



Downen takes a fresh direction

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Architecture and the body are mainstay themes for St. Louis artist Jill Downen. In past exhibitions, particularly the 2003 Great Rivers Biennial at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Downen seemed to infuse the existing architecture with a parasitic spirit, causing it to swell, crack and buckle like infected flesh.

Her new exhibition at Bruno David Gallery, "Hard Hat Optional," takes a different approach to the themes, one that's less site-specific, consisting of discrete structures that nonetheless cohere over issues of structure and physicality.

She's filled Bruno David's main gallery with what looks to be a ghostly construction site: stacks of plaster "breast blocks" sit on a palette; wooden two-by-fours extend from the walls to meet plaster pillows, which seem to sink under the weight; and everywhere, wooden crates open up to reveal their cache--sandbags, and more white plaster pieces that evoke bone, skin, and tendons.

Most intriguing is a wooden rack holding a pile of "architectural cartilage strips" made of white painted foam. I couldn't help but recall Richard Serra's "Casting" of 1969, in which the artist flung molten lead into the wall-floor juncture of the Leo Castelli Gallery, then pulled back the cooled strips to reveal both their identity and their subtle differences.

But where Serra's exercises are marked by their industrial grit, Downen's territory is the phantasmagoric. As physical as these pieces are, they're drained of their lifeblood, doppelgaengers of their real-world counterparts. (Even her crates and palettes have been built *anew* by the artist, rather than taken from actual construction sites.)

Downen's "Hard Hat Optional" marks a considerable -- and unexpected -- leap forward in the sculptor's conceptual thinking

Image: Jill Downen, "Component 2: Rack, Sandbags, 40 Architectural Cartilage Strips", Mixed Media, 2009. Photo: Richard Sprengeler, courtesy of the Bruno David Gallery.

ABOUT THE BRUNO DAVID GALLERY

Established in 2005, the Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.