

# ART PAPERS

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## JILL DOWNEN ST. LOUIS

The critique of the white cube is by now so thoroughly ordinary that it suffices to acknowledge its politics. There is little need continuing a now clichéd analysis of the spatial determinants of the archetypal contemporary commercial gallery. Jill Downen has embraced the gallery's box as subject and object, and its whiteness as coloration of her oeuvre. *Jill Downen: (dis)embody*, recently on view at Bruno David Gallery [April 7—29, 2006] presents her latest investigations. In a move that could easily be construed as a return to aesthetic empathy, Downen's work relates architecture and the body by revealing their shared substructures. She proffers their trifold symbiotic relationship: architecture and the body are both subject to the natural forces of time and decay; they literally interconnect during the physical process of construction; and humans use architecture as protection.

The body has been a standard for architectural form and function in Western culture since at least the time of Vitruvius. It has been associated with architecture, which has been cast as the anthropomorphic reflection of human (or even divine) form. As such, architectural design is understood as a series of perfected geometric proportions echoing an idealized human body, as in Leonardo's canonical drawing *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1492. Modernist scholarship often suggests a lessening of anthropomorphism with Le Corbusier's "machine for living," which essentially abandons the image of humans to embrace logic and functionality. Downen's art attempts to unite these divergent constructs by foregrounding a transitive operation. Thus, her works equate body as architecture with architecture as body.

*Over Flow*, 2006, continues the conceit of many of her previous installation-based works. Made of polystyrene and gypsum, and painted white, the work is an extremely convincing visual hoax, effectively suggesting the actual surface of the wall. Mirroring a depression in the gallery floor, a substantial bulbous form exudes from the wall. It is precariously propped up by a 2 x 4, and

seems about to erupt and spew the wall's entrails onto the floor. Reminiscent of Richard Serra's prop pieces, *Overflow* creates an unsettling tension. Its material presence virtually anticipates destruction, implying the imminence of actual collapse. An expectant fissure also evokes the abject body.

Eleven vertical white elements placed at sixteen-inch intervals mimic the underlying studs in *Lineament*, 2006. These ghostly cast-offs of a construction site emerge as if they had pushed through the wall. They also continue Downen's dialogue with Serra's art as they virtually recast his thrown lead castings as upright *doppelgängers*. Downen's titles are always carefully chosen signifiers. Lineaments can describe distinctive facial lines as well as property lines or topographic features, such as a fault line. The work relates to the building's skeleton as a dual system of unveiling and enfolding. Yet, she never pierces the wall. Many artists have peeled away or cut through wall surfaces, from Lawrence Weiner's removal piece to Gordon Matta-Clark and recently Urs Fischer. Downen's work opts for a different strategy, shirking processes of removal to explore surface ornament. While in dialogue with the architectural setting, her works maintain a strictly sculptural identity.

It's that very objecthood that suggests an alternative intent, as if works like *Orthosis*, 2006, or *Flexure*, 2006, were prosthetic attachments that act on a concealed physicality. *Stratum*, 2006, is a slightly undulating shelf-like form that resembles an exaggeratedly elongated version of Duchamp's *female fig leaf*, 1950, with ample doses of Louise Bourgeois. It describes a smooth epidermis covering a textured internal formation, sheltering a potentially overlooked protuberance that can read as benignly as a ball thrown through the back of a wall, or conversely as a growing malignancy, or even a sexually charged hidden secret.

—Jeffrey Hughes

Jill Downen, "Over Flow," 2006, polystyrene, gypsum, and latex paint, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist and Bruno David Gallery, St. Louis)