to that old pond and introduce a new way of thinking about water that many people are looking into.

**JGC:** *Are treatment systems for purifying runoff water fairly established?*

**MM:** No, they're not established at all, especially in what are called ultra-urban areas. People are looking at ways of treating runoff water from agricultural areas and suburban areas, but very little is happening in city locations. Figuring out how to configure these things is what's really interesting. In St. Louis, the water will go through a cleansing process. Then it becomes visible as it goes through narrow troughs embedded in a platform area and continues into troughs that are freestanding over the water. It brings one's attention in a very visceral way to the clean water going into the pond.

**JGC:** *City planners need to address these issues.*

**MM:** As in the subway project, it's making people aware of things that they take for granted.



I always meet very interesting people who are curious and eager to share the information they've got about a site.

**JGC:** Was water quality an issue in the Des Moines Art Center project?

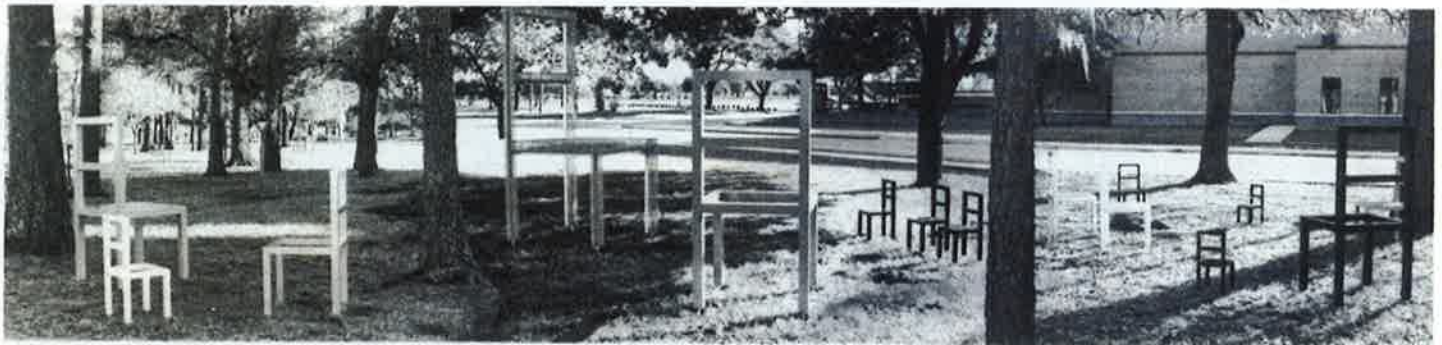
**MM:** Yes it was. When we started working with the pond, it was in a very degraded state. Before the construction could be started, it had to be dredged. Filtration dams were built upstream on either side to clean the first flush of runoff. One reason for all of the planting is that it helps to cleanse the water further.

**JGC:** Could you describe the design features of the Milwaukee project?

**MM:** First of all, this walkway is in an old part of Milwaukee. Because the buildings go straight down into the

tions, the end stretch of the walkway goes along a large old industrial building that's now the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. I've maximized the decking on this area to make a place where the students will be able to get out on the river. Also, I wanted to make areas where they would be able to work and do projects in the river. I thought it was important for art students to be exposed to the possibility of doing projects that deal with the water. It gives the art school a presence outside on the river during periods of good weather. And I'm opening up the building visually so that people can see into gallery areas and be more aware of what's happening in the building. I'm trying to make it more permeable. The notion that artists can somehow participate in the real world and be accessible to it is important.

The finale at the far end of the walkway is an old abandoned boiler room. We've opened up a two-story space. There are seating areas, a glass wall looking into the student gallery, and a series of terraces that you get to by going up a spiral stair that's attached to this no-longer-used chimney structure. You can get to several levels; at the top of the spiral stair, you have a fabulous overview from Lake Michigan all



water, the walkway itself often goes into the river along this stretch. I'm looking at the reemergence of natural systems within this area. It used to be a marshland and was filled in at a certain point. Pilings were put in and buildings were built. I'm interested in the juxtaposition between the existing natural environment and the structures that were put into it over the years. The built nature often has to do with the infrastructure of the city: five bridges, a deep tunnel access shaft—we're opening it up so that you can look down a 300-foot shaft into the system. So as often as possible, I'm trying to make people aware of the relationship of that infrastructure to the river itself. I'm building a spiral stairway up the side of an old bridge abutment and also there are some planted trays that terrace down to the level of the walkway; sometimes you're actually walking out in the river.

As you proceed, you see very different areas. When you start out under the highway, you're in a large, open planted area that's almost a diagram of how a wetland operates. It's not a natural wetland; it's a constructed area. There's a pond where treated storm water runoff goes in as clear water. Then there are smaller treatment devices that you pass as you walk along.

After having gone through a series of very different situa-

the way up the river. Inside the space, a spiral seating ramp goes down, and a spiral is painted on the ceiling.

I'm using the old chimney stack itself—a circular shaft six feet in diameter that goes up 150 feet or so—it's the reverse of looking down into the deep tunnel shaft at the beginning of the walkway. If it rains, the roof water runoff is channeled to come down the sides of the chimney. That will go through a treatment device and out into the planters outside. This whole interaction between infrastructure, water, the river, and the buildings culminates in this part at the end of the school.

**JGC:** Could you address interior space as a feature of your art?

**MM:** Early on, before I was thinking of the word public, as in public art, I was thinking of the experience of the individual walking through a place or space—the time that was involved and what you pass through was like a cinematographic experience. As an artist, I'm trying to find many ways to look beneath the surface, to create compelling situations, to question boundaries, and to engage attention.

*Jan Garden Castro is a writer and art historian based in St. Louis, and the author of The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keefe.*