

# CONNECT

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George Nelson: Architect, Writer, Designer, Teacher | February 3–May 8, 2011



# Jill Downen: COUNTERPARTS

NEW FRONTIERS: Series for Contemporary Art | February 3–May 8, 2011

Jill Downen in her studio. Photo by Charles Schwall.

**JILL DOWNEN** is a working artist and a 2010 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellow. She is best known for her large-scale installations that focus on the relationship between the human body and architecture. *Jill Downen: COUNTERPARTS* exhibits approximately ten architectural sculptures combining human anatomy with the constructed environment. These large plaster and foam forms hug the walls and floors and fill the gallery space, looking much like a construction zone of the human body, with objects such as building blocks in the shape of breasts and joists supporting sagging folds of skin-like sculptures. Associate Curator Jennifer Klos discusses the development of this unique exhibition, from concept to installation, and what that means for the artist.

**JENNIFER KLOS:** Tell me a little about your artistic training and what you are creating for your exhibition in Oklahoma City.

**JILL DOWNEN:** My background is in painting. In my early years, my plan was to be a painter. I studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and earned my BFA in painting and printmaking. I went into the work force for 10 years; I kept painting and during that time interesting things happened. The language of painting became exhaustive for my concepts. What I was trying to say no longer worked visually in the confines of canvas and paint. I started building forms that looked like the forms in the paintings. In my paintings, which were abstract, spaces were based on architectural floor plans and sacred spaces from around the world. The process of leaving painting behind and turning to sculpture took about five years. I started graduate school in 1999 at Washington University in St. Louis and earned an MFA in sculpture, with some minor studies in architecture.

For the Museum's NEW FRONTIERS exhibit, I am creating a site-specific installation that concerns the symbiotic relationship between architecture and the human body. The title of the show is

*COUNTERPARTS*. The exhibit will offer viewers an immersive experience with a place of ideas about the body and architecture, temporality and permanence, the material and immaterial. In the gallery, a counterpart—or an element—is going to work in conjunction with other multiple elements to balance and counter balance the total space.

**JK:** Were you interested in color in your paintings or have you always used white-on-white tones? How do you see white as being an important part of your work?

**JD:** I was interested in color in so far as it could communicate a sense of light and a sense of place. In my formative years, I made a body of work in painting and printmaking that utilized a range of white tones, and when I started sculpting, I was still using color. In 2003, I started dealing with specific characteristics of exhibition spaces. I changed my color palette to match each particular space.

It would be incorrect to say my art doesn't have color. There is an intimate range of color that appears when the human eye perceives light in my installation art. Light and shadow, as well as temperature and time of day, are all factors that give my work a strong sense of color. I see the use of white materials, like plaster and paint, as defining the space with subtlety. I'm asking viewers to open themselves up to a new way of seeing and thinking. Within a narrow range of light, the human eye and mind will have to adjust to perceive contours of form and spatial relationships in an uncommon way.

A narrow color range also alters perception. The act of looking at the art changes one's experience of time due to a period of adjustment. In my practice, there is a certain threshold that gets crossed where language becomes insufficient, and you have to acknowledge that the work itself is a language. Sometimes, I think in images and spatial relationships, as opposed to language. It's a way of thinking, and I'm trying to make that visible in the art.

**JK:** What would you say is your strongest influence, past or present?

**JD:** My strongest influence has been my parents. My father is a master craftsman and sign painter, and my mother is a registered psychiatric nurse; they are both retired. From my father, I learned spatial thinking and the joy of making things or crafting form. From both my parents, I've learned how to see and look at the world around me with curiosity. Creativity was always fostered and supported in my family. That combination is at the core my artistic identity.

Today, the concepts drive the art—the questions that are central within the studio concern the symbiotic relationship between architecture and the human body. I'm always posing questions and trying to understand "What is a body?" and "What is a building?" and how their interdependent relationship creates understanding of who we are in the world.

**JK:** What is your creative process, and how do you proceed from concept to installation?

**JD:** The process begins with a site visit and time to pose questions such as, "What is this space about? What is happening in this place? How does a person enter, exit, and experience the space?" I also shoot video and make drawings in the empty exhibition space. Back in my studio, I use black and white Xeroxes from photographs of the gallery. On the Xeroxes, I draw geometric construction lines similar to those used in architectural renderings. The drawing process helps me understand the space's volume and how that capacity is demarcated within the gallery.

Within a three-dimensional scale model, I place small plaster maquettes as stand-ins for the actual sculptures. I have a larger model situated on the floor like a map. I move the maquettes frequently, as I consider scale and how sculptures might fit in the space. It is a process of moving forms as if they're elements of a language that are continually changing. From the drawings on the wall to the physical objects themselves, everything is laid out in the studio. It's a very non-linear and physical process.

I enjoy organizing and using spatial thinking skills to problem solve. It's one current that runs through my work, which is why I'm now making large-scale installation art instead of paintings. There's a challenge to dealing with something much larger than your own body that heightens understanding about space and how we exist in space.

**JK:** How do you determine the size or scale of your sculptures?

**JD:** I consider how the human body moves through architectural space. Whenever I'm conceiving a show, the human body—its height, its orientation in space, and how it moves through architecture—is at the focus of the work. In terms of architectural scale, the bodily forms can be magnified so that they make the viewer feel like they are in an open, vast space.

I'm also very aware of where the viewer is inclined to move or look—the walls, the floors, the ceiling, a corner or edge—and what might attract them to different points within the exhibition space. For the NEW FRONTIERS exhibit, I'm approaching the Museum's gallery as a volume of space in which viewers will move and interact with various forms, pockets of density, and open space.

**JK:** Could you tell me about the materials you use to create your forms?

**JD:** The installation is one total unity. Even though it's made up of zones, different materials and objects, all of those come together to create one total volume. Some of the materials are typical for construction. When viewers walk into the space, they're going to see lumber structures and hand-fabricated plaster forms.

The plaster forms have central cores made of EPS foam or polystyrene, which comes in different densities. The polystyrene that I use is construction grade; it is typically used in buildings for insulation.

My use of plaster goes back to the influence of the architecture of my childhood home, which had old plaster walls. There is a sensuality to working with plaster. Every phase—from mixing to pouring, forming to sanding—is much like interacting with skin. It actually puts off heat when it's setting up, and it's a beautiful, pliable substance to work with.

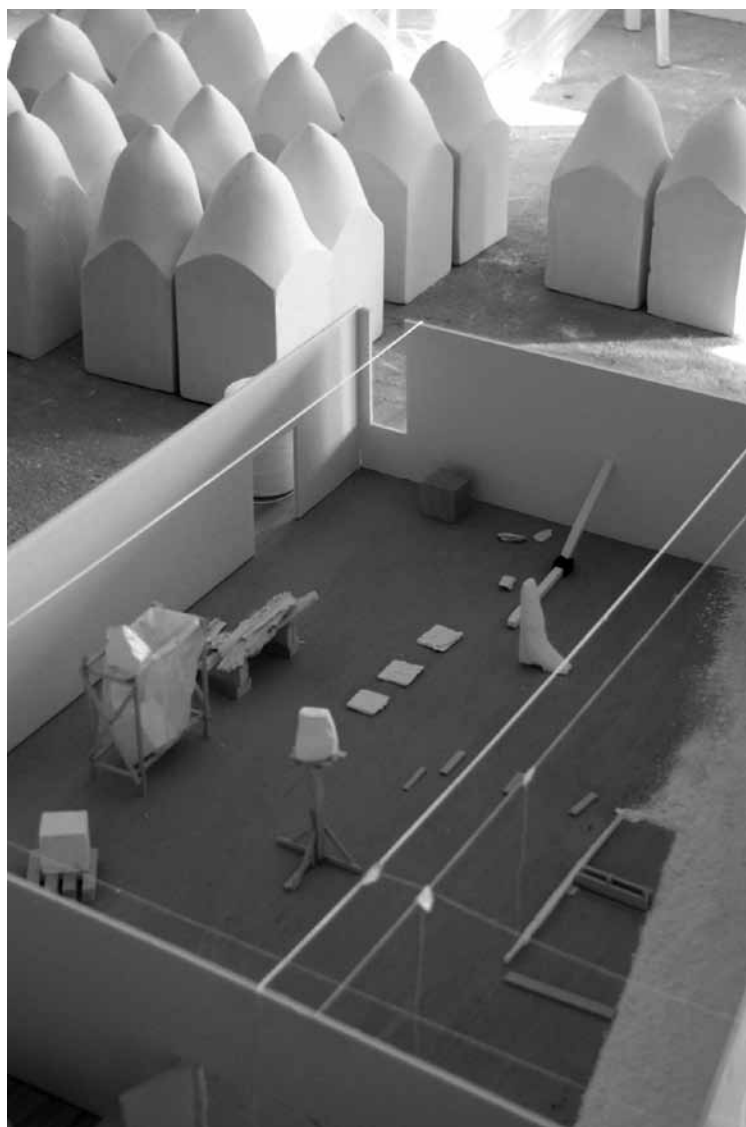
I would say 95 percent of my work is hand-shaped. A few elements are cast, but they are combined with the carved sculptures to form hybrids. During the sculpting process, energy from my body goes directly into the art, much in the way energy from a construction worker would get transferred directly into the infrastructure of the built environment. When you see the work in person, it is evident that every surface has been touched multiple times.

**JK:** How do you decide which parts of the body you want to represent?

**JD:** Decisions are directed by concepts, intuition, and by trial and error. I make a lot of work and test pieces; then I edit. Sometimes the creative process itself gives me the answer. The magnified scale of the body to that of architecture is abstracted.

A sculptural element may feel like any concave or convex area of the body, or it may be so abstract that you cannot be sure where it's located on the body. In the art, the topography of muscles, skin, and bones gives a sense that you are on the surface of the body somewhere.

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Working studio floor model of Jill Downen: COUNTERPARTS. Photo by Charles Schwall.



Jill Downen working from Xerox copies of the Museum's gallery space in her studio. Photo by Charles Schwall.

There may be forms that have a sense of gender that will be counter balanced by something else, so in terms of masculine and feminine, you are going to see both present in the work. Aspects of the body combine to blur boundaries.

**JK:** Can you tell us a little about your idea of time and decay in relationship to the human body and architecture?

**JD:** Ideas of time and temporality permeate the installation. Buildings are like bodies, and bodies are like buildings because they are affected by time, space, and gravity. What is interesting to me is that a single work of architecture will outlive a human being many times over. If I handed you a brick and you lifted it to get a sense of its weight and strength, then I asked you what's more important—a brick or a human being—obviously the answer is a human being. Yet that brick, when used to construct a building, endures and outlasts the life of one human being. It's such an odd contrast. So when I look at buildings, which provide protection for our fragile bodies, architecture becomes a second skin, one that will decay if we don't care for it. It's a symbiotic relationship. A broader question of mortality and the search for permanence arises—what is permanent? If my body is not unchanging and everything that I can see and touch is concrete but isn't permanent, then what is?

**JK:** How do you feel, as an artist, about making these installations that are not permanent?

**JD:** Temporality undergirds our fast paced culture. My installations offer audiences an opportunity to experience something that will heighten awareness of their own bodies as well as space, time, and the nature of temporality. I feel that the non-permanent installation sets up the parameters for what can be communicated about permanence. Within *COUNTERPARTS*, everything is part of a visual-spatial language that creates a place for consideration and reflection. The show is going to have a shadow of indeterminacy. It's going to be very open-ended and dialectic. People will have an opportunity to experience it, and then the installation will go away. What will remain is the experience, settled in people's memories.

This interview was held on November 11, 2010. *Jill Downen: COUNTERPARTS* is the third installment of the *NEW FRONTIERS: Series for Contemporary Art*. Organized by the Museum, the series presents the work of individual contemporary artists and current perspectives in the field. *NEW FRONTIERS* was created to provide a framework for the exchange of ideas between the Museum, artists, and the community. It connects the Museum to the international dialogue on contemporary art and emphasize the importance of the art-of-our-time as a critical and dynamic part of our daily lives.

## In the Galleries



*George Nelson*  
Architect, Writer, Designer, Teacher  
February 3–May 8, 2011, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor



*Jill Downen: COUNTERPARTS*  
February 3–May 8, 2011, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor



*Highlights from the Oklahoma Art League Collection*  
On View, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor



*Alfonso Ossorio*  
*Gifts from the Ossorio Foundation*  
On View, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor



*Amy Blakemore: Photographs 1988–2008*  
March 17–June 19, 2011, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor