

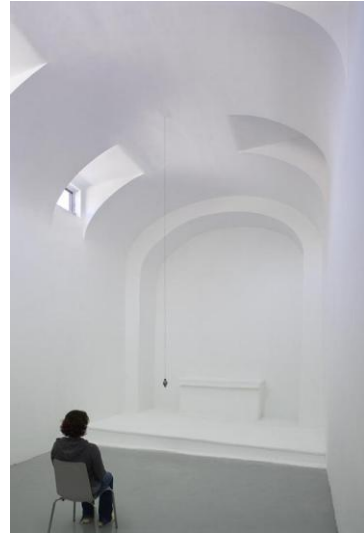
JILL DOWNEN

12/1/2010

LUMINARY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

By Ivy Cooper

ST. LOUIS With the installation *(dis)Mantle*, St. Louis-based artist Jill Downen transformed a small chapel in the Luminary, a former convent, into a space for the contemplation of sensory perception and spatial experience. Using plaster and other construction materials, Downen made significant changes to the vaulted chapel—concealing doorways and electrical features—as well as more subtle alterations to the architecture: making a central arch asymmetrical and building up both the top of the simple, tablelike altar and the platform below, causing them to gently slope down to the right. Finally, she painted the entire space a matte white, so that the clear light streaming in from the chapel's high windows generated an even, diffuse glow.



Viewers were admitted into the chapel individually, and invited to stay as long as they liked. Thus the space functioned somewhat like an isolation chamber in which one could absorb the interplays of space, mass and light. After several minutes inside, one experienced something akin to arctic whiteout: depth perception was compromised, shadows took on a palpable presence, and voids and masses appeared equally dense. Light and space seemed to assume a physical quality that was not merely seen but felt, and even inhaled (the artist laced the air with subtle notes of frankincense and myrrh).

In the haze of these effects, the alterations to the chapel's architecture might have gone unnoticed were it not for a plumb line suspended from the center of the ceiling, the bob poised at the level of the average viewer's heart. The true verticality of the plumb line allowed one to perceive the impurities of the chapel's geometry. Yet it also revealed the power of our perceptual faculties to compensate for gaps in logic, for there were viewpoints from which the chapel's skewed design looked perfectly correct, while the plumb line appeared canted—a physical impossibility.

The experience of *(dis)Mantle* recalled a host of artworks that invite meditative focus and engage perception, from the spare, icy frescoes of Fra Angelico to James Turrell's contemplative natural-light installations to the mesmerizing white paintings of Robert Ryman. And like these works, Downen's installation possessed clear spiritual overtones, particularly in its employment of light as a transformative medium, and in the tension generated when what we sensed to be true conflicted with empirical evidence.

Downen, a 2010 Guggenheim Fellow, has made a career of exploring the intersection of bodies and architecture. In previous installations she has created floors that are cracked like weathered skin, walls that are bloated and sagging, and anthropomorphic forms rendered in white plaster and supported by two-by-four frameworks. *(Dis)Mantle* signals a new direction, the artist venturing beyond "body-building" to engage in the phenomenology of architecture and perceptual experience.

Photo: View of Jill Downen's installation *(dis)Mantle*, 2010, plaster, plumb line, foam and mixed mediums; at the Luminary Center for the Arts.

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