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Sarah Crowner Crosses the Border and Collaborates With the Ghost of Frank Lloyd Wright at the Guggenheim

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Photo: David Heald / Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

For a September 1957 *New York Times* article, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, then 90 years old, took the architecture writer Aline B. Saarinen on a tour of the museum he had designed to house Solomon R. Guggenheim's collection of modern art on the Upper East Side of New York City. Even if you've never been, you probably know the Guggenheim, which looks a bit like what might happen if a gorgon stared down an alien spaceship and petrified it to stone in the middle of a ritzy stretch of Fifth Avenue. *Life* magazine, more than a decade earlier, had already dubbed Wright's design "New York's strangest building." Over the years, it has been compared to many things, among them "an inverted cupcake," "a giant Jell-O mold," and "a washing machine," or so brags the museum's Facebook page. For her part, Saarinen thought the building, mid-construction and still two years from opening, resembled a "concrete snail."

Of course, Wright's strange exterior houses an interior that's just as unusual. "What we wanted to do was create an atmosphere suitable to the paintings," the architect told Saarinen of his gallery space, a long, spiraling ramp that works its way around an open central atrium, with a curved perimeter wall for hanging art. "Each one would exist in the whole space, the whole atmosphere, not within its rectilinear frame in a rectilinear room." Wright added, "and once he stops having to think in terms of rectangles, the painter will be free to paint on any shape he chooses—even to curve his canvas if he wants."

Make that a she, and you could be talking about Sarah Crowner, the Brooklyn-based artist who, 60 years on, has, at least indirectly, taken the architect's provocation very much to heart. The museum recently asked Crowner to make her mark on a small piece of Frank Lloyd Wright's imposing creation: The Wright, the architect's namesake restaurant, tucked into an out-of-the-way corner of the building's ground floor. She's not the first to do so. In 2009, architect Andre Kikoski, with the help of British artist Liam Gillick, reimagined the interior of the space, transforming what had been a sort of drab cafeteria into an artfully appointed fine-dining destination. Their intervention won glowing reviews and industry awards. But years later, it was time for a facelift. Enter Crowner, whose work, like Wright's, reflects a keen interest in freeing painting from its conventional frame.



Photo: David Heald / Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Crowner is best known for two parts of her practice: hard-edged geometric abstract paintings that, on closer examination, are actually collaged fragments of painted canvas that the artist cuts out and stitches back together; and large-scale installations of tile work, patterned mosaics grouted to walls and across floors, that she regards as paintings, too. Both parts reflect her interest in using her own artistic language to reinterpret the work of forgotten modernists, particularly women, or, as she puts it, "the ghosts of art history."

And the ghosts of *architectural* history: "It was a challenge collaborating with Frank on this," she jokes, when we meet at The Wright to discuss her project a few days before the restaurant reopens to the public. "I hope he won't turn over in his grave." The artist, in her early-40s, is blonde, blue-eyed, and as sunny as the weather outside is dreary—as sunny as the slab of highlighter-yellow terra-cotta tiles she mounted in the foyer of the restaurant to greet diners as they enter. The tiles trace the architect's tightly curved wall—too tight, in fact, for tiling, so Crowner had to cheat and install hers on a plywood armature with a slightly gentler bend. "My work in The Wright is really about respect," she explains. "It's respecting the curves. It's pointing to the existing architecture. It's not trying to dominate it or cross it out."

Inside the restaurant, which is cozy and shaped a little like a football, with a row of porthole windows offering a limited vantage onto 88th Street, a handful of people busily work to put the finishing touches on Crowner's vision. "It's all about: What can painting do?" the artist says. "Can we walk on a painting? Is this a painting?" She points down at the floor, made of beige and white terra-cotta tiles installed in a series of chevrons—she's liked the pattern ever since seeing it used in an interior by Wiener Werkstätte architect Josef Hoffmann—the arrows calling attention to the skewed orientation of the room. "Can it be a backdrop for something else?" she goes on. Behind her, another expanse of tiled chevrons, these in shades of turquoise, serves as backsplash for a long bar and also seems to gesture across the room at the portholes. In this topsy-turvy language, the windows of Frank Lloyd Wright's spaceship look out at dry land; the sea is inside.



Crowner in front of Wall (Yellow Terracotta) at The Wright restaurant Photo: David Heald / Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

In the back, hanging above a yet-to-be-installed banquette, is an actual backdrop: a broad, unstretched canvas that hugs a corner of the restaurant—again, “honor the curve”—and depicts an array of globular shapes painted in velvety jewel tones. Crowner walks me over to the canvas, pulls it away from the wall, and reveals her handiwork: a Frankenstein-ish maze of neatly stitched seams hidden in the back. “I think the hands are great teachers,” she offers, telling me she’s interested in finding ways to bring modernism into conversation with the tactility of craft. (“I think the best art makes you want to touch it, hold it.”) She adapted the motifs for her backdrop from a tapestry designed by the late Swedish painter Lennart Rodhe for a Stockholm restaurant in 1961 and produced by a women’s weaving collective. “I wasn’t interested in the paintings that he made,” she clarifies when I ask if it was the artist or the craftswomen with whom she felt more connection. “I was interested in the weaving, which was not made by him. Designed by him, but made by the weavers. I think that’s interesting.”

She scans the floor and finds what she’s looking for: a tiny paw print immortalized in a tile. “Cute, right?” she asks. The prints, which pop up occasionally, are “happy accidents.” These hand-glazed terra-cotta tiles come from Guadalajara, Mexico, from the workshop Cerámica Suro, helmed by Crowner’s friend and serial collaborator José Noé Suro. To make them, artisans dig up local clay, knead it with water like bread, shape it in handmade wooden molds, and let it bake for a couple of days in the sun. Sometimes animals wander by—chickens, kittens, Chihuahuas—and leave their mark.

We’re standing, in other words, on Mexican soil, in the ghostly presence of these Mexican animals, which wander freely with no sense of borders. It feels particularly poignant given that on the day we meet, Donald Trump has just signed an executive order to hasten the building of his wall between the U.S. and Mexico, has threatened to impose massive tariffs on Mexican imports to pay for the ill-begotten project, and Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto has responded by canceling his official visit to the U.S.. It seems suddenly plausible that the exchange of skills and ideas across art-historical time may be simpler than the exchange of skills and ideas across national borders in the present. “Every time I think about it, I literally start to cry,” Crowner says, and sure enough her eyes grow wet and begin to overflow. It’s clear that she’s upset about many things: the message Trump sends to her Mexican associates; her fears of the consequences of the president’s isolationist agenda; her frustration, shared by so many, about how to keep doing the things we used to do in the face of an alarming new political reality. “If you want to talk,” she says, “I’ve had such a hard time with this installation. I’ve had so many sleepless nights, worried about what I can do. Can I even be an artist anymore? It’s an existential crisis. I just think what we can do is move forward, do our work. I’m an optimist. I try to be.”

Her tone grows more insistent. "I'm really happy to say—and you can quote me on this—that this installation is because of our Mexican friends. This whole body of work is possible because of the open friendship I have with Mexico. The earth that makes the soil that makes these tiles comes from Guadalajara, Mexico. This is a good thing that we do together."