Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

The Modern

Architecture mirrors Art at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Resting serenely beside a pool in Kyoto, Japan, the graceful 11th-century Byodo-in Temple has a roof with corners that point upward, like the wingtips of a bird. Celebrated Japanese architect Tadao Ando visualizes the temple as a swan floating on water.

A swan floating on water--that's also what Ando had in mind for his design of the new Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, which opened in December to rave reviews.

For visitors, it doesn't matter whether you "get" Ando's swan imagery. What matters, I decide on a recent trip to the Modern, is the daring of the building--itself a work of art--and the thought-provoking whimsy of the artworks inside.

As the Modern's chief curator, Michael Auping, puts it: "There's not a test. We simply want people to ramble through this unique space and enjoy the dialogue between art and architecture."

That notion must be working. The museum predicted 250,000 visitors in its first year. In its first two months, says museum director Marla Price, 120,000 had already rambled through.

The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is the state's oldest art museum. Founded in 1892, it moved to Fort Worth's Cultural District in 1957. Two other art museums followed--the Amon Carter Museum in 1961 and the Kimbell Art Museum in

1972--giving Cowtown a rare triumvirate of world-class art museums within walking distance of each other.

The new Modern's $60 million facility boasts 53,000 square feet of exhibit space. Among American modern art museums, only New York's Museum of Modern Art has more galleries.

The ample space showcases the Modern's permanent collection. After a flurry of major acquisitions in the last five years, the collection now numbers 2,600 pieces. Some 150 of them are exhibited, on a rotating basis, at a given time.

The Modern concentrates on artworks created after 1940. That includes paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs, and even video and sound installations. Featured American and international artists include household names, such as Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, and Jackson Pollack. They include influential artists like Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Donald Judd, Susan Rothenberg, Philip Guston, and Agnes Martin. Texas artists--including Ed Blackburn, Vernon Fisher, and Joseph Havel--also are on display.

Remarkably, visitors pay nothing to view the collection. (There are admission fees for traveling special exhibitions, such as the September 21, 2003–January 7, 2004 show of paintings by New York abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell.)

Box in a Box

The façade of the new Modern strikes a long, low pose sprawled across a tree-studded, 11-acre site. Counterbalancing this horizontality, a massive sculpture rises near the entrance. It's *Vortex, 2002*, by California artist Richard Serra. The 233-ton piece features seven, elongated plates of steel (each more than two inches thick)

standing on end. The rust-colored plates overlap slightly, like petals of a flower, and gently corkscrew 67 feet into the sky.

The museum design is elegantly simple--five interconnected, rectangular pavilions, each two stories high, set side by side. Two long pavilions accommodate an atrium lobby, 5,600-square-foot education center, 250-seat auditorium, cafe, museum store, and offices. Three shorter pavilions, about half as long, house downstairs and upstairs galleries. The gallery pavilions seem to float on a shallow, acre-and-a-half reflecting pool that wraps around two sides.

For his first major American project, architect Ando employed his favorite building materials--concrete, glass, and steel. In essence, each pavilion is a concrete box inside a glass-and-steel box.

Poured under Ando's watchful eye into wooden moulds of varnished mahogany veneer, the concrete of the inner box feels as silky-smooth as polished stone. Steel panels and glass curtain walls comprise the outer box. A flat concrete roof cantilevers beyond the walls, shading the exterior.

On the pool-side end of each gallery pavilion, the cantilevered roof is supported by a 40-foot-tall concrete column shaped like a "Y." This eye-catching design element has become the museum's architectural signature.

The full-height space between the pavilions' concrete and glass walls embodies what Ando calls an *engawa*--sort of a veranda that surrounds traditional Japanese homes and provides transition between outside and inside. The museum's *engawas* house sculptures and act as corridors between downstairs galleries. But they also serve as transitional spaces where visitors look out over the natural world outside (the

pool and surrounding landscape) or contemplate the artworks they've seen inside the adjacent galleries.

Architectural Rhythm

Ando varies the museum's 14 galleries by scale, proportion, and mood.

Some exhibit spaces are two-stories tall and large enough for gigantic artworks. Some are single-height and small enough for intimate viewing. Some areas are wide and some are narrow, subtly suggesting a surprise around the corner.

Most galleries are bright and friendly. Natural oak flooring adds warmth. Uncrowded artworks hang on, or sit in front of, light-colored walls, illuminated by spotlights and natural light from unseen clerestories and skylights above.

Other spaces are dark and brooding.

At the entrance to the downstairs galleries, one such space draws me in. Its smooth concrete walls take an elliptical form in a largely rectangular world. (The circular museum cafe is the building's only other non-linear space.) Inside sits a lone sculpture, *Book with Wings*, by German artist Anselm Kiefer. As the name implies, the lead-and-tin piece looks like a book with stork-like legs and a 17-foot wingspan. It appears poised to fly from its concrete cage, perhaps symbolizing universal knowledge escaping manmade confines.

The space seems built just for this piece of art.

Another dark, all-concrete space seems similarly well-suited for its contents. The tall, narrow, boxy gallery holds Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. The work is an elegant ash and maple ladder, with undulating side rails, that rises like a rivulet of hope 36 feet into the subdued space.

In either case, which came first, the art or the architecture?

Visitors shouldn't be able to tell, says chief curator Michael Auping. "The key is to create an environment that seamlessly integrates art and architecture, something that's intriguing, not intimidating."

In some galleries, Auping painstakingly chronicles styles and movements of modern art's last half-century--from abstract expressionism to pop art to minimalism to conceptual art. In others, he intermingles periods and styles to pique curiosity and stimulate thought.

A walk through the Modern does just that for me.

Questions of Art

In each gallery, abstract pieces catch my eye first--including Sean Scully's 1983 painting, *Catherine* (horizontal colored stripes atop vertical black-and-white stripes), and Dan Flavin's *Diagonal of May 25, 1963* (a warm-white flourescent light tube mounted diagonally on the wall). Some prove incomprehensible, but still evoke questions and strong feelings.

A bevy of more representational pieces wield an equal power.

Made of silicone, acrylic, polyurethane foam, and fabric, Ron Mueck's *Untitled (Seated Woman)* is a two-foot-tall figure portrayed so realistically, with a quizzical look on her face, that I expect her to stand up and say something.

I see myself in Michelangelo Pistoletto's *The Etruscan*…literally. The bronze statue of a toga-clad Roman Republican reaches out to his own reflection in a mirrored wall. As I pass by, seeing my own reflection beside his, I wonder if antiquity is reaching out to me.

In places, art tickles my fancy, in large part, because of its location.

As I reach the top of the stairs to the upstairs galleries, a bizarre image gradually appears, as does a smile on my face. Step by step, I see more and more of a nine-foot-tall, black-and-neon-green painting of famed pop artist, Andy Warhol, hair standing wildly on end. It's his *Self-portrait 1986*. The Modern also exhibits Warhol's iconic *Twenty-Five Colored Marilyns (Monroe)*.

At the other end of the upstairs galleries, I hear hypnotic sounds. Descending the stairs, I enter the atonal sound installation of American artist Jonathan Borofsky, titled *The Radical Songbirds of Islam*. The intermittent sounds, coming from speakers in the stairwell, have no rhythm and no beginning or end. At first, they sound like underwater voices of whales, but with a human quality. Whatever it is, I linger, submerged in its chant-like quality. (Later, I learn these are computer-altered recordings of Borofsky counting from one toward infinity. The piece was inspired by Islamic prayer chants he heard on a visit to Jerusalem.)

The museum's conceptual art likewise rivets me.

I watch the entire 10-minute video/sound installation of Bill Viola's 1995 *The Greeting*. The larger-than-life "movie" shows three women greeting each other in slow motion. The scene somehow reminds me of classic European Renaissance paintings. Watching hand gestures and eye movements, I wonder about the women's interpersonal relationships.

I wonder about interplanetary relationships while mezmerized by another video piece. The hypnotic scene projected on a white gallery wall looks like some distant galaxy rotating into nothingness. To get the effect, a Fort Worth artist, appropriately

named Brian Fridge, videotaped ice crystals and vapors swirling in his home freezer. It's part of his experimental *Vault Sequence*.

Myriad wild images swirl in my mind as I take a break in the museum's pastoral sculpture garden. There rests Henry Moore's *Two-Piece Reclining Figure No. 2*. Surveying its smooth shapes and rough textures, I realize that wherever I ramble in the Modern, I feel the presence of artists (and a architect) who play by their own rules, stretching the boundaries of modern art.

The Japanese temple that inspired architect Tadao Ando was built to hold a statue of Buddha. It's natural, then, that the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth houses works that speak eloquently, even reverently, about life and the human condition.

Ando once said: "The art museum, like the church, creates a special space in people's lives…If you can be with yourself and your thoughts in a serene place for even just one hour, then this space can provide a special point of energy."

Sitting on the cafe's terrace, I stare at the gallery pavilions' Y-shaped columns reflected in the pool. After a few quiet moments, I start to "get it." I begin to see Ando's swans floating on water. And I realize that the art, architecture, and nature brought together at the new Modern has, indeed, left me energized.

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