



Construction zone

by Dickson Beall – April 15, 2009



It seems fitting that the installation *Hard Hat Optional*, by Jill Downen, is on view just across the street from the Pulitzer Foundation's elegant architecture by Tadeo Ando and its courtyard sculpture "Joe" by Richard Serra.

Although Ando and Serra are a bit more famous, Downen's site-specific environment created for the Bruno David Gallery demonstrates that her work, with or without a hard hat, can hold its own with the majors in the international art league.

Downen has been, over the past half dozen years or so, the recipient of many national and international grants and fellowships, along with coveted residencies, including a recent one in Paris. Locally, artists remember her inspired work in the 2004 Biennial at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. With this new innovative installation, she continues pushing to the edge.

Downen shares with Ando a love of architecture and of spare, elegant forms created with lyricism, but delivering a tough punch that makes no compromise with honesty. She lets ordinary materials be what they are, never masking the process of how her art is made.

Just as Ando leaves the scars from plywood molds to show beauty in humble concrete, Downen chisels Styrofoam, pours plaster and brushes in contractor's mud, leaving cuts, waves and dark holes as evidence of the process. From a few down-to-earth materials, the artist shapes her installation space into a huge and breath-taking beauty, into a whole and sublime environment.

As with architecture, the viewer interacts with space and time, entering into and moving through not only a space, but also a history of all that went before this moment in time. For instance, this site-specific installation exists because, before Downen got here, Bruno David erected white walls, climbed on ladders, sanded ceiling beams and shaped the gallery spaces, where the viewer moves in relationship with Downen's current environment.

What Downen shares with great sculpture, such as Serra's "Joe," is a love of the immersive experience — a pulling of the viewer into a space and time that demands attention. Both ask that viewers check reason and preconceptions at the door.

Downen's art is about architecture but it is also all about the body — architecture as flesh; flesh as architecture. Downen's materials seem to be alive and moving. Listen closely and you might hear the planks of tendon-like Styrofoam settling and creaking in their racks. Downen shapes a pulsating, oozing, coagulating work of art that boldly underscores acceptance of everything that is real in life.

Downen's art is best understood in terms of formal qualities, especially in terms of space, but an awareness of the dust in all things — the temporal nature of life — is ever present in her work. Tough yet fragile and crumbling surfaces contrast with the smooth porcelain delicacy of baby skin.

Symbolic of reason, and all those preconceptions left at the door, is the hanging string of a carpenter's plumb line at the center of the gallery. This tool asserts that this is a construction site with rules, with order. Downen erects two-by-fours that seem to hold up the walls; she pulls us into protected spaces, too crowded, too intimate, too much an interruption to our comfortable view of things. Downen throws down sandbags that are guiding us safely through the obstacles, as well as grounding us in a dynamic space that soars.

Experiencing Downen's *Hard Hat Optional* triggered in me this first impression, a memory of seeing Michelangelo's "Dying Slave," a nude male form that rests on an unsculpted piece of marble. It feels like a work in process, not quite finished, and yet it is a complete expression. Both the dying and the coming into being are alive and in perfect balance.

I've seen installation art that looked like the last pillow fight in a child's room before the Apocalypse. That's not Downen. With this installation Downen takes installation art in new directions. I doubt that she gives a whit about being famous, but I'm probably not alone in thinking that there just might be a page in art history with Jill Downen's name on it.

• *Jill Downen: Hard Hat Optional* continues through May 9 at the Bruno David Gallery, 3721 Washington Blvd.

Dickson Beall is a video and visual artist who has exhibited at locations throughout St. Louis, including the Bruno David Gallery.

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