

TONI SCHLESINGER

Wonderful Towne! Lever House Hosts Homage to Screenwriter

Hollywood is all over Lever House! On Sept. 12, artist Sarah Morris' *Robert Towne* installation, inspired by the famous screenwriter of mysterious, shadowy *Chinatown* and the dank, sequiny *Shampoo*, opened at the glassy modernist skyscraper on 53rd and Park. No one expected it to be a W.P.A. mural of Faye Dunaway screaming, "My sister! (*slap*).... My daughter! (*slap*)....," or Julie Christie pointing to her hair: "It's *got* to look really *great* tonight." But why was Mr. Towne represented on the ceiling of the plaza and the lobby with 19,744 square feet of blue, green, and orange hexagons?

Ms. Morris, 39, makes vast paintings of geometric abstractions. The *Towne* installation is an expanded variation of her *Los Angeles* series of paintings, works using colors and geometries associated with a city's vocabulary and palette. She studied semiotics at Brown and is still enthused about interpreting the world through systems of symbols. Sitting on a marble slab in the Lever Plaza, wearing a navy dress with green rectangles, she explained that she is interested in conspiracies, a city's grand schematic plans and the workings of the corporation. Not character—not fictional businessman Noah Cross' desire in *Chinatown* to have a child by the child of his child. Rather "the closed-off water systems...."

There was a man on the plaza eating a sandwich, two women with ponytails, and a woman smoking and studying her cell phone—all oblivious to the convoluted hexagonal plotting on the overhang above.

Why did Ms. Morris choose the sea-green, stainless-steel-framed, early-1950's Lever House—the former headquarters of the soap company, the "perfect tabletop model of postwar American idealism," wrote Eric P. Nash in *Manhattan Sky-scrapers*—to interpret Mr. Towne (a name, she mused, "that is like a code, a word that has a double meaning")? "I remember having martinis in the Four Seasons," she said. "It must have been before Sept. 11, and I was telling friends how I really wanted to do something at the Seagram Building. I love that building. It's almost too perfect. The only thing you can do there is take down the Picasso tapestry and put something in its place. Lever House is complicated. The public plaza was problematic—probably because the space seems nonfunctional. You can't pass through the city block. It's always critiqued as being sort of dark. I was attracted to that; it's unresolved, in the sense that it seems to have a public function yet it's sort of thwarted.

"It also has a Jacques Tati element," she continued, referring to the French film director. "Points of false entry. You don't quite understand what's going on with the architecture. It seemed like a perfect spot to intervene. Then I started to

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—screenwriter
Robert Towne

realize Towne as a chrysalis form, a portal...."

The revelation began in Warren Beatty's library, she said, during the making of her *Los Angeles* film (Ms. Morris also makes short "quasi-documentaries" of cities), sometime after Mr. Beatty told her, "Tell me what's so great about you, and then tell me what's so great about me."

Ms. Morris strode through the white 20-foot entrance tube to the Lever House Restaurant, with the Japanese plaster walls and the white Corian bar top, where she ordered a Ketel vodka and cranberry juice. "I was trying to convince Beatty to be an image in the film," she said. "He said, 'Conversations about a possible collaboration sometimes take years.' I was pushing to have a decision in 24 hours, and he was saying these things take years...."

Mr. Beatty—"on hiatus," his publicist said, and unavailable to comment on Ms. Morris—must have a real sense of longevity.

"He also has a sense that non-action is more interesting than action," Ms. Morris said. "What's not in the frame is more interesting. It was interesting for me to accept that people involved in the film, people who were circulating in and around my mind, were not necessarily in the work. The refusal to be an image is an intriguing refusal." Then Bob Towne called, she remembered. "Beatty proceeded to have a real detailed conversation with him," Ms. Morris said. "You know how someone involves you in a conversation, talking to him while talking to me, present but not present? Beatty was almost making me complicit in it. The conversation moved in a Bob Towne way, moving in a sideways direction. Certain parts of that conversation sounded very cryptic, coded. It seemed they wanted me to understand the code."

Didn't Mr. Towne write *Chinatown* in some basement?

"I don't think he's in a basement now," Ms. Morris said.

He didn't say what room he was in, but over the phone from L.A., the 72-year-old writer and legendary last-minute script consultant (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Parallax View*), said he's currently working on a screenplay about a "rather eccentric World War II American soldier who became a soldier in the Philippines—one of the few men who refused to surrender after Bataan and Corregidor fell to the Japanese, and he attempted successfully to organize a resistance."

And how did Mr. Towne feel about being evoked on the overhang of one of New York's most famous buildings? "It's better to be on the ceiling than on the floor," he said.

The *Towne* installation is always perceived in long shot; there are never any close-ups, no matter where one stands. That goes for the Lever House building itself, which still looks as if it's an architect's drawing or model. The real people in the plazas look like tiny artificial figures placed there to show the scale of the big space.



MELANIE FLOOD

Meet Ms. Morris: At Lever House, the erstwhile soap-company headquarters, artist Sarah Morris worked herself into a creative lather over the writer of *Shampoo*.

Ms. Morris' life, by contrast, is rather outsized. She is married to a successful artist, Turner Prize nominee Liam Gillick, who also leans toward the geometric-architectural-conceptual; they have a 4-year-old son, Orson. The family appears to always have a bird's-eye, godlike view, whether it's in their apartment in another glassy tall building, near the United Nations, in which Truman Capote and Johnny Carson also once lived; or in Ms. Morris' studio in Chelsea overlooking the Hudson, where three assistants work on her seven-foot-square and nine-and-a-half-foot-square paintings; or in their apartment on the top of the Barbican apartments in London; or on a plane flying over the Atlantic.

Ms. Morris was raised in Rhode Island, in "just a brick house with a lot of antiques," she said. Her parents are "in medi-

cine," and they met through her aunt, who was "a flapper." After Brown, young Sarah was accepted to the Whitney Museum of Art Independent Study program after submitting a one-issue magazine that she had produced as an undergraduate. She worked as an assistant for Jeff Koons, had her first solo show in New York by 1991, and then, one day, walked into a dinner party of 30 people and met Mr. Gillick, who opened the door.

She now shows regularly at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York and White Cube in London; has had solo exhibitions at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam (2006) and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2005); and is talking to the architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, who are building the stadium for the 2008 Olympics, about a possible film there. How Leni Riefenstahl!

If Ms. Morris has a point of view, it might be described as hypnotic surveillance—sort of like the filmmakers Ernie Gehr and Chantal Akerman—but without the feelings of isolation or deep longing. In fact, it is more from the point of the view of the corporation. "Many of the people aren't aware they're in film functioning as a conduit in the city," she said. "I wanted to use citizens as part of the work."

Ms. Morris didn't consult Mr. Towne about the use of his name, though they talked on the phone—"It was an interesting conversation," she said—after he was contacted about photo permission for publicity materials. "The Public Art Fund said that the etiquette is that you should ask," she said. "Well, half the art in the world wouldn't be accomplished using etiquette."

Her installation cuts through the building—"as if you took a knife and chopped off the bottom," she said, "continuing from the lobby out on to the plaza."

"The cutting-through is what intrigued me," said Aby Rosen, the German-born, silver-haired developer and owner of Lever House, also a principal in RFR Holding L.L.C., which sponsored the installation. His other holdings include the Seagram Building, the Gramercy Park Hotel (with Ian Schrager) and some 35 other properties, mostly in New York. His personal art collection includes 80 Warhols. He makes *Chinatown's* Noah Cross look like a pauper. Asked about a recent remark in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* ("We go for the money"), he said: "Look, I have desire for great design and architecture. You have to put out X amount of money to make more buildings, art . . ."

Public art in the democratic 1960's—the days of giant bright red and yellow giant steel abstractions in parks and plazas—was seen partly as a way to bring art to the world without a ticket price, but it is also very much the artist's footprint on a landscape: Giant's Leap or the kettles of Stonehenge. Today, it's about the corporate sponsor's largesse. Everybody ends up with big affect, and producing it is no small matter. Ms. Morris estimated the cost of *Robert Towne* at well over six figures, which included assistants, professional sign painters and electricians. "We increased the wattage," she said.

The recessed lighting did seem brighter than usual.