

JILL DOWNEN HARD HAT OPTIONAL

Essay by Andrea L. Ferber, April 2009

Hard Hat Optional unveils Jill Downen's most recent manifestation of an installed environment intended to heighten awareness of the relationship between one's body and space. As the title of this temporary exhibit suggests, the proliferation of objects around the gallery in seemingly haphazard order conjures a construction site. One must traverse and navigate through the built environment, carefully stepping around fragile plaster skins on the floor, hand-sculpted forms of all sizes, and precarious wooden beams. Pallets, crates, and makeshift frames support stacks of figurative plaster fragments and amorphous parts. Sandbags brace otherwise unstable areas.

Yet the whole site is pristine; the clean whiteness of every element and the near-silence of the space contradict typical characteristics of actual construction sites. These subtle aspects of *Hard Hat Optional* are more suggestive of a museum storage space, especially one full of fleshy neo-neoclassical sculpture. Comparisons to either kind of space relate in that both usually have restricted access; construction zones and museum storage areas are dynamic sites—in states of continuous flux—where bodies labor rather than relax or contemplate. Public space and private space are conflated; moreover, the installation borders on chaos yet is resolutely a site of meditation.

The employment of indeterminacy reveals a turn in the artist's approach, one which she says is the result of "a deeper level of trust in [her]self as an artist." Rather than

establishing a set arrangement for the sculptural objects in advance, the layout was worked out in situ. Architectural methods are part of the artist's process. Downen created and carefully considered modes of display in a scale-model maquette but still allowed herself the artistic freedom to make drastic changes for the installation's final realization.

Of critical importance is the individual's phenomenological encounter of space and the site's temporary nature. Alex Potts describes Rosalind Krauss' understanding of the connection between phenomenology and the sculptural as "the bodily sensations produced in the viewer by the disparate apperceptions she or he ha[s] of the [work]'s configuration as seen from different standpoints."¹ Though still, the environment rejects stasis. Furthermore, one's physical body and perception of their body image creates entirely different experiences for each visitor to this installation; height, for example, and how comfortable one feels moving around the space generates varying modes of participation and reaction. If created elsewhere, the result would be an entirely different incarnation which could include many of the elements shown currently, but not all. The context and cleanliness signify deliberateness, yet raise questions about artifice: are the wooden props and sandbags necessary buttresses for the sagging forms, or placed solely for experiential interest? Downen's work embraces these ambiguous dialectics.



Each object in this installation brings its own unique dialogue of textures, volume, shape, and possible referent to the conversation in and about space. Most of the sculpted white plaster forms appear silky smooth, almost fluid, yet retain a matte surface with occasional evidence of air bubbles. Though the institutional context imposes limitations on direct contact with the art, these objects beg to be touched. Like Bernini and countless other sculptors who could produce the illusion of soft flesh from marble, Downen's forms transcend their materiality. Yet raw, apparently unworked sides left exposed—indeed, highlighted by the arrangement of forms—and the exaggerated ambiguity of shape place Downen's work squarely in the language of abstraction. Blocks evoking female breasts are stacked on one pallet, every one unique and sensuous but disturbingly disembodied. Other surfaces suggest voluptuous posteriors yet are similarly severed.



Confronted with a multiplicity of fragments, audiences might consider how the pieces relate; if they originally fit together, or what, if anything, they could construct. The absurd state of the site and its infinite potential become conceptual problems each individual must consider. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, "The built environment, like language, has the power to define and refine sensibility. It can sharpen and enlarge consciousness. Without architecture feelings about space must remain diffuse and fleeting."ⁱⁱ In the case of *Hard Hat Optional*, the sculptural objects stacked throughout the space (including unfinished plywood leaning against one wall and a plumb line hanging from the ceiling) and the corpulent walls bring attention to the specific architecture of the gallery, with the effect that there is no division between art and site.

-- Andrea L. Ferber

ⁱ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 209.

ⁱⁱ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 107.

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Images:

Jill Downen. *Hard Hat Optional (Installation View – detail)*, 2009.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

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.

