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**"equilibrium and alignment" : Jill Downen's
"Weightless" at NUNU Fine Art**

Jill Downen's "Weightless"
NUNU Gallery New York

By Yohanna M Roa March 10, 2025



Jill Downen, Weeping Wall, 2018 - 2024 plaster and gold leaf on lath 72 x 48 in 182.9 x 121.9 cm, courtesy of the artist.

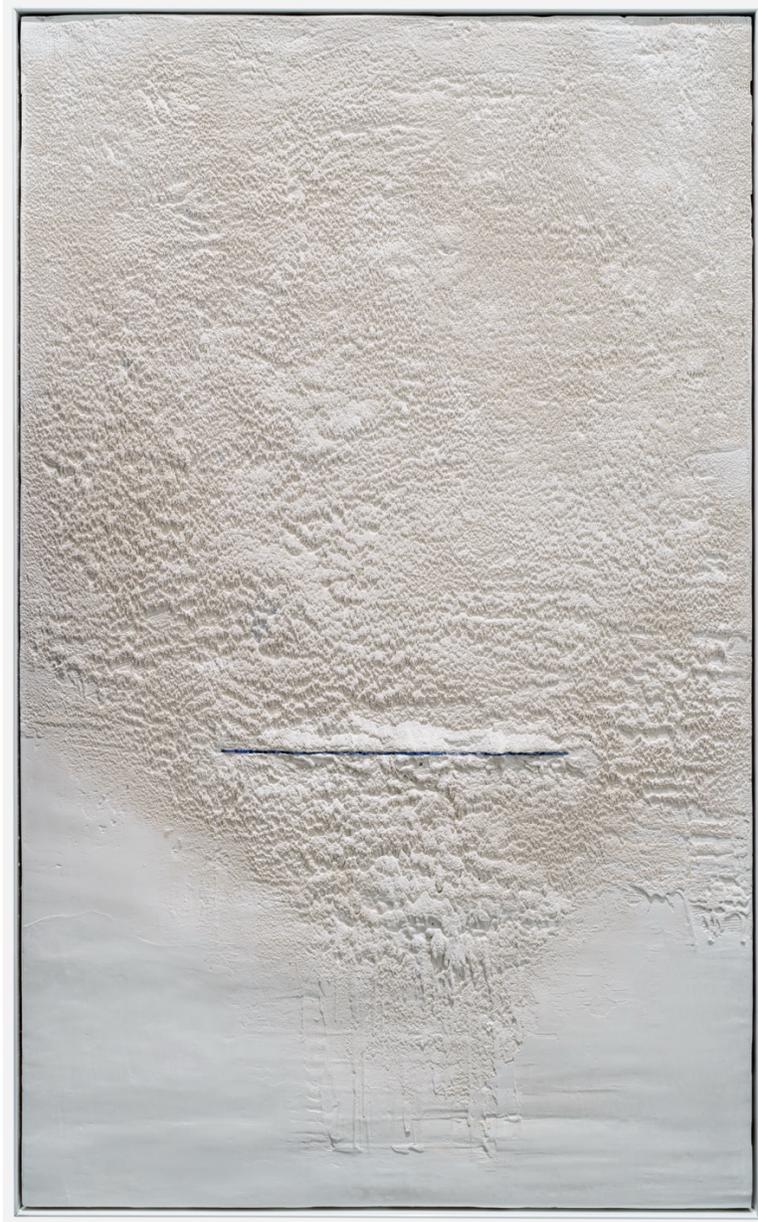
Inside and behind the walls, a rib cage often lies—an underlying materiality made up of pieces of wood. In the case of Jill Downen's work, however, it is plaster, which begins as a thick liquid and builds up

in layers, forming a kind of wall-skin or accumulations of dust, wrapping around this rib cage as though it were an organic substance. Through this process, it becomes clear that it can simultaneously be both visceral and rational. This duality allows for creating spaces "resistant to naming, representation, or restriction," opening a sensory realm that feels rooted, concrete, and weightless. Jill Downen's *Weightless* at NUNU Gallery in New York draws viewers into a world of subtle tension, where materiality, time, and emotional experience converge. Spanning six years of the artist's practice, the exhibition presents a sophisticated collection of plaster and concrete works that evoke both the physicality of architecture and the fleeting nature of the ephemeral.

The theme of *Weightless*—the paradox of holding space that is both heavy and light—is intrinsically tied to Downen's non-linear approach to both making and thinking. A non-binary artist whose work defies easy categorization, Downen explores the concept of binaries, considering how these polarities—hot and cold, male and female, rich and poor—serve to both construct and dismantle systems. As the artist shares in an interview with me, "Strength for me comes from a middle place," a place where opposites meet, interact, and retreat. In the material language of plaster and concrete, Downen's tactile exploration of this middle ground becomes a meditation on temporality, architecture, and human experience.

This approach isn't immediately evident in the conventional sense of binary opposites but emerges through the nuances and textures

embedded in each artwork. Downen, who grew up surrounded by construction—her father a master craftsman—brings a hands-on



Jill Downen, Grounding, 2019 - 2023 plaster, inlaid lapis lazuli on wood lath, 72 x 48 x 2 in., 182.9 x 121.9 x 5.1 cm, courtesy of the artist.

sensibility to her materials. Weightless includes over thirty wall-hanging works—referred to by the artist as “reimagined drawings”—crafted using traditional lath-and-plaster techniques, metal mesh, and concrete. These pieces merge the tactile with the ethereal, forming an architectural language that speaks to both physical structure and emotional resonance.



Jill Downen, Level, 2024, concrete, lapis lazuli, 10 x 8 in., 25.4 x 20.3 cm, courtesy of the artist.

The materials themselves become central to the exploration of time, memory, and space. Plaster, concrete, lapis lazuli, and gold leaf evoke both permanence and impermanence, creating surfaces that seem as though they might shift at any moment. As Downen describes her process with plaster, “It feels cold, like yogurt, and then as it hardens, it turns thick, like Greek yogurt, and it starts to put off heat.” This transformation reflects a duality that extends beyond the material—it speaks to the dual nature of existence itself, where stillness and motion, growth and decay, are intricately connected.

A key piece in *Weightless* is *Weeping Wall*, which encapsulates the artist’s meditation on time and materiality. Created over two years, this drawing emerged in the wake of Downen’s father’s sudden death. The physical changes within the piece—marks built, destroyed, and rebuilt—serve as emotional echoes of that period of loss. The texture of the plaster, with its “deep scars” from chiseling and gilding, mirrors the scars of grief and the transience of life. These markings, as much about the artist’s labor as the passage of time, invite the viewer to contemplate how time accumulates not only in the artist’s materials but in their body and psyche. The process itself becomes as important as the product, as creating becomes a journey of both discovery and transformation.

In contrast to the more visceral and textured works, Downen’s use of lapis lazuli introduces stillness and precision. In pieces like *Level* and *Level Up*, where the stone is carefully placed with a slight curve, the lapis lazuli evokes balance, stability, and grounding. These works allude

to the concept of a plumb line—a tool from Downen’s childhood symbolizing equilibrium and alignment. Suspended with near-spiritual precision, the lapis lazuli offers a visual counterpoint to the tactile



Jill Downen, Unsettled 1, 2024, concrete, lapis lazuli 10 x 8 in 25.4 x 20.3 cm, courtesy of the artist.

intensity of plaster and concrete, suggesting that balance is something to be felt, yet must also be carefully maintained.

The delicate interplay of gold leaf in works like *Unsettled 1* and *Unsettled 2* introduces another layer of complexity. Traditionally a symbol of the divine or eternal, gold contrasts with the pyrite (fool's gold) Downen also incorporates into her practice. This tension between the precious and the mundane, the divine and the earthly, reflects the artist's interest in how we navigate the contradictory forces within our lives. The gold leaf, often a symbol of transcendence, here appears cracked, scarred, and imperfect, suggesting that transcendence is not static but ever-changing, subject to the forces of time and decay.

The exhibit functions as a call to pause, to “sit quietly, look deeply,” as Downen herself describes. The quiet spaces she creates in her work are not merely formal but conceptual. The minimalist color palette, dominated by the gray tones of concrete and plaster, creates a meditative atmosphere that invites a slow, intentional gaze. While there is an overarching sense of stillness, it is a stillness filled with undercurrents—energy, tension, and history. Downen's works invite the viewer to experience not just the materials and forms, but the very space between them.

The overarching conceptual motivation of *Weightless* is an invitation to reflect on the precariousness of life, offering a response to the rapid and constant shifts in the world around us. As Downen eloquently states, the

work serves as a reminder “to slow down and heighten awareness of internal and external energies.” The exhibition provides a moment of respite in a world that is often in flux—both personally and globally. The materials, though at times fragile or impermanent, are imbued with a quiet resilience, suggesting that strength can be found in vulnerability and beauty in imperfection.



Installation image of Jill Downen: Weightless at Nunu Fine Art, New York, 2025, photo by Martin Seck.

In her ability to transform construction materials into a deeply introspective and evocative experience, Downen achieves something both profoundly intimate and universally relatable. *Weightless* exists not only in the realm of physical architecture but in the spaces between the material and the immaterial, the lived and the imagined, the known and the unknowable. This exhibition is not just a collection of artworks; it is an invitation—a chance to breathe, to pause, and to engage with a world as vast and complex as the spaces she so carefully crafts.

Weightless is a meditative exploration of time, loss, labor, and the quiet yet powerful potential of materials. It is an exhibition that invites reflection and pause in a world that often demands constant motion. Downen’s work reminds us of the beauty and strength found in the spaces between certainty and uncertainty—spaces that are weightless, yet imbued with profound significance. **WM**



YOHANNA M ROA

Yohanna M Roa is a visual artist, art historian, and feminist curator. She is in the MA Women and Gender studies program at the CUNY Graduate Center. She has a Ph.D. in History and Critical Theories of Art program at the Universidad Ibero Americana de México. Master's degree in Visual Arts from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She has given lectures for the SEAC Annual Meeting, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Mexico and the Latin American Public Art Seminar, Brazil-Argentina. She is a permanent contributor to ArtNexus Magazine. Her artistic work has been studied, published and commented by Karen Cordero for the 109 CAA Annual Conference, 2021, in *Revaluing Feminine Trajectories and Stitching Alternative Genealogies in the Work of Yohanna Roa, Natalia e la Rosa: Yohanna M Roa, Textile Woman*, Casa del Tiempo Magazine, and *Creative industries, Innovation and Women's Entrepreneurship in Latin America*, published by the Andes University and UNAL in Mexico, 2022. She has developed exhibitions, educational art, and archive projects for including WhiteBox NY, The Tertulia Museum of Modern Art in Colombia, Alameda Art Laboratory Mexico City, and Autonomous University of Nuevo León México.

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