VISUAL ARTS

ARCHITECTURE

California Acropolis

An architectural beauty, the Getty Centre shows what money can buy

ANNMARIE ADAMS
and RICARDO L. CASTRO
Special to the Gazette

The Athenian Acropolis. Disneyland. The Vatican. The Alhambra. Mycenae. Hearst Castle. Jerusalem's Western Wall. The tomb of Queen Hatshepsut. Piazza Navona. The Salk Institute. They are all evoked in the new Getty Centre , one of the most significant architectural events of the 20th century. This series of crisp, off-white buildings dramatically perched on a hilltop above Brentwood, an upscale suburb of Los Angeles, was designed by New York architect Richard Meier at a cost of $1 billion U.S. It opened with great fanfare in mid-December. Like Meier's other projects – the best known are the High Museum in Atlanta, the Frankfurt Museum for Decorative Arts, the Athenaeum in New Harmony, Ind., and the Bronx Developmental Centre in New York – the six structures that comprise the Getty Centre are lowrise and high-tech. Their sleek metal forms appear to grow out of their rough-cut travertine bases, resembling magnificent ocean liners momentarily grounded in a monumental, mountain-top quarry.

Although the Getty Centre recalls these historical precedents in its modernist, abstract language of references, it is also a place unlike any other in the world. The splendid collection of paintings, drawings, illuminated manuscripts, photographs and sculpture the complex is meant to accommodate is world class. And the Getty's impressive exterior spaces offer breathtaking views of the surrounding metropolis, the Santa Monica Mountains and the Pacific. The six buildings form a harmonious ensemble, occupying the hilltop's two natural ridges: the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, the East Building (housing the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Educational Institute for the Arts, and the Getty Grant Program), the North Building (housing the Getty Information Institute and the Getty Trust), the Harold M. Williams Auditorium, and the Restaurant-Café Building.

The details of arrival to the Getty Centre make it different, too. In typical L.A. fashion, most visitors come by car to a six-level garage (parking reservations are required and are apparently booked up to nine months in advance!). They are then transported in four minutes – literally and figuratively – up the Getty mountain by a quiet, pollution-free electric shuttle from which can be glimpsed views of deer and other urban wildlife. Here there is no ceremonial path, no gateway, no clear demarcation between outside and inside. Since admission is free, there's not even a ticket counter. The experience is positively cerebral.

The monorail brings visitors to a vast arrival plaza, paved in travertine. The feeling at this point is "top of the world." Most will then ascend a series of terraces to the largest structure on the site, the J. Paul Getty Museum. It is here that the art collection formerly housed in the Getty Villa, in Malibu, is now displayed. Because of the mild climate of southern California and the institution's apparent willingness to hire a virtual army of security personnel, visitors are free to wander in and out of the museum at will. In fact, as soon as one enters the museum through its lofty, cylindrical entrance hall, one is led to the complex's largest outdoor space, the so-called Museum Courtyard, which features a 120-foot rectangular pool with 46 jets shooting streams of water in a perfect arc beside a row of Mexican cypress trees.

The use of water is a major theme throughout the plan of the centre : fountains, canals, quiet ponds, and even a dripping chamber where the sound of falling water is augmented. A thoroughly controlled topography appears beyond the hard surfaces that define the open public areas. One of the most impressive features of this landscape is the section designed by Los Angeles artist Robert Irwin. Located at the end of the main east-west axis through the site, Irwin's contribution comprises a sloping garden located in the natural ravine between the Museum and the Research Institute. The garden skilfully accommodates a zig-zag path that ends in a plaza defined by bougainvillaea. A stream flowing through various conditions accompanies the visitor in his or her promenade.

Irwin designed this spectacular garden to change continually according to the times of the day and different seasons, thus creating a "conditional" piece of environmental art, which responds both to the site and to Meier's architecture. While the buildings attempt to express qualities such as permanence, endurance and timelessness, Irwin's Central Garden is in constant flux, thanks to the interplay of light, colour and reflections created by plant materials, stone and water.

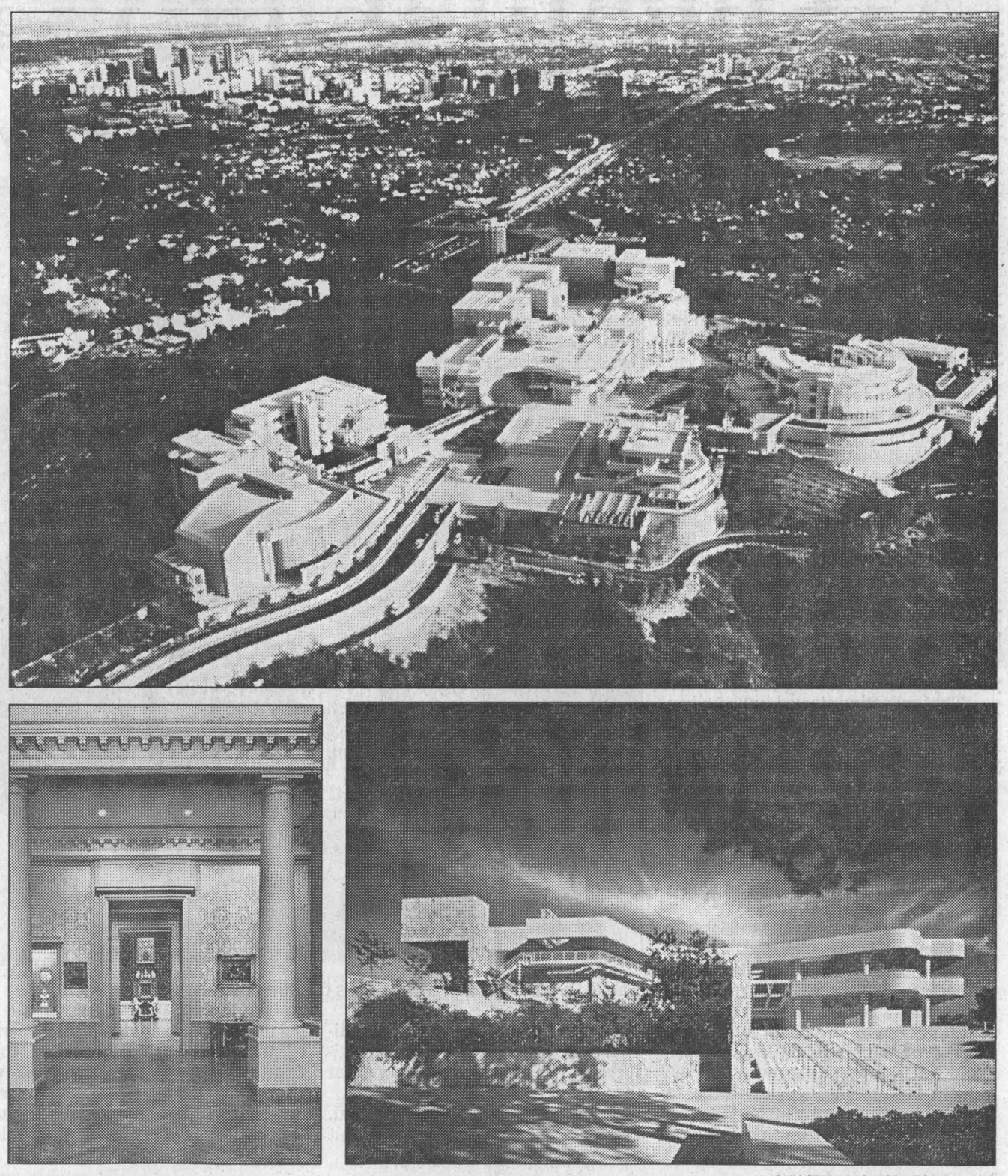
Materials are an essential part of the Getty experience. After an arduous, worldwide search, Meier chose Italian travertine, quarried in Bagni di Tivoli, 15 miles east of Rome, for the pavement and walls. Although it resembles marble, travertine is actually a form of limestone. To produce the desired, rough-cut effect called for in Meier's design, a special guillotine process was developed to bring out the fossilized and iron-stained appearance of this beautiful stone. This was no small commission. The project uses 1.2 million square feet of the luxurious material, mostly cut into 30-inch squares. It is estimated to be between 8,000 and 80,000 years old.

Unlike most other projects using travertine, particularly those erected in Rome during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, at the Getty this stone is used only as a veneer. And there's no mortar either. Each piece is fixed to the supporting wall with a stainless steel wall anchor. This separation of stones also prevents them from touching in the case of an earthquake. So although the use of travertine conjures up images of Rome and Jerusalem, its use as a superficial cladding is very "L.A."

Perhaps L.A.'s love affair with temporary sets, celluloid, and surfaces can also be blamed for the centre 's only serious architectural flaw: the inconsistency of interior and exterior spaces. While Meier's neutral Modernist forms make magnificent backdrops for viewing art from all ages, unfortunately, many of the interiors are veneered with period decoration. Thierry Despont, a French architect who specializes in historical restorations and residential work, was mostly responsible for these. The idea, according to Meier, was for each gallery to take inspiration from the art that is exhibited. There are plenty of examples of museums where inside, outside, the work of art, and site are all one single statement. One of the best models of such unity is Carlo Scarpa's Canova Museum in Possagno, Italy, 1956-57, or even Meier's own Frankfurt Museum for Decorative Arts, 1980-83.

Despite this weakness, there's no question that the new Getty Centre is great architecture. Like the places it evokes, it causes you to see the world a different way; it increases your heart rate by its very grandeur; it shows what money can buy. And it certainly is worth writing home about.

✤ *Annmarie Adams and Ricardo L. Castro are associate professors in the School of Architecture, McGill University. They were invited to visit the Getty Centre two weeks ago with 498 other architectural historians.*



JOHN STEPHENS (TOP); TOM BONNER

Visitors see the hilltop museum's entrance facade (bottom right) as they arrive at the tram-terminal plaza. The opulence of the place is reflected in the Great Hall (bottom left).

Discordant apples and video dreams

HENRY LEHMANN
Special to The Gazette

An apple is an apple is an apple – or is it? Possibly not, in the case of Gathie Falk's latest works, collectively titled Apples, on view at Galerie René Blouin.

Each of the eight medium-size oils contains row on row of what might be construed as apples. An especially striking canvas, Apple 15, places the regimented but slightly unruly apples against a dark, all-over setting that almost suggests black velvet. In this work, the orange-yellow apples remain relatively whole, round emblems attended by a glowing penumbra of pink flecks.

In other pictures, such as Apples 25, the best work on view, triangular slices of apple hover like asteroids in the upper regions of the canvas. And in still other works, some of the apples have been halved and quartered to reveal the seeds.

But, somehow, the forms don't add up to convincing apples – which makes Falk's art all the more interesting. In fact, under close scrutiny, the apples come further undone – not into thinner slices but into their true constituent parts – squirming brushwork and patches of coagulated pigment that occasionally recall parts of Jack Bush's better colour-field paintings.

The longer we look, the less these forms resemble paintings of apples – and the more they resemble mere paint. Falk, who lives on the West Coast, serves an apple sauce that is distinctly sour. Had this been the fruit on offer, Adam and Eve would still be sitting pretty in their garden and the serpent would have slithered into oblivion. But Falk's apples don't refer specifically to the Bible – or to anything other than their own painterly anatomies. Yet it is precisely the off-colour, almost grimy aspect that gives Falk's delightful works their tart taste of intrigue. These apples, which aren't necessarily apples, can be seen as open symbols waiting for us to fill them with meanings.

Falk questions the link of language to interpretation, image to subject matter – both very arbitrary – and winds up with art fermenting with low-key mirth. Perhaps despite herself, she is a conceptualist dealing with the nature of symbols. If pictures are flat and unsubstantial, apples are three-dimensional and subject to gravity. The distance between picture and reality is vast. Yet, despite – or because of – their full-bodied ickiness and conceptual core, Falk's latest works are, in their own right, something to lust for.

On display in the gallery's small room are more works by Falk, three square abstracts collectively titled Pieces of Water. Like the others, these works, mossy "voids" laced with yellow, are about meaning and interpretation. The comic titles, Bouchard, Parizeau and Gustafson Lake, reflect the artist's interest in the arbitrariness of both culture and nature.

Apparently, these titles were selected because they are the news items that came on the radio while Falk was working. And, again, we are reminded that reality – or any facsimile thereof – is not simply given, but an artificial product of human consensus. If seeing is believing, then, too, believing is seeing.

✤ *Gathie Falk's Apples and Pieces of Water, at Galerie René Blouin, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 501, until May 23. Phone: 393-9969.*

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The nearby La Centrale features the latest installation by Lani Maestro, a Montrealer whose work is becoming well known on the international art circuit. (She had a show at the Centre d'Art Contemporain de Basse-Normandie at the beginning of the year.) The current creation, consisting of a video projection, is disarmingly simple.

One wall of a darkened gallery room is covered by a luminous image, actually a video projection. Initially, this "mural" seems inert. Time stands stiller than in Wertmuller's ravishing Swept Away. On entering the darkened room, we are met by a vision – one large wall of sparkling, dreamy water. We see this bit of forever from above, as if from a low-flying airplane.

Then we notice that things do not stay the same. The mesmerizing striations of froth seem to reconfigure themselves as we watch, and the water changes density. For the spectator, objective and subjective time merge.

Maestro probes both the nature of time and the meaning of metaphor. The ocean, with its beautiful inflections and patterns, may be a metaphor for painting. Then again, it's equally possible to see this video "painting" as a picture of the ocean. Which is it – life about art or art about life? This sea is deep in more ways than one.

We also become aware of an alarming, surface presence. Two children, boy and girl, appear floating on the waves. Are they drowning? They seem to have been there all along, but in fact surface only at intervals and then disappear.

Yet, before whipping off our clothes and preparing to save the pair, we should take a few breaths. Perhaps they are just a mirage, a figment of the imagination or a fabricated memory. Hallucination and memory are part of the picture. The "initial" event – the sighting of the kids – fades emotionally as it is repeated with metronomic precision. What was shocking becomes almost soothing in its sublime predictability. Finally, it is we who are swept away in the dream. The piped-in sounds of crashing surf are not necessary.

✤ *Lani Maestro's Rêve de l'Autre, at La Centrale, 460 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 506, until May 31. Phone: 871-0268.*

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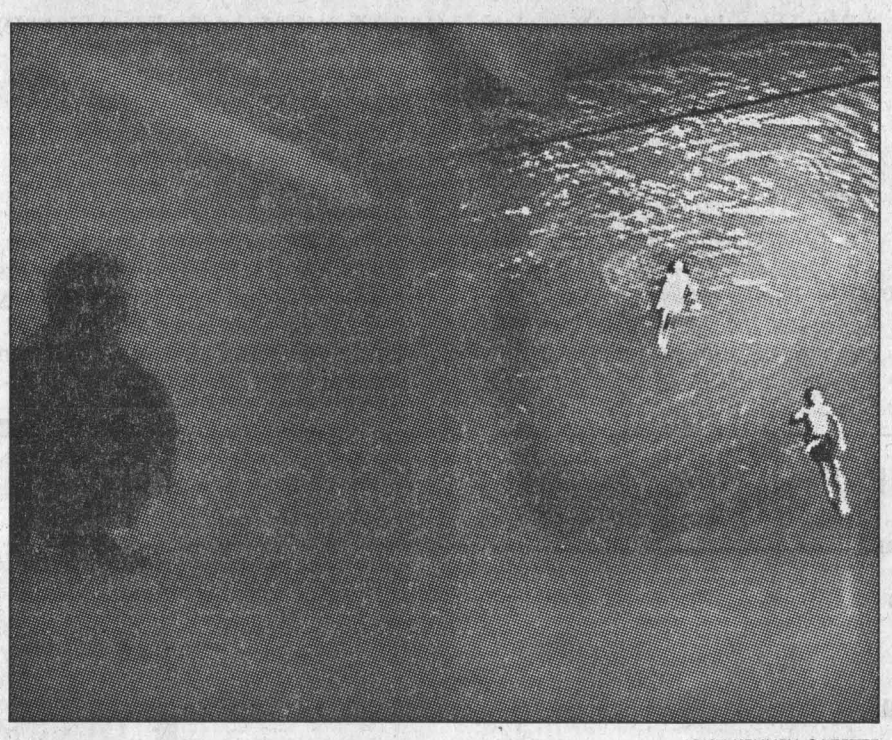
Photographer Jindrich Streit's turf is the impoverished, mining area of northern Moravia in his native Czech Republic. His black-and-whites on display – all too briefly – in Ogilvy's Tudor Hall are not the sweet images preferred by promoters of tourism. This is definitely not Don McGowan country. This show was organized by the Comenus Institute. (Named after Comenus, the last Bishop of the Czech Brethren, a Reformation-era Protestant group, the institute's mission is to organize cultural and social activities bringing together people of diverse origins.)

Streit finds beauty in the ruins, both architectural and human. Yet, there is more humanity – and art – in one of his shots of people huddled in a bare kitchen than in a whole street of quaint buildings. Working somewhat in the tradition of Cartier-Bresson, Streit hones in on the banal. In one powerful image, we see kids frolicking with toy guns made from what may be old car parts. The blunt setting is a wall of corrugated steel.

There is a sense of life's irrepressibility – that life flourishes in the darkest shadows. Be sure to catch this stunning show.

✤ *Jindrich Streit's photographs, at Tudor Hall, Ogilvy's, 5th floor, until tomorrow. Open during regular store hours today, tomorrow from noon to 3 p.m. The show opened only on Thursday. Fortunately, arrangements are being made to show these works again this year at the Visual Arts Centre.*



JOHN KENNEY, GAZETTE

A visitor takes in Lani Maestro's dreamy video installation.

Jindrich Streit's Moravian photographs at Tudor Hall.