



The Evening Standard (London, England)

Peace at Last, in a Fountain; the US Designer Kathryn Gustafson Has Created a Many-Layered Diana Memorial That Lays to Rest Eight Years of Unseemly Squabbles

[Evening Standard \(London\)](#), [Jun 25, 2004](#) by [ROWAN MOORE](#)

WHEN there is reconciliation to be made, or a gesture of peace to be offered, the American landscape architect and artist Kathryn Gustafson often gets a call. She is currently designing a Garden of Forgiveness in the still-fractured centre of Beirut, and a new park on a polluted former industrial site in Amsterdam. Her earlier work includes the Square of Human Rights in the French new town of Evry.

With the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain, which the Queen will open next Wednesday, there was need for reconciliation, not only of wounds left by the life and death of Diana, but also of the rows over the nature and site of her memorial. The first idea, for a conspicuous memorial in front of Kensington Palace, was furiously opposed by local residents. Once a more discreet site was chosen next to the Serpentine, another row broke out over the judging of the competition to choose the design.

Gustafson is an expert in soothing. Her palette includes running water, gentle grassy mounds, stone carved into natural shapes and scatterings of trees. She speaks in quiet, earnest tones, with a level gaze from her grey-green eyes, reinforcing her points with light touches on your arm. Of commemorating the complicated and contradictory Diana, she says: "We wanted to focus on the reasons why she was loved - all the positive things. Not the negatives: there's no point."

Gustafson is wearing dungarees, Wellingtons and rubber gloves to the office, her arms deep in wet plaster, as she and her British architect partner, Neil Porter, are making a new cast of one of their models for the Diana project.

The scene is a striking contrast from most architects' offices, where you are greeted by ranks of computer screens and displays of precise, rectilinear models.

Here the models are in plaster and clay, shallow reliefs with a Brancusi-like play of curves.

The Pounds 3 million Diana fountain is in the shape of an irregular oval channel sloping down towards the Serpentine, placed lightly on the undulations of the park. Nothing is completely regular or flat, which means that the channel is higher in some places than in others. "We wanted places where you can walk across it but not anywhere," says Gustafson. "We also wanted places where you are protected and

enclosed. We want people to experience it in different ways: to touch it, walk over it, walk in it, sit on it. Your body relationship to different parts of the fountain is constantly changing."

There is a tinge of the mystical about the design, distantly reminiscent of ancient stone circles and burial mounds. Most people approaching from the nearby road and car park will walk through a grove of newlyplanted trees, in what Porter calls "an initiation type of experience". The oval represents Diana's life: "She started off in one place and went another place and then another place," says Gustafson, "but she came out of it whole, like an oval."

The most striking thing about the fountain, once the Queen has switched it on, will be the flow of its water. Gustafson and Porter have shaped the channel to rush and churn in some places, be still and calm in others. They call these effects "Swoosh", "Rock and Roll" and "Chador cascade", a Chador being a device from Moghul gardens for creating ripples of white water. "It is a release of energy," says Gustafson, "like a racehorse coming out of a starting gate."

THE attractive power of the water, the way its sound and movement will draw people towards it, is a metaphor for Diana's magnetism. However, Gustafson and Porter are careful to avoid making the fountain a biography of the generous/ manipulative/loved/rejected/ glamorous/ anti-landmine Princess. It is not Andrew Morton in stone.

Others, such as the competition runner-up artist Anish Kapoor with architects Future Systems, tackled Diana's image overtly, with a dome of coloured water breaking into the famous view from Serpentine Bridge towards the Palace of Westminster. It referred directly to Diana's dazzle, and the way it burst upon the staid British monarchy.

Gustafson, presumably alluding to this, insists that "we didn't want to impose on the historical landscape views. We didn't think she would have wanted to do that."

Born in the American northwest in 1951, Gustafson shuttles regularly to her London office from Seattle, where she mainly works. It is tempting to say that her love of running water stems from the city, an easygoing place, surrounded by a lush, idyllic landscape of lakes, sea, trees, mountains and snow.

She, however, is quick to remind me that she also lived for 30 years in Paris, after studying in New York. Drawn to France by the fashion business, she moved into garden design, and set up her own practice as a landscape designer with President Mitterrand as an early patron.

If her sentiments have a laid back West Coast haze, she can also be sharp and purposeful.

Out of dungarees she is blackclad and chic, with a silver necklace made of what look like very elegant paper clips. A coffee cup arrives with a tiny chip in it, and is promptly binned. Her current projects include the new Millennium Park in the centre of Chicago and the courtyards of the revamped Treasury building in Whitehall.

It required determination to achieve the deceptively languid loop of the Diana Fountain, with each one of its 545 granite blocks being differently shaped, but needing to fit together perfectly. The many textures and shapes that manipulate the flow of water only add to the complexity, and building the fountain has required new technology, pioneered for the project by a company called Texxus.

It has taken the techniques that motor manufacturers use to achieve difficult threedimensional shapes in cars and applied them to stonework.

Architects are saying that Texxus's and Gustafson-Porter's inventions may revolutionise stone building. Other skills were enlisted at Imperial College, the engineers Arup, Ford cars, Texxus and S McConnell Sons, the Northern Irish stone cutters who bought special machinery to realise the project. Few visitors will appreciate the complexity of effort, but this computer-cut stone has an uncanny perfection that is as much a characteristic of Gustafson's work as gentle curves.

The last Royal Consort before Diana to inspire such monumental remorse was Prince Albert. The Albert Memorial, also in Hyde Park, is an erection of phantasmagoric Victorian kitsch that became an object of London myth and proverb. The fountain that Gustafson has created, female to the masculinity of the Albert Memorial, will not make such an assertive impact.

On the plus side, it is unlikely to generate the heat that has accompanied almost every proposal to commemorate Diana since her death almost eight years ago. That is an achievement of itself: the subject of her memory can finally be laid to rest.

(c)2004. Associated Newspapers Ltd.. Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved.