

Jill Downen: The Approach

Erin Dzedzic

Jill Downen's installation *Threshold* is part of an ongoing body of work she has created in service to her memory of when lightning struck her childhood home, and its lasting structural aftereffects. The explosive lightning current caused the "skin to peel away," exposing "the bones of the house," wood, pipes, plaster, and wires.ⁱ Downen excels at engaging space in a way that is simultaneously subtle and impressionable, extensive yet seamless, and is able to synchronize a firm framework with a bodily softness. Amidst these dialectics in *Threshold* Downen explores a world of perception, of sensation, and experience activated by an installation of three interconnected components, ushering in new planes and surfaces that expand the phenomenology of the manner in which viewers approach her environments.

A reinstalled work that has been modified for this exhibition, *Inscribe*, is an undulating line of molded plaster that extends outward from the wall and snakes from floor to ceiling. The serpentine form evokes the shape of a lightning bolt, emphasizing the permanent mark that Downen's childhood memory has inscribed on her work. On the adjacent wall, Downen customized the lower left quadrant where a window cuts into the gallery for her work *Membrane* a multi-paneled, mixed-media violet painting on watercolor paper. *Membrane* hangs horizontally just a few inches above the floor, where a sliver of natural light creates an illuminated bar just below the monochromatic painting like a new horizon. Lastly, *Rejoinder*, a sixteen-by-four-foot gold leafed sheet of clear acetate vertically bisects *Membrane* and floats parallel to *Inscribe*.

Rejoinder acts as the pivotal element in the *Threshold* installation. Its malleable surface sways, responding to the movement of air in the space. The delicate gold leaf catches *Membrane*'s violet hues glimmering across its surface, while tiny exposed cracks where the golden flecks have fallen from the clear surface allow light to

permeate the underlying acetate. As viewers advance toward the reflective wall of gold, blurred outlines of the surrounding world are cast back as distorted shadowy

forms. In passing by the crease of the golden acetate formed by oscillating air in the space, our own out-of-focus body is abruptly slowed down, and for a brief moment we pass by an impression of ourselves. This slight drag in time, a tear in our present temporal moment, makes us acutely aware of our own trajectory in the space.

The arrangement of *Threshold* activates the gallery space in a dramatic departure from traditional laws of one-point viewing perspective. Instead, the trio of works coalesces into a temporal experience beyond our perceived physical world, illustrating the activation of space as described by minimalist artist Stephen Antonakos (1926–2013) which “involves the senses, including the kinetic sense, the mind, the emotions, the imagination—really finally a pure sense of being.”ⁱⁱ French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) suggests that “we must try to understand how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective.”ⁱⁱⁱ Ultimately, it is the viewer’s cadence toward and amongst the works and his or her own rhythm and gaze which activate the spatial possibilities of Downen’s newest work.

Erin Dziedzic is curator and head of adult programs at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

Notes ⁱ Jill Downen, in conversation with the author, October 4, 2015. ⁱⁱ Stephen Antonakos, interview with the author in preparation for the exhibition *Darkness and Light*, 2008. ⁱⁱⁱ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1945), 77.