

Smashing The Glass Ceiling

For more than 20 years, Aotearoa New Zealand artist **Gill Gatfield**'s minimalist and conceptual abstract sculptures and site-specific works have been characterized by their attention to precious and unique materials: 45,000 year-old kauri timber (Native Tongue, Auckland Botanic Gardens, 2011), glacial stones/black granite (The Kiss, Aarhus Denmark, 2015), and, more recently, alpine stone and Italian granite for Zealandia (2018 Venice Architecture Biennale).

Glass is also a favored material. At Silo Park, on Auckland's harbor, in February 2019, Gatfield made Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa), a monumental work of smashed glass, filling and virtually over-flowing the base of a waterfront silo. Yet, Glass Ceiling is also an idea and experience that possesses all the qualities anticipated in her work—an engaging physical experience of materials and site; a visual paradox about light and darkness; a metaphor about the politics of equality in the 21st century; and a celebration of, and open-ended question about, the ideas and values of humanity. Glass Ceiling's 16.5 tons of smashed glass in a 30mH silo literally explodes the political 'glass ceiling,' a metaphoric barrier obstructing the advancement of women and minority groups in public life.

Recently, New Zealand contributor Warren Feeney interviewed Gill Gatfield about Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa), its site-specific nature, politics and metaphors, and the public's response.





Warren Feeney: *The Silo, in Auckland, is a classic late-Victorian/Edwardian architectural edifice grounded in the ethos of an Industrial revolution, the expansion of Empire and global European industry. Was that important to you in deciding the kind of work that you wanted to create and, if so, surely there is a strong political agenda to Glass Ceiling, particularly feminist, but also, even more universal, a metaphor to ‘tear down the walls’?*

Gill Gatfield: I chose the Silo space to transform into a central element in the sculpture, imposing but vacant and a muscular heritage container in every sense. Like the glass, it plays a multi-dimensional role. ‘To silo’ means to isolate a system or process from others. Located at the inner city harbor fringe, the smashed glass ceiling is set apart and distinct from its context. Subversion here results in liberation and obstruction. People cannot enter the room.

The disused Silo is packed with industrial and colonial meaning. A sense of halted productivity—suspended economics and power—fill the air. These go to the core of human rights, whether expressed through global movements about gender violence and discrimination or mass migrations and climate change. Glass ceilings are universal. They limit progress on all fronts by keeping power out of reach.

Like a medieval tower, the Silo is



Above and previous pages: **Gill Gatfield**, Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa), 2019, silo, broken glass, 30 m high x 6.7 m diameter, Silo Park, Auckland. Night photograph. Courtesy of the Artist. Photographs: Conrad Morley.

fortified by castle-thick walls. Archways offer safe havens and portals into an underground glass moat. The stone-like walls and multiple arches also suggest a Roman forum, perhaps a coliseum or a ring—good for a fight or a debate. Ladders are drawn up. The walls are unscalable. *Glass Ceiling* brings the battlefield into full view.

In formal terms, you refer to Glass Ceiling as abstract sculpture, not an

installation. Yet at a surface level, it also appears as a landscape in relief. Can you elaborate on this combination of formal elements?

Like poetry and music, art has structure—including formless art. In this case, ‘installation’ describes the process of making the work, not its outcome. *Glass Ceiling* (NZ Aotearoa) has several structural layers, seen when shifting perspectives or changing perceptions of scale. Stepping



Gill Gatfield, Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa), 2019, silo, broken glass, 30 m high x 6.7 m diameter, Silo Park, Auckland. Aerial photograph. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph: Conrad Morley.

back into the Silo space, it unfolds into a monumental geometric abstraction, with two primary sculptural forms—cylinder and disc. The Silo, a giant concrete pipe, contains at its base a glazed disc of shattered glass. The contrasting materials of concrete and glass amplify the separation of these two circular elements, yet each depends on the other for form. Bare walls, arched openings and a 30mH cavity are intrinsic to the composition.

Moving closer, an expressionist dimension is visible. I carved the glass surface into seams, rises, and hollows. The smooth undulating finish gives an unpredictable 'edge' to the mass of sharp glass shards. Symbolic content follows, from the picturesque to the sublime: a knowable landscape of valleys, mountains and plateaus, a moonscape beneath a soaring void, deep impressions left by bodies lying in the glass, the topography of human skin under a microscope, or a heaving mass of hidden content seething or rising up from below. The unknown creeps into a minimalist frame.

Glass is a sculptural material with a deep history, yet you use it in your practice in some new and distinctive ways. You have previously cut glass into monumental transparent texts that stand in space. In Glass Ceiling you seem to have abandoned form and shattered the glass. What prompted this shift?

Smashing the glass is a subversive act. With symbolic connections to violence, broken mirrors, and bad luck, this action takes down the political 'glass ceiling,' literally and figuratively involving risk, ego, and ambition. Over 200 million glass fragments fill the floor, revealing an operating system with no playbook. The mess is contained within a silo. Mounds of glass shards press hard against the clear panes of curved glass that span three arched doorways. These arched panes complete the circle of the Silo tower. Like a Petri dish, they set up a science experiment. The viewer could be witnessing the growing of things. Like a lens, they enable close inspection of the internal workings of the 'glass ceiling.'

At night, with the play of light, Glass Ceiling appears to have an aura. In the daylight, it seems edgy and difficult but, when sunlight fills the space, it is suddenly luminous and seductive. Do these elements play a role in the abstract metaphor?

Definitely. Human movement and natural elements take the sculpture beyond a requiem, a monument, a shrine. It becomes a living thing—pulsing with

energy. The glass shimmers and sparkles. It feels like an alluring bed of diamonds. When the sun strikes, it penetrates the glass revealing an aquamarine pool. Under moonlight, the air seems to glow. These and other ephemeral elements track the passing of time and evoke the pull of an invisible 'glass ceiling' with its aspirational rewards, full of promise.

At the same time, the weight and

scale of *Glass Ceiling* pushes back, again like a political 'glass ceiling.' The sheer volume—16.5 metric tons of smashed glass, expresses the magnitude and power of this continuous metaphor—now multi-faceted, compound, deeper and more complex than a single planar barrier above. As the sky darkens, the body of glass blackens and condenses, weighed down by the hollow darkness



Gill Gatfield, Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa), 2019, silo, broken glass, 30 m high x 6.7 m diameter, Silo Park, Auckland. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph: Conrad Morley.

of the void above. The work is dangerous and unsettling. It conjures images of excess, obsession, of egos run wild, Narcissus, and the sublime.

People express a wide range of emotional and physical responses to Glass Ceiling—shock, awe, fear, surprise, delight, hesitation, disbelief. At one event, a woman touched and tasted the glass. People struggle to keep their hands out of the work. Are you aiming for particular responses or are you surprised by the often physical and personal responses that your work is capable of?

To some extent, formal intentions can influence thoughts and feelings but there is no script for the diversity and depth of personal response. Beyond the initial impact of the work, with time, many fell silent. Responses were culturally diverse and often gendered. Some could not cast their eyes on *Glass Ceiling*. Some drew away. For them, the space was deeply personal and sacred. It triggered memories of losses and gains. People described the work's power and beauty. It sparked discussion and comment, including between strangers. A father of a small child, who was entranced and reaching out to touch the glass, announced to anyone listening, "I hope this is the only *Glass Ceiling* she will ever see."

In Denmark in 2015 you created Glass Ceiling/Glasloft at the national Kvindemuseet/Women's Museum as artist-in-residence during Denmark's Suffrage Centenary. How did that work differ to this sculpture in New Zealand/Aotearoa?

My work in Denmark commemorated Denmark's suffrage centenary. Breaking two tons of crystal-clear glass, I made a rectangular level plane in an anteroom at the top floor of the Women's Museum. There, *Glass Ceiling|Glasloft* was internalized and politically contextualized. The long glass field evoked the flat Danish landscape and memorialized a level-playing field established in 1915 when Danish women were granted the vote.

Glass Ceiling (NZ Aotearoa) is not about a level-playing field. It is seditious, disruptive, undulating, circular, and seductive. I shattered multi-colored glass (transparent, white, black, brown, grey) implying greater diversity, apt for a city like Auckland with its diverse population, yet like the power base it represents, a small minority of



Gill Gatfield, *Glass Ceiling* (NZ Aotearoa), 2019, silo, broken glass, 30 m high x 6.7 m diameter, Silo Park, Auckland. Artist on site. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph: Conrad Morley

glass fragments are non-white. Despite New Zealand women gaining the vote first in the world, New Zealand lags behind in achieving basic equity goals. This time, the ceiling and the step-up are higher. This *Glass Ceiling* looks to the future, not the past.

What role do you think public art has in inviting audiences to think about important issues and ideas, and how would you measure the success of the politics of a work like Glass Ceiling?



Silo 6, Wynyard Quarter, Auckland. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph: Gill Gatfield.

If the success of *Glass Ceiling* could be measured, it would be in multiple ways. Prompting feelings, thoughts, and aspirations rate highly for me alongside political provocation. *Glass Ceiling* makes public issues commonly kept in private. It disregards the veil of secrecy, bringing into the public domain that which takes place behind closed doors in suburbs, ivory towers, in office blocks, and on factory floors.

Glass Ceiling shifts the focus from an invisible obstacle located above to a tangible mass of multiple parts on the ground. No longer preventing ascent, the ceiling now stops access to the fortress-like room. This shift reveals the 'glass ceiling' as substrate and structure, visible but complex, with immense weight and giving way to the forces of gravity.

The work shows how breaking the 'glass ceiling' is not enough—it is the first step in a process which requires real systemic change "on the ground," not just in theory. For me, artworks in the public realm don't need to offer 'endings.' If we could measure the political value of public art, it would be by the questions it prompts, not the answers it gives. Δ

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