

Casting for Meanings in Jill Downen's
Architectural Folly From a Future Place

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To best appreciate in situ Jill Downen's stark wall installation *An Architectural Folly From a Future Place* (2018), we should perhaps first take a walk in the park. A short ramble downhill on the lawn finds us on the portico of a neoclassical grave memorial dedicated to Thomas H. Swope, Swope Park's founder and benefactor. Monuments always speak to cultural values and aspirations, and this edifice is no different. It asserts in its Greco-Roman elegance that although we are a far stretch on the map from Athens or Rome here in Kansas City, and the age of antiquity is by definition a very long time ago, nevertheless the philosophical and spiritual virtues of the lands of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and Cicero are held near and dear by Swope and his town. Reason, democracy, logical thinking, moderation, enlightenment, harmony, symmetric proportion, elegance...all these virtues are celebrated in the graceful structure guarded by noble lions. Time may be long, indicated by the fact that the colonnade even when new was styled by Charles Keck in 1918 as a folly, or architectural ruin, an artificially old echo of a polis in the past. But the stones and the beauty remain, a solid bedrock for a shared moral foundation. The architecture encourages passers-by to reflect on and be proud of the affinity between the American and the Greco-Roman republics. Swope's philanthropic gift to Kansas City of land to be shared by all its citizens seems grander in light of a kindred spirit in antiquity.

And now we climb uphill, a little out of breath with anticipation and rising elevation, to Downen's recently erected edifice. Will its sentiments harmoniously echo those of Keck's, and give us a Gesamtkunstwerk of old, new, and antique bound up in elective affinity? But then we stop in our tracks, a bit puzzled. What exactly is this thing? An "architectural folly" it is, to be

sure, since its white concrete form also is a new ruin of sorts, and it solidly commands the civic space in similar scale and proportion. It too invites the viewer to sit upon and stand astride it. But what are we being encouraged to associate with Downen's sculpture? For a temple ruin this does not seem to be; rather what commands our view here, low-slung but still insistently marking the lawn before us, is a wreck of a wall.



Architectural Folly from a Future Place, 2018, Jill Downen, concrete, lapis lazuli, 30 feet long. Photo: Charles Schwall

Jagged fissures interrupt and break apart the careful mold. Downen casted this to endure with a crew of concrete specialists locally at Wassmer Studios: the 30 x 1 1/2 x 4 1/2 foot wall met blueprint specifications, so these ragged breaches are no accident of wind and weather. The artist has purposefully put them here. Close looking also reveals a brilliant blue line evocative of the ultramarine plumb-line chalking string dangling in earlier Downen site-specific installations such as *(dis)Mantle* (2011), *Dust and Distance* (2012), and *Alignment* (2014). But this line is horizontal, not vertical--and not a plumb line per se, for it is fashioned not of chalk but of semi-precious lapis lazuli. What does this semi-precious stone, once ground into pigment and usually

reserved in the Renaissance because of its rarity and expense to paint the robes of the Virgin Mary herself, seek to fathom and measure for us?



Details of *Architectural Folly from a Future Place* (fissure and lapis lazuli inlay)

It doesn't appear to have anything to do with a classical past and its humanist associations. Something has crumbled, but it does not, as its other architectural counterpart on the hillside, immediately engage our senses to reflect on democratic virtues and neoclassical beauty.

Nevertheless, regardless of intent, it is a squat and inviting wall, and we can relish the fact that we can dance on or handspring over it, or eat our lunch sitting upon it when its stone surface has been warmed by the sun. In the simulacrum it plays upon, it might be a foundation that has sunk off-kilter into the ground over the centuries. Even though what kind of temple or building it might have been is no longer clear--or was it just a wall alone?--, everyone enjoys the fun of walking and sitting on something that in the imagined past would have blocked our view or been too mighty to climb and master. One gets a bit of the thrill of running through European castle ruins knowing that the ivy-crumbled walls which once housed kings are now steeped in wildflowers, weeds, and saplings, and are wide-open to our hiking-boot explorations.



Swope Park visitors lunch at the sculpture, summer 2018.

So something has passed to the ages, if we know not quite what, and we are secretly glad of it. Minimalism makes no pretense of the Acropolis, no lions glower at us, and we just enjoy the anonymous wreck in the late summer sunshine.

But there is that horizontal plumb line again, nagging us. Downen probably wants us to think of something after all. Earlier work of hers prodded us to think about what was out of true in architectural space and place, which in turn was a metaphor for the asymmetry and finally the decay in our own human frames. Body as building, and architecture as body, and everything under the sun will pass away.

Surely *Architectural Folly* is making mention of this, we muse, and suddenly the word "folly" gains multiplicity of reference, carrying not just its art-historical meaning of a cleverly constructed fake ruin for contemplation--which of course Downen's piece is as much as Swope's--but the more common meaning of a ridiculous or absurd pursuit. "All is vanity," the dejected philosopher of Ecclesiastes laments. And our bodies both biological and architectural will

collapse inevitably in gradual accordance with the relentless ticking of the clock, no matter what we do. If one shimmering heavenly sparkle of lapis remains as a legacy of our endeavors and kindnesses, we can consider ourselves lucky and blessed. For even if (wo)man is the measure of all things in a traditional cosmology, (wo)man fades. A memento mori calls out to us, and we somberly recall Swopes' monument just past the trees is also his tomb.



Architectural Folly from a Future Place with Swope Memorial in the background, Kansas City, Missouri. Photo: EG Schempf

But there is yet another note sounded here, and a further complication of the word "folly," I'd submit. And this is where we might go back to Swope's colonnade and our original uphill walk, and consider how that monument's Hellenistic precepts might have resonance for this artwork after all. Unusually for Downen, we have a third "body", the body politic, to reflect upon via her wall construction. Our national project as conceived by the current Administration, as the headlines across our great land make clear, has not shown much affinity for democracy, freedom, and rational tolerance for all (wo)mankind. Indeed, borders have been closed, the tired and yearning have been turned away from our safe harbor, families have been rent asunder, and

access has been blocked to the very ideals of antiquity America prides itself upon being the beneficiary of. Contemporary U.S. strategy embraces the mindset of "good fences make good neighbors," to quote Robert Frost's beloved poem's wall-building neighbor, whom the poet describes as "like an old-stone savage armed." The most obvious American physical architectural symbol of this attitude is the proposed fortified border wall with Mexico, of which eight prototype sections already stand towering south of San Diego. "Folly" here takes on a meaning of national import, a signal of hubristic government policy gone astray from the aspirations we once held dear, and Downen's work seems an admonition to take up their cause again and erase and raze any divisions or barriers to the democratic spirit in antiquity and foundational American ideals. What remains in "a future place" of militant barricades and isolating structures may crack, crumble, sink into the soil; it may leave a more humble architecture measured instead by its capacity for community, refuge, and repose. Significantly, and depending on one's perspective, thankfully, Downen's ruined wall can be seen to speak of success in liberating us from off-plumb political error as well as reminding us of the fleeting nature of the temporal.