

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Η ΚΑΘΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ

Jean Nouvel: A Mystery

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Photo Angelos Giotopoulos

“He is very observing. If you try to hide something, he will immediately know.” Leo Chapuis has been working for Jean Nouvel over the past seven years. He is his Project Manager as well as the person in charge of his first solo exhibition in Athens, Greece. We are both waiting for the famous architect to arrive at the opening of his exhibition and his young collaborator grabs the opportunity to describe to me the 70-year-old architect’s character. “He is always trying to improve his projects, even if they have been completed twenty years ago. There are no boundaries between his personal life and his work. He is always working, at the office, at the restaurant, at home, in the car, on the plane...” explains Leo Chapuis, one of Jean Nouvel Design’s twelve employees. Jean Nouvel Design is the company Nouvel founded in 1995 to develop design and interior design projects in parallel with the architectural practice Ateliers Jean Nouvel.

“He is here!” the gallery’s staff informs us. Jean Nouvel, always dressed in black, his head shaven, vivid look in the eyes, reminds one of actor Telly Savalas from ‘Kojak’. The award-winning architect is accompanied by a beautiful Chinese woman, also dressed in black. Her name is Lida Guan, she is also an architect, she is one of Nouvel’s employees, and to the best of my knowledge she is his third wife.

Nouvel shakes my hand, we get introduced and then he goes for a final check of his artworks. After making a remark to his assistant, we start our interview.

I've read that when you were a teenager you wanted to study fine arts. Is this the opportunity to realize one of your childhood dreams? He laughs and starts narrating the story of his life: "I am the offspring of two teachers and I grew up in a southwestern province of France. At the time, all teachers believed that the only sciences worth studying were either literature or mathematics. I had no art education whatsoever at home, but fortunately, when I was 16 I met a fine arts teacher from whom I learned a lot. Funny thing is, his name was Devier (meaning 'deviate' in French), and he actually persuaded me to follow a different path from the one my parents had dreamt for me. He wanted me to become an artist. So I started looking into it and eventually decided to study fine arts. When I announced my decision to my parents they said that painting is not a profession so they wouldn't let me do it. They said that I had to take a Maths Diploma first. Nonetheless, I enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts, but at the architecture department. I explained to my father that building is a serious occupation. He decided to go find my teachers and talk to them. Fortunately, they managed to persuade him that I was right. So I went on with my studies, always hoping that I would go back to studying fine arts at some point".

Did you regret it? Did you eventually regret not going back to fine arts? "Non, je ne regrette rien" he answers using Edith Piaf's famous lyric. "After a year I actually realized that architecture is art. An art that can offer you much better opportunities than I had ever imagined, so I decided to stick to it".

Thank God he did! Otherwise, the architecture world would have lost a huge talent. Jean Nouvel was a key protagonist of intellectual debate in France during the '70s, he was a founding member of Mars 1976 and Syndicat de l'Architecture. Mars 1976, he explains, was a movement to oppose the architects' corporatism, to prevent the state from using the same urban design and architectural plans all over the country. "We didn't want the universities or whole cities to look alike, we didn't want them to be built based on the very same plans. We were fighting for diversity," he underscores. And then he adds: "The best way to defend an architect's rights is to defend architecture."

I personally don't like all of Jean Nouvel's projects, but some of them are admittedly exquisite. For example, the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art and the exotic Institute of the Arab World, both in Paris, France; as well as the Culture and Congress Centre in Lucerne, Switzerland, or even the phallic Agbar Tower in Barcelona. As for his buildings that I don't really like very much, I must acknowledge that they are awe-inspiring, they are sensational. Like the Sidney towers with the vertical gardens and the huge sunlight reflector; or even the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which is now under construction. There is a good reason why he has received so many awards, including architecture's top honor, the Pritzker Prize, which Nouvel received in 2008 "for 200 of his projects."

It's hard to describe the French architect's style – and the reason is that he doesn't have a signature style. Each one of his buildings differs completely from every other. "There is a misunderstanding as far as style is concerned. Architecture is not like painting, where you have a blank canvas and you can draw whatever you feel like. If you are an architect, you should not use the same vocabulary in every project. In architecture you engage in a dialogue with what existed before on a site; and what exists there in the present. I often say that I'm always trying to find what I call the missing piece of the puzzle. A site is linked to lots of information: the people, the surrounding nature, the history. An architect should take all these into consideration, he can't create something abstract, something irrelevant to the place".

Taking a closer look at his work you realize that there are several recurring motifs, like playing with light, the hanging gardens, the perforated embroidery-like facades, the huge heights... “This is where psychoanalysis comes in! I acknowledge having certain obsessions – which I don’t like. Architecture is closely related to progress, to the complexity of the world. We don’t like simplifying. On the contrary, we seek complexity. The architect should open a dialogue with each site, he can’t be standing on no man’s land – this is often the effect of globalization. ‘No man’s land’ has no qualities or character. But these are philosophical issues.” Has the fact that he is what we call a starchitect helped eliminate difficulties during the realization of his projects? “My only difficulty is trying not to impose an idea. I aim at finding the emotion. The architect is like a chef at a restaurant, his job is to please the client, not to satisfy one of his own abstract visions. Architecture is a gift.”

The game of mirrors

Prince Nikolaos with his wife were present at the opening of the exhibition, as well as Dakis Joannou. With the latter they greeted each other warmly – they have worked together in the past. The well known Cypriot businessman and art collector had chosen Jean Nouvel for the construction of White Walls, the white tower standing close to Nicosia’s central square. For this 62-meter-tall skyscraper (the tallest on the island) the French starchitect used the concept of his vertical gardens again (“well, this is what happens in contemporary cities where some people wish to feel like they are in nature”). “How are you Jean?” Dakis says, “Running around, as always!” Nouvel answers as if talking to a close friend.

The first work of art the visitor encounters when entering Gagosian Gallery is an extra-large stainless steel tool box titled *Boîte à outils*, which could very well be used as a trunk or set of drawers. The two smaller galleries host a series of three-paneled colored mirrors, Nouvel’s *Triptyques*. Here, the viewer enjoys a game of reflections – it feels like entering the hall of mirrors at an amusement park.

Can you share with us your aspirations as an artist? “Well, they are not very clear since most of my experience comes from architecture. These artworks for example, I wanted to imbue them with the feeling I’m trying to create in many of my architectural projects. I must say that I’m obsessed with the existence or the absence of matter, therefore with transparency, light, and glass. I’m always looking for ways that disturb and deform reality. This is feasible with glass, with the mirrors.”

To make this concept immediately understandable he uses two of his architectural projects as examples. On the one hand the Cartier Foundation, the astonishing Parisian museum of contemporary art which was built in 1996. “The Cartier Foundation is a transparent building with three levels made of glass that creates reflections. The trees are reflected on the trees, the clouds are reflected on the clouds. What I’m interested in mostly is the superimposition of the reflection on the object being reflected – that is putting an image on top of another. I’m interested in the feeling you get looking through the glass, in the way it relates to the real world, in the creation of virtual spaces, as well as in the accuracy of an image. What I especially enjoy with the Cartier Foundation is the moment it rains.”

On the other hand, there is the Culture and Congress Centre in Lucerne, with its cantilevered roof. “What it really is, is a hazy mirror. On it we can see the boats at the dock. We can tell they are boats but their reflections are distorted. The *Triptyques* in this exhibition are more or less

based on the same concept. The hazy mirror is a projection of space. It has a double virtue, depth and distortion. It creates parallel dream worlds. Nothing is ever completely clear with these mirrors. They also comprise a narcissistic system: they capture beauty!”

Before he leaves, I grab the opportunity for one last question: Mr Nouvel, why are you always dressed in black? “This is not true, during the summer I’m dressed in white” he says with a smile. “Well, mainly for practical reasons, black makes our silhouette look slimmer. On a metaphysical level, because it symbolizes the color of night. Darkness is linked with mystery.”

info Until 30 July, Jean Nouvel, Gagosian Athens (3 Merlin Str., Kolonaki, tel. 210-36.40.215