

BAD AT SPORTS

Contemporary art talk

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Jamilee Polson Lacy

(blog post: edited to her introduction & coverage of Jill Downen's "Three Dimensional Sketchbook".)

For my time in Kansas City, I have created for myself a program of full emersion. I am doing my best to live, learn, read, hear and see this city inside out. From my outsider-on-the-inside position, I am looking deep down inside of Kansas City for themes currently pulsing through its contemporary art and culture scenes.

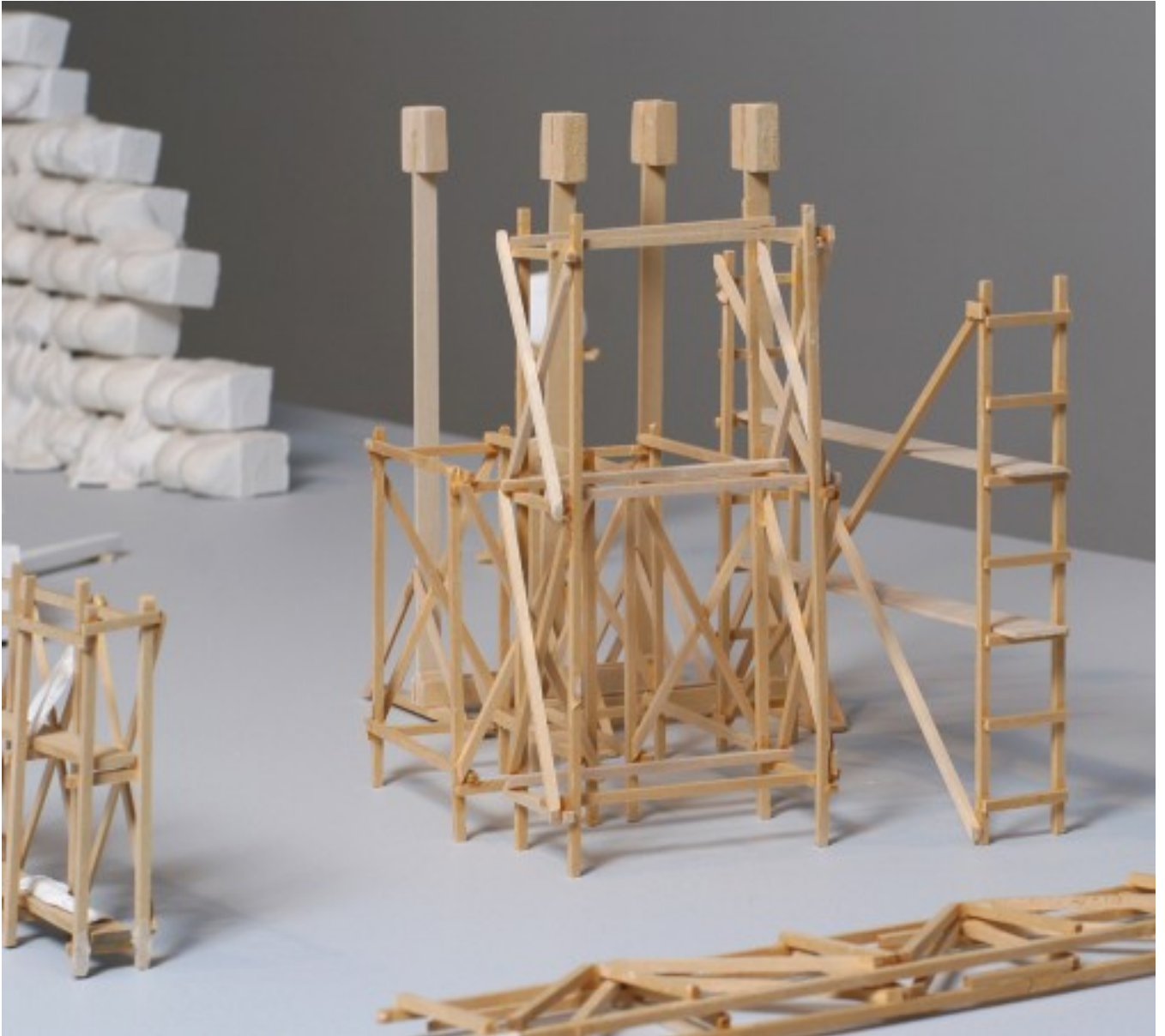
My first day at work, my boss and Charlotte Street Foundation Co-Director Kate Hackman loaned me *The King of Kings County*, an extraordinary novel by local author Whitney Terrell. Teenager Jack Acheson, this book's loveable narrator, takes the reader on a vivid journey that roars through mid-century downtown Kansas City, Missouri, into the development of its expansive Kansas suburbs. In the mid-1950s, Alton Acheson — part con man, part visionary, and Jack's dad — begins developing Interstate 70 and building a suburban empire as the freeway exits the city amid the cornfields of Kings County, Kansas. As Alton bluffs his way into prosperity, Jack becomes an accomplice to his grand ambitions. But when greed, corruption, and organized crime combine to create an urban nightmare instead — abandoned buildings, ghettos, and slums — Jack is forced to reexamine not only his father's legacy, but also that of his city and its community. Though fictional, this incredible story draws extensively from a sordid history of urban culture, as well as the race relations and class conflict that come with it, to examine the making of Kansas City's so-called American Dream, one whose contradictions continue to surface in every American place to this day.

Jill Downen, an artist who recently migrated West along Alton Acheson's I-70 from St. Louis to Kansas City, understands places by their insides. She looks deep down inside to see the architectural bones

and tendons that make up a location's structures. In many cases, those insides are sculpted, agile muscles trained to carry the weight of societies for years to come. In others, insides are aged and weak, crumbling under those same societies and the changes, like those led by Alton, they impose. For the most part, Downen recreates these insides full-scale, filling whole rooms in galleries and museums across the country with few giant sculptures. Opting for a bit more intimacy in *Three-dimensional Sketchbook*, the artist's first solo show in her new hometown at PLUG Projects, Downen has set up a series of small-scale models that invite viewers to look deep down inside both structures and her studio practice. With each miniature architectural ligament or joint, this installation shows just how hard Downen studies, analyzes, and tries to know a place.



“Hard Hat Optional” by Jill Downen in 2009 at Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis.



Detail of “Three Dimensional Sketchbook” by Jill Downen at PLUG Projects.



Detail of “Three Dimensional Sketchbook” by Jill Downen.



Looking in at “Three Dimensional Sketchbook” by Jill Downen at PLUG Projects.

-Jamilee Polson Lacy, Charlotte Street Curator-In-Residence