

ABSTRACT
omakuva chapel | FINLAND SUMMER 2012

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OMAKUVA is Finnish for self-portrait. The project is a sanctuary, serving all religious denominations. The architecture draws upon the inherent nostalgic atmosphere of an isolated site as well as the power of Helene Schjerfbeck's mysterious and subsuming paintings. As one of Finland's most important and recognizable artists, Schjerfbeck's paintings, in the spirit of the Rothko Chapel, charges the calm of the secret garden with the reminders of time passing, aging, and the infinite mystery of our human spirit. These juxtapositions challenge the visitor's sense of self, encouraging the experience of the sanctuary to become a transcendent warning against the isolation of living in a constant present.

There are places in the world where geography is inconsequential, detached.

The island of Suomenlinna is a twenty-minute ferry ride southeast of Helsinki. The island, a former sea fortress, is now one of Helsinki's great tourist destinations with shops and restaurants towards the northeastern shore. Some of the island remains residential, but a large portion is overgrown and uninhabited, a stark textural memory of the once powerful fortress. At the heart of the island, just off a small channel is the old dry dock, still used for the repairs of tugboats and private racers. This site, two paths off the main walk, attracts only workers and the more intrepid visitors to the island. The backs of thirty-foot fortress walls magnify the isolation of the industrial area. Between the walls and the dock is what can only be described as a secret garden flanked by birches and filled with violet wildflowers. Interstitial, lush, and intensely introspective, the birch fortress is the poet's idyll, the surprising haven in the busy island.

Crossing the dry dock, one leaves museums and gift shops far, far behind. The world only just left is extracted from existence and the secret garden becomes the only reality. White towers pierce the treetops, standing sentinel at the canopy, but hiding amongst the birch bodies underneath. A courtyard containing a trinity of soft stone forms emerges from the ground behind these tall bodies.

The courtyard is nestled between the birches and the old fortress walls to the south. One may enter from any direction, approaching from somewhere, elsewhere. Passing through the fortress walls begins a process of introspection and removal from daily life.

At night, spots of flickering light emanate from openings in the stones, recordings of ancient rituals glancing across a primitive black night. During the day, the heads of roses flicker and wave in the winds of the Baltic Sea. They trace the path of the submerged building.

A simple wooden door marks the entry. It leads into the pale warmth of the tearoom. The table in the center of the room waits with warm cups and fresh tea. Off come coats and hats while the visitor sits at the bench waiting for the cup to cool. The first Schjerfbeck painting hangs in the tearoom. Curiosity drives them towards the painting and its neighbouring mirror reflects not only themselves but also the space behind them.

The corridor leading to the main gallery distorts the walker's shadow on a surface of brushed aluminium. Upon entering the gallery, shadows are left behind as a muted overhead light dissolves down the walls and onto Schjerfbeck's landscape paintings. Surrounded by paintings of foreign and familiar views and with no sight of anything but the sky, the visitor finally leaves the outside world completely behind. Absorbed in the cycle of painting and stepping, the visitor comes upon a cracked door, lit from behind.

Inside is the sanctuary, empty of people but full of faces. Schjerfbeck's omakuvas, self-portraits done throughout her life and up to her death, line the walls and in a counter-clockwise motion, the visitor completes the series. At the end, a tapestry of a summer birch reminds them to look up. Above are the still branches of the birch trees and the delicate pastels of climbing winter roses.

I finish my tea with a sense of completion, finalizing the cycle of restoration. The memories of past lives, others and my own, ring in my mind. I feel connected and, like stretching after a deep sleep or the first warm day of spring, I slowly uncoil, realigning the world that had become crooked.