Architecture + Art

The exhibition series Architecture + Art continues the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art’s mission to champion innovation in contemporary art, architecture and design. The series is on view to invite architects to create site-specific installations in response to the Museum space and the specific environmental context of Scottsdale, Arizona. Architecture + Art offers a platform for architects to explore the boundaries of art and architecture and push forward the ways in which architecture is presented in an art museum setting.

Atherton/Keener has constructed spaces that are intended to allow for a range of specific physical experiences. As viewers move through this installation, their first experience is thermal—a drop in temperature. Sound is another key feature—both the sound of ice cracking and shifting as it melts and that of the drip hitting the surface of pooled water. Although its construction is forthright, the installation also the experience is thermal—a drop in temperature. Sound is another key feature—both the sound of ice cracking and shifting as it melts and that of the drip hitting the surface of pooled water. Although its construction is forthright, the installation also the whiter the wall, the quicker it succumbs to dirt.1 Atherton and Keener thrive on this sense of contingency. They intend that elements of their project change and evolve over the course of the exhibition and that viewers’ interpretations lend meaning to their construction. They have deliberately created order up to a point and then let go of that control.

Architecture + Art: 90 Days Over 100°
May 22 through September 19, 2010
Organized by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art
Implementing curator, Cassandra Coblentz
Lighting designer, Claudia Kappl
Sponsored by the SMoCA Salon

The architects Jay Atherton and Cy Keener are fascinated by the intersection of the constructed world with the natural world. Because Atherton | Keener is based in Phoenix, their work often involves the dominant element of this desert environment, sunlight. Their installation 90 Days Over 100° for the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art revolves around channeling sunlight to melt ice. The installation is an extension of the architects’ on-going choreographed experience of discovering melting ice and then dripping water. Atherton and Keener have collaborated with lighting designer Claudia Kappl to integrate sunlight transmitted through skylights with artificial light in the form of fiber optic cables. This mix monumentalizes the otherwise diminutive phenomenon of dripping water.

As a key element in the installation, the lighting underscores the dichotomy of natural and artificial and speaks to Atherton | Keener’s approach to materials in general. Cy Keener has explained that they often grapple with “how to mediate the elements.” The materials used in 90 Days Over 100° reflect the architects’ consciousness and conscience regarding natural resources. Wherever possible, elements are repurposed. Although not an overt environmental critique, the concept of the installation is tied to concerns about energy use and climate change. Atherton | Keener practices a subtle kind of environmentalism, not overt but integrated. Thoughtful awareness and responsibility are givens. The architects have not taken a stand on one particular issue but in their installation have shared their concern about issues by reproducing their own research materials on the wood cutouts left over from the sculptural construction. These materials “mediate” the physical elements of the installation for visitors, creating an open-ended platform of information that aims to inspire consciousness of water and its usage.
Atherton/Keener has constructed spaces that are intended to allow for a range of specific physical experiences. As viewers move through this installation, their first experience is thermal—a drop in temperature. Sound is another key feature—both the sound of ice cracking and dripping as it melts and that of the drip hitting the surface of pooled water. Although its construction is straightforward, the installation also flirts with the organic and suggests a living body: the components visually echo a skeletal structure and a membrane contains and channels fluid.

In his book, Jeremy Till wrote about the ways in which architecture is always contingent upon the world surrounding it: “with architecture, as with any project of the modern age, the more one attempts to eliminate the other of order, the more it comes back to haunt one. Weeds always come back. The white the wall, the quicker it succumbs to dirt.” Atherton and Keener throw on this sense of contingency. They intend that elements of their project change and evolve over the course of the exhibition and that viewers’ interpretations lead meaning to their construction. They have deliberately created order up to a point and then let go of that control.

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MAY 22 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 19, 2010
Organized by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art
Editor, T. A. Neff Associates, Inc., Tucson, Arizona
Publication designer, Diana Bergquist
Photographer, Bill Timmerman
© 2010 SMoCA
Sponsored by the SMoCA Salon.
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90 Days Over 100°

Summer in Phoenix is an endurance test. It’s not so much about how high a temperature one can tolerate but rather how to withstand temperatures well over 100° for over 90 consecutive days. As Phoenix has grown, so has the urban heat island effect, thanks to increased amounts of asphalt and concrete. It is now hotter for longer than it has ever been in the recorded history of the region. So, in order to function under such extreme conditions, we construct climate-controlled environments that protect us from the harsh natural world. Ironically, this solution contributes to the problem, as we increase the number of artificial environments, we increase the heat island effect and thus need more controlled environments. We are increasingly at odds with the natural world.

Atherton + Keener practices a subtle kind of environmentalism, not overt but integrated. Thoughtful awareness and responsibility are givens. The architects have not taken a stand on one particular issue but in their installation have shared their concern about issues by reproducing their own research materials on the wood cutouts left over from the sculptural construction. These materials “mediate” the physical elements of the installation for visitors, creating an open-ended platform of information that aims to inspire consciousness of water and its usage.
A Conversation Between Jay Atherton, Cy Keener and Cassandra Coblentz

Cassandra Coblentz
How did the concept and foundation of the project begin— and what did your goals shift as you developed and refined the physical manifestation of your ideas?

Jay Atherton
Jay and I have been interested in slightly different aspects of the project from the beginning. One of the initial ideas that has remained important to me is to share the experience of being in an ice cave. Being surrounded by frozen water and having it over your head gives one a completely different appreciation from encountering it as cubes in a drink. As far as the unexpected, the best I can hope for is that visitors come away having seen in a slightly new light something they encounter daily.

Cy Keener
As far as the unexpected, the best I can hope for is that visitors come away having seen in a slightly new light something they encounter daily. But each discovery requires taking a step, and some viewers will take this step while others won’t. The most profound artworks I have encountered allowed me to take them in at my own pace and in my own way.

It was essential to introduce the variability of the skylights, which allowed for different rates. We approach materials in terms of their origins as well as their final application. However, the role a material takes on in its final application does not necessarily relate directly to its originally intended use. As for the idea of specific experience, I consider that out of my control.

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How do you see your work or practice within the relationship of art and architecture in the context of the museum?

Jay Atherton
In our practice, the context of the museum does not change the process by which we create art or architecture. In either context, thought must permeate everything, both solid and void, allowing time to finish the process. It makes for a slow practice, but I am in no particular hurry.

Cy Keener
For me, architecture is clearly rooted in a world of changing phenomena like sun, sea, and wind, while museum space is typically understood as static. In this project, it was essential to introduce the variability of the skylights, which enables changing light to interact with water in its solid and liquid states.

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What is the factor of the museum made your approach here different from that of your architectural work? How might some of the ideas you have explored here manifest themselves in future projects?

Jay Atherton
I don’t think we have approached this project any differently, but I do think the museum context has allowed me the freedom to be very clear and focused about what it is I am interested in. I am excited about the prospect of taking that clarity of purpose back to a stand-alone building, with all the attendant infrastructure and issues, and see what purity can be achieved.

Cy Keener
Within the museum environment, the visitor is given the opportunity to engage in the work in a way that is very close to its intention. Architecture has lost some of the closeness that is possible in the museum. This potential still exists in architecture, it just won’t be taken advantage of in any way.

Economy and function guided our materials selection for this project. The primary waterproofing layer is Tyvek®. It is recyclable and has a tactility and construction of woven paper. Most importantly, water beads up in perfect spheres on its surface. Through the process of trial and error, we discovered the formality of water depends greatly on the surface of the material. I find that research and experimentation are essential to discover new materials or new uses for traditional applications.

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I like the shape of the physical thing, such as corners and planes, and the dual of each edge, as a result of observing the behavior of water through experimentation, as opposed to a preconceived idea of how things would look or be. This form and material have evolved in response to working directly with it as it is becoming water.

In terms of how you consider audience, to what degree do you seek to offer a specific experience? How has a first-hand, direct involvement in this experience something unexpected with this installation? How do you believe creating a proscribed experience serves one that is more uncharted or unexplored?

Jay Atherton
Architecture is fascinated by things that go beyond the obvious. When I open a book, young, or innocent, I read the footnotes in the margins. I am interested in all the activity that occurs between the text on the page. Most importantly, water beads up in perfect spheres on its surface! Through the process of trial and error, we discovered the formality of water depends greatly on the surface of the material. I find that research and experimentation are essential to discover new materials or new uses for traditional applications.

Cy Keener
Architecture is fascinated by natural phenomena. Jay has extensively studied the edge of the built environment into high altitude peaks, glacial valleys and forested edges of the built environment into high desert plains. We have engaged in an ongoing comparison of these experiences. He has a degree in classics and philosophy from Colorado College, and earned his Master of Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, and has worked under established practitioners in the United States and Europe, including Studio Daniel Libeskind, Will Bruder Partners and Studio.

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A Conversation Between Jay Atherton, Cy Keener and Cassandra Coblentz

Cassandra Coblentz: How did the concept and foundation of the project begin? What was your goal at the start as you developed and refined the physical manifestation of your ideas?

Cy Keener: Jay and I have been interested in slightly different aspects of the project from the beginning. One of the initial ideas that has remained important to me is to share the experience of being in an ice cave. Being surrounded by frozen water and having it cover your body is a completely different appreciation from encountering it as cubes in a drink.

Jay Atherton: I am interested by the idea of phase change—the capability of water to be a liquid, a solid and a gas. In our daily interactions with water, we experience it at different states at different rates. Water must be at a specific state and quality in order to nourish the human body. I have fascinated by the specificity of usefulness and change, especially in regard to the desert Southwest.

Precisely how to present water to the public has offered a challenge. Compared to surrounding materials, water changes quickly. In a solid state, it melts into liquid; in a liquid, it vaporizes into gas; in a gaseous state, it is very difficult to contain. This capricious nature makes the physical manifestation difficult. Over the last few years, we have explored quite a few ways to communicate the characteristics of ice, water and steam. But each of these different states requires a different method of containing water has not changed.

I generally look for a solution that fits with the practical context of each situation. In this case, we had to find out what it means to do an ice project in an urban desert. We were driven to find a method that would be moving and lively. We are thoughts that born in the beginning, think physics and reconfiguration and hands-on working with the medium to discover the implications for the form and organization of the particular project.

Cassandra Coblentz: How do you approach materials and what factors led you to those you chose for this project?

Jay Atherton: More than ever, technological advances in material studies provide an incredible array of possibilities for our new age. However, the idea of a material takes on its final application does not necessarily relate directly to its originally intended use. As far as water and ice, one of the few parameters that stays constant is the density of water. We have chosen to use the density of water as our primary application as well as our final application.

Economy and function guided our material selection for the project. The main materials are similar to those used in exterior wall construction of most homes in the United States. These materials are inexpensive, but their density is nearly 200 times that of water. This high density enables changing light to interact with water in its solid and liquid states. In this project, it was essential to introduce the variability of the skylights, which simulate the effects of sun, rain, and wind, while museum space is typically understood as static. In this project, it was essential to appropriate the variable of the skylights, which enables changing light to interact with water in its solid and liquid states.

Cy Keener: Has the factor of the museum made your approach here different from that of your architectural work? How might some of the ideas you have explored here manifest themselves in future projects?

Jay Atherton: I do think we have approached this project differently, but I do think the museum context has allowed me the freedom to be very clear and focused about what it is I am interested in. I am excited about the prospect of taking that clarity of purpose back to a standalone building. But, I don’t think I have the opportunity to engage in the work in a way that is very close to the intention. Architecture has lost some of the closeness that is possible in the museum. This potential still exists in architecture, but it just takes advantage of any opportunity.

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J A: As far as the unexpected, the best I can hope for is that visitors come away having seen a new perspective on something they encounter daily.

Cy Keener: The experience of discovery—or getting to know something through physical movement and multiple senses—is important to me. When you first encounter the piece in the museum, all you see is a forest of hanging fabric. Visitors who choose to pass through this wall will find a transformed world, and another world behind that. But each discovery requires taking a step, and some viewers will take this step while others won’t. The most profound artworks I have encountered allowed me to take them in at my own pace and in my own way.

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Cy Keener: For me, architecture is clearly rooted in a world of changing phenomena, like sun, rain, and wind. Architecture is a discipline that requires discovering new materials or new uses for traditional applications.

J A: As for the idea of specific experience, I consider that out of my control. I don’t really think much about audience until the moment when I feel comfortable stepping away from the project, allowing the audience to step in. My initial relationship with water was personal, especially as a material. Only later in the process, when my thoughts were ready to be shared, did water gain an audience.

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A Conversation Between Jay Atherton, Cy Keener and Cassandra Cobleinte

Cassandra Cobleinte: How did the concept and foundation of the project begin?

Cy Keener: Jay and I have been interested in slightly different aspects of the project from the beginning. One of the initial ideas has been to find a way for the viewer to be aware of and experience the behavior of water as it changes from one state to another. We have talk about wanting viewers to experience something unexpected. How do you balance creating a surprising experience with one that is more understood or anticipated?

Jay Atherton: I am fascinated by the idea of phase change—the capability of water to be a liquid, solid and gas. In our daily interactions with water, we are exposed to the changes in state of water at different rates. Whether or not water is in a solid state, it wants to melt into a liquid or evaporate into a gas. Water as a gas is a tricky concept to conceptualize. I was initially intrigued by the idea of phase change because it allowed us to explore the nature of water and its behavior over time. In this project, we have explored quite a few ways to communicate the characteristics of water. Our project allows us to change the rate of interaction with water, which is an important feature of this experiment.

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Atherton/Keener has constructed spaces that are intended to allow for a range of specific physical experiences. As viewers move through this installation, their first experience is thermal—a drop in temperature. Sound is another key feature—both the sound of ice cracking and shifting as it melts and that of the drip hitting the surface of pooled water. Although its construction is fortuitous, the installation also flirts with the organic and suggests a living body: the components visually echo a skeletal structure and a membrane contains and channels fluid.

The concept of the installation is tied to concerns about energy use and climate change for the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art’s mission to champion innovation in contemporary art. The architects Jay Atherton and Cy Keener are fascinated by the intersection of architecture and design. The series is based on inviting architects to create site-specific installations in response to the Museum space and the specific environmental context of Scottsdale, Arizona. Architecture+ Art offers a platform for architects to explore the boundaries of art and architecture and push forward the ways in which architecture is presented in an art museum setting.

As a key element in the installation, the lighting underscores the dichotomy of natural and artificial and speaks to Atherton I Keener’s approach to materials in general. The materials used in 90 Days Over 100° reflect the architects’ consciousness and conscience regarding natural resources. Wherever possible, elements are integrated. Thoughtful awareness and responsibility are givens. The architects have not taken a stand on one particular issue but in their installation have shared their concern about issues by reproducing their own research materials on the wood cutouts left over from the sculptural construction. These materials “mediate” the connection between the inscriptions lend meaning to their construction. They have deliberately created order up to a point and then let go of that control. Atherton and Keener throw on this sense of contingency. They intend that elements of their project change and evolve over the course of the exhibition and that viewers’ interpretations lend meaning to their construction. They have deliberately created order up to a point and then let go of that control.

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In his book Skeletal Structure and a Membrane Contains and Channels Fluid, Jeremy Till wrote about the ways in which architecture is always contingent upon the world surrounding it: “with architecture, as with any project of the modern age, the more one attempts to eliminate the other of order, the more it comes back to haunt one. Weeds always come back. The whiter the wall, the quicker it succumbs to dirt.” Atherton and Keener throw on this sense of contingency. They intend that elements of their project change and evolve over the course of the exhibition and that viewers’ interpretations lend meaning to their construction. They have deliberately created order up to a point and then let go of that control. Cassandra Coblentz, Associate Curator

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