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Don't think of a construction site



In the most general terms David Cerny and Jill Downen have about as much in common as an old half liter of soda and a sheet of aluminum foil. In the one case they are both flat, in the other both sculptors. It was nevertheless a memory of Cerny's "Kits" from a 1997 exhibition at the Joslyn Museum in Omaha, that floated to mind as I wandered across the threshold at the Bruno David Gallery.

Cerny is a Czech sculptor who, when he is not merely sculpting, relaxes by tangling with whole continents of politicians, a recreation exemplified by his recent commission *Entropa*, where for the celebration of the six-month presidency of the EU by the Czech

Republic he contrived a nose thumbing piece characterizing member states like Germany with the depiction of autobahn treadmills, or Holland described as a nation completely flooded with the exception of the Minarets of Mosques, or Bulgaria portrayed by the floor and plumbing of primitive urinals. Supposed to have represented the contributions of twenty-seven artists from throughout the EU, it didn't—and only once the eight-ton sculpture had been installed at the European Council building in Brussels was the ruse finally detected.

Cerny's work tends toward the thematic but is nevertheless varied. His "Kits", however, with titles like, "Rock Star", or "Jesus", or "Artist Standing" are the near life size sculptural representations of what their names suggest, but rather in the form of the unassembled parts of snap-together model toys, with arms, torso, crown of thorns, etc, still fastened separately by their breakable tabs and stamped plastic frames. Displayed in giant, sealed and labeled bags, they are made from fiberglass and plastic and raw irony.

Far from the considerations of EU identity, on the other hand, is Jill Downen, a Saint Louis artist who has accumulated an impressive list of residencies, including one in France; she's won the Great Rivers Biennial in 2003, exhibiting her impressive "The Posture of Place" installation at the Contemporary Museum as part of the Biennial, and has been forging a strong reputation to accompany her body of work. She is fundamentally interested in the conceptual junction of bodies and buildings, and despite the one being considerably more literal than the other, it was surely something of this shared deconstructed anatomical reference, which I think elicited my correlative summoning of David Cerny as I first encountered her show. To be clear, I expect that Downen shares little interest in the sort of specificity or rhetoric which concerns Cerny, or sends him occasionally to prison.

Rather, in *Hard Hat Optional*, Downen's current installation at Bruno David's the work runs thematically parallel to her prior meditations with concern to deconstructed anatomical forms, the overlap of architecture, and its compositional elements and construction. Here Downen imagines structures informing context so as to speak to both the discontinuity of objects and the process of assembly, which is often agent to this discontinuous character. With *Hard Hat Optional* she has filled the gallery space with white plaster forms of varying shapes, which though abstract, retain their nonspecific, but distinct anatomical reference. The individual pieces are presented within or upon the fresh lumber crates or pallets with which they are presumed to have been delivered, and are ordered throughout the space without the appearance of special consideration.

Among the works of most literal architectural reference, *Component 9: Breast Blocks on Palette*, is a collection of objects which have the character of decorative architectural accent pieces, each adorned with the conical form of a breast at one end, as opposed to the depiction of a pineapple or some other traditional architectural finial. These are stacked four tall and wide on a clean new palette with a handful seeming already to have been removed and presumably used from the rearward stacks. *Component 6: Block and Support Arm*, employs another vaguely anatomical form, in this case a highly formed plaster block which has the general nature of a milled quarry stone with fat rolls, which by a formfitting depression on its upper surface supports a series of two-by-fours, which bolted together form an angling brace against the wall. Downen is no stranger to structures which lean upon one another, or appear to require the support they receive. Here, however, in the absence of observable troubles with the wall itself, the implications of the piece seem to develop additional complexity. Whether the brace ultimately serves to hold up the wall, or to fasten down the plaster form, the piece nevertheless, seems to speak in more substantive ways to questions of internal and external dimension, and the measures of reaction in the process and function of art than has been suggested by much of her other work to date.

For me, by far the most impressive piece in the show is *Component 8: Tendon on Palette*. The work is quite simple in its ambition—in fact it appears to seek to be nothing more than a massive plaster reference to a long, sinuous tendon, perhaps of the underarm or of the back of the knee. Its dimensions feel precisely satisfying and its palette is carefully scaled for effect. The surface is smoothly contoured, with a small amount of worked surface in a few localized areas toward its top. This piece is covetously good; I would be gratified to have made, or certainly to own it, and I feel comfortable suggesting that it could hold its own in a sculpture gallery among more veteran reputations and works.

Overall the assembled pieces are coherent, as well as distinct, and seem to emerge fairly organically from Downen's established conceptual momentum. There is a hitch, however, and it's one which brings me again to David Cerny. You see, the gallery literature describes the work as being informed by and resembling a 'construction site'—and the somewhat incidental structures and forms and states of completion which result from this general imagery. In fact the installation speaks well to the process of transfer and accumulation of energy which is of specific interest to Downen. Her observation of the streams and eddies of energetic contribution are indeed a point of compelling interest. However, while the installation portrays these conceptual concerns, the imagery—fresh, unblemished lumber, pristine

plaster forms, the inescapable formality of a gallery space—serves to dispel it like ironworkers by the lunch bell.

What seems to have happened in Downen's attempt to employ irony in order to re-contextualize her installation is that she has run afoul of the arcane tenets of ironical transposition. Cerny is particularly relevant here because his work so well illustrates an appreciation that irony is most effective as the sauce not the entrée. It is painting the tank pink, rather than making a painting of a pink tank; and this effect, as far as I can tell is the result of two principal causes. Firstly: the subject of ironic transformation must be quickly recognized and understood. Secondly: an object cannot be ironic. The upshot of all this is that ironic epiphany is manifest spontaneously, and occurs within the audience, as a product of the audience and their own understanding, cued by some discrepancy of expectation.

So a gallery bedecked to suggest an artist's studio, or an interrupted installation, or a surrealist landscape is fine—but it in no way gains ironical reinterpretation by casting reference to a construction site or some other thing to which it bears no actual, much less conceptual likeness.

This and an unintelligible choice for flat, dim, and diffuse reflected lighting for an installation whose richness is most surely in its form, proved for me unfortunately distracting.

Free from such concerns, however, the work is thoughtful and imaginative, and in some cases simply gorgeous. Where Downen adheres more closely to her native concern and vocabulary; speaking to the anthropomorphizing confusion of anatomy, architecture, and art, and the interesting commutation and storage of energy, subjects which have clearly fascinated her from the outset, *Hard Hat Optional* is both an appreciable contribution to her developing catalogue, and the source of work which is closely considered and rewarding.

Image: Jill Downen. "Hard Hat Optional (Installation – Detail)

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ABOUT THE BRUNO DAVID GALLERY

Established in 2005, the 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.

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