

HAND TO HAND: JILL DOWNEN'S THREE DIMENSIONAL SKETCHBOOK by PETER MACKETH

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"Painters and poets are born phenomenologists," asserted the Dutch psychiatrist J.H. van der Berg in his 1955 book, *The Phenomenological Approach to Psychiatry*, suggesting that the mental attitudes and frameworks of the artistic mind, as well as the means and methods of artistic expression, are essentially grounded in the lived experience of the world. And so too, we might propose by extension, are sculptors and architects also "born phenomenologists" – at least, this is the explicit suggestion of the artistic vision and creative work of Jill Downen.

Indeed, Jill Downen's body of work, conceived and executed with great vigor over the last decade, has sought to demonstrate that all of us, no matter our walk of life, possess this essential capacity. Her works, from the animated room-scaled exercising of walls, floors and ceilings to the articulated hand-scaled constructions, maquettes and fragments, appeal to our physical and mental apprehension of our bodies – and accentuate our bodily movement (elegant and awkward by turns) in the space of the world. Such self-awareness, such such-knowledge, such *embodiment* of the tangible, palpable qualities of sheer existence, can be reassuring, discomfiting, or exhilarating – but at any scale, the works clearly resonate with these ambitions and impressions.

In the context of Downen's *Three-Dimensional Sketchbook*, however, as presented in the Bruno David Gallery's front room in the fall of 2013, an opportunity exists to consider the concept of "the sketch" – intellectually and artistically – in the construction of Downen's body of work over the last decade, since her rapid emergence as an artist of depth and productivity. If here the sketch is understood as an early unformed conceptual exploration, as an initial setting out of terms and techniques, or as a brief suggestive essay or dramatic scene, the relevance of two early experiences in the artist's development may be revealing – and in fact, these "sketches" may give dimension, volume and density to an understanding of Downen's work.

For these contemporary intellectual and artistic ambitions were fully evident already in *Anxious Architecture*, the artist's spring 2001 MFA thesis work at Washington University in St. Louis, a room-sized condensed wooden re-construction of her childhood house in which viewers/visitors were compelled to encounter rooms of sloped floors, angled ceilings, over-scaled furniture, and distended apertures of doors and windows. These disorienting and compressed rooms contained further chambers, cabinets and closets, each with a distinctive echo, fragrance, or texture, and all was composed – as if set to a distant melancholy music – to elicit simultaneous poignancy and disquiet. The work presented as an enlarged shadowed dream-like memory-box, a Cornell construction for phenomenal (if temporary) inhabitation. In multiple ways, as a "fragment" of artistic DNA, *Anxious Architecture* prefigured Downen's preoccupations with place, memory and sensory response, with the physicality of form and the manipulation of architectural elements, and with the materiality and density of experience.

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The convergences of art and architecture, of resonant memory and immediate sensory appeal, of material construction and spatial sequence, that *Anxious Architecture* and its author both relied upon and demonstrated had been equally present as focal points for intellectual discussion in a fall 2000 seminar in Washington University's School of Architecture, entitled simply, "Questions of Perception." Led by visiting scholar Juhani Pallasmaa and myself, and open to graduate students in both art and architecture, the reading list for the seminar included Pallasmaa's own *The Eyes of the Skin*, as well as Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture*, Christian Norberg-Schulz' *Existence, Space and Architecture*, and Steven Holl's *Questions of Perception*, among others.

But these readings (so clearly emerging from a phenomenological sensibility in architecture) and the seminar discussions they engendered, centered around the French scientist-philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, an ur-text of such thought for many in architecture educated in the 1980s and 1990s as waves of superficial historicism and formalism swept over architectural culture. Bachelard's texts, along with those of the other authors, suggested that architecture could achieve a poetic quality, and the idea that such quality might in fact emerge from an active employment of empirically understood experiences of the world possessed immense appeal to the young artists and architects of the seminar. That such a course would appeal to those in the University's MFA program as much as in the M.Arch program came as a welcome surprise, as was the swift realization that the students were pursuing the trajectory of these intellectual forces with such passion. Moreover, the common ground that the course themes outlined for both artists and architects provided fertile territory subsequently for both collaborative investigations and individual productivity. Such can be the power of an intellectual "sketch" in an education.

In the present moment, more than a decade later, the elements presented in Downen's *Three-Dimensional Sketchbook* have both aspects of a sketch: as an early conceptual exploration of forms and as an initial, condensed setting out of terms and techniques. The sequence of individual wall-mounted shelves lining the small gallery displays a spectrum of formal propositions, within the material family of plaster and concrete, across a range of technical means of execution – and what seems at first a disparate set of fragments, all from different hands, can be understood ultimately as the manual meditations of the same pair of restless, active hands.

On one wall the aligned studies of *Stack*, a multitude of dipped and dried planar layers, unable to withstand their own weight; *Artifact (from a Dream)*, a smoothly cast and released cornered volume, against the odds possessing a center of gravity and balance; *Nerve*, a ganglia of petrified linear energies; and *Un-nameable*, a brain-sized mass of abstract matter, paralyzed in mid-pulsation, on the verge of losing any formal coherence. On the other wall, the aligned exhibits of *Artifact (from Beauty Mark)*, a collection of golden flakes, both piled and gridded, suggestive of the infinite points that constitute a line, a plane, and volumetric surface; *Artifact (from the Posture of Place)*, a cracked concrete shard, dispossessed of context and balance; and *Tendon (from the Posture of Place, maquette)*, a nearly recognizable sculptural proposition, measured and smoothed with evident intent.

Downen's work intends to evoke both immediacy of sensation and more considered assessments of our own physical activities. These wall-mounted, eye-level sequences swiftly suggest multiple processes of making, recognitions arriving first intuitively but then understood cognitively in gerund formations: layering, stacking, dipping, drying, balancing, shifting, casting, molding, releasing, piling, gridding, cracking, measuring, smoothing, sanding (In these evocations, the relentless pursuit of these "making" processes by Richard Serra in an earlier era may serve as an intellectual and historical backdrop). For the artist, these "sketches" may well be simultaneously a personal tactile dictionary, an intense, condensed catalog of process, form and technique, as well as a record of her own time, labor and energy.

The centerpiece of *Three-Dimensional Sketchbook* is most properly understood as the magnetically antiseptic white-enameled metal cabinet of drawers, centered on the far wall of the gallery, mysterious in its isolation and banality, yet comfortingly measurable in its dimensions and quantities: three stacks of eight, two groups of nine in two different depths and one group of six of a third and thinnest depth, twenty-four drawers in all, set atop a simple, unadorned four-legged platform, all rising to an accessible height of an average person's waist. To all appearances, when closed and silent, this mute metal cabinet is an example of generic office furniture, or perhaps more interestingly, an equipment cabinet on loan from a scientific

research laboratory, or more ominously, a dispensary for a dentist's stainless steel utensils, or more evocatively, an altar of an austere and demanding faith. Only the nickel-plated drawer pulls and individual label surrounds offer an immediate humanity to the composition, providing the minimum of access and identity – and even there, the enigmatic labels (*breath, light, room, joined, deconstruction, embodiment*, among others) both provoke and puzzle our imaginations.

But the cabinet and its drawers are anything but mute; when pulled open, certain drawers reveal a concentration of material, textures and color: tissues of gold leaf, chips of cast white plaster, milled lengths of dimensioned wood, iridescent blue powder, for instance. Certain other drawers contain miniature assemblies of scaled construction – cunningly crafted wooden trusses, scaffolds, pallets, and pedestals – or dense presentations of cast or molded plaster in situ, in fragments, in singular formation, or in multiple units. When fully opened, Downen's cabinet, her "sketchbook," pulses with multiple energies. The clinical restraint of the ordered white enclosure only masks a diverse variety of artistic possibilities, a kaleidoscopic material palette of expressive opportunities.

The twenty-four cabinet drawers also stimulate another possibility: that there are others, many others...a vision of a vast room of such cabinets hovers at the edge of the imagination. That Downen's *Three Dimensional Sketchbook* is highly personal – it is hers, from her hands - makes it no less generous – it is also potentially ours, potentially for our hands. Such can be the gift of a sketchbook, whether one of half-filled or entirely blank pages, or drawers, or of overflowing or empty shelves. Each page, each shelf, each drawer opens into a world, Downen's sketchbook suggests, and each world is a territory to be experienced and inhabited, in all of its physical, material, sensual depth. Such can the gift of a sketchbook, such can be the gift of art.

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