

school of  
**art** \*

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# Art Works



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 Washington University in St. Louis

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# Jill Downen and *The Posture of Place*



Above Jill Downen at the opening reception of *The Posture of Place*.

Right: A detail of *The Posture of Place* installation. Photo by Richard Sprengeler.

As a recipient of the first Gateway Award, School of Art graduate and now instructor, Jill Downen (MFA in sculpture, 2001) has produced a vast interior landscape that evokes numerous references to both the human body and architectural space. Downen's winning installation, *The Posture of Place* heralds a forceful teleological argument and an important investigation of the interconnectivity of viewing and the locus of that experience.

To recognize the most significant emerging artists in the greater St. Louis area, the Gateway Foundation, in collaboration with the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, has established the Great Rivers Biennial, an award that provides a grant of \$15,000 to each selected artist, and underwrites an exhibition at the Contemporary. According to Shannon Fitzgerald, Curator, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, the Gateway Award is intended to "move the artists to the next level in their professional development and will become an equivalent to the career support of the prestigious Joan Mitchell Award."

Following the call for participation, three jurors from around the country chose three artists for the inaugural exhibition from a yield of 244 submissions. The jurors undertaking this enormous selection process were Lisa Corrin, Deputy Director and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seattle Art Museum; Debra Singer, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Whitney Museum of American Art; and Hamza Walker,

Education Director, The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. This celebrated group of curators was chosen by the Contemporary and represents a unique understanding of contemporary art practices, as well as both diversity of geographic region and aesthetic sensibilities. After making an initial selection of 19 artists, the jurors then determined the award recipients based on the strength of their proposals for the exhibition and noteworthy level of professional experiences. In addition to Downen, the other finalists were Adam Frelin, a visiting assistant professor of art at Webster University and Kim Humphries, project manager of Arts in Transit. Although entries were permitted in a range of media, each of the recipient artists had proposed site-specific installations that resulted in multiple approaches to engagement with the space of the Contemporary. Frelin's work addressed the ambiguities of perceived experience and the interstices of tangible form with assumed visual verity. Humphries presented an installation of collected artifacts reminiscent of a lower middle-class basement from the 1950s, or an obscurantist compilation of objects filled with associative potentiality. Although essentially three solo exhibitions, the artists formed a successful composite that seemed to imply a common conceit and yet maintain thoroughly individual voices.





As a recipient of the first Gateway award, Jill Downen has produced a vast interior land



Above School of Art students Mark Bartholomew, BFA'07; Christina Cosio, BFA'05; and Emily Renner, BFA'05, played a crucial part in the construction of *The Posture of Place*. Each of them worked as a studio assistant during the summer months.

Left A detail of *The Posture of Place* installation. Photo by Richard Sprengeler.

Since her work for the past several years has employed a notion of body and building simultaneity, Downen's proposal for the exhibition proffered an attempt to create sculptural pieces that would directly engage the architecture of the Contemporary Museum itself. For Downen, who began her career as a painter, the transition to sculpture and the linkages of object and architecture were nearly hard-wired. Having grown up in a large family and observing her parents' efforts to make improvements on their property has had a profound effect on her later understanding of the interaction of people and their built environments. She states that her recognition of architecture as a living thing began in childhood, "when I witnessed and learned about space through my parents' labor to maintain their home." She continued by quoting her father, that there "was not a surface that he didn't touch." This sense of a very personal identification with space would lead Downen to a much broader realization of how architecture can reveal both its own internal structures and also serve as a marker of multiple determinants of social identities.



Downen has emphasized the cracking in the floor by creating large ovoid forms that appear to seep and ooze up from below the surface of the concrete. Continuing the existing cracks through the blisters, there appears almost an explosion of some subterranean fissure. Built up of polystyrene, purposefully split open, covered with concrete and polychromed; the seamless precision with which Downen creates these pieces produces an unexpectedly realistic effect.

The Contemporary was designed with an attempt to open the building to views from the street and undermine the rigidity of the white cube, while at the same time providing usable exhibition space. There are consequently few right angles, or extended wall vistas. The joining of architectural components at right angles, floor to wall, wall to contiguous wall, is therefore far less visually prominent than in the typical gallery setting. It is at these 90 degree points that Downen most thoroughly investigates the association of body to building. In one instance a large, stark white blob of wall envelops an ascending floor blister.

*scape that evokes numerous references to both the human body and architectural space.*

The sense of developing identities extended to the working project for *The Posture of Place*. Commencing with an initial visit to the site, Downen responded directly to features in the architecture that seemed to characterize the identity of the body, and those in relationship to various assumptions about the construct of the social identity of the building as a non-collecting art museum. The museum primarily exerts a transparent identity to exhibit recent art, or as Downen phrases it "art isn't hidden," but at the same moment, an art museum serves multiple functions; as a location of social interaction for various art and occasionally non-art related events, as well as a focus of the ongoing dialogue about the nature of both the explicit and implicit power of art institutions. Additionally, like the human body, the wall surfaces mask an infrastructure, a sub-epidermal layer replete with conduit, heating and cooling ducts, etc., that perform the physical necessities of the structure. Fitzgerald described this relationship "as less about specific parts of the body, for example, the blisters on the floor are non-specific, but rather as a general posture as it relates to the building and its institutional mission."

The blistering that Fitzgerald mentions is one of the most provocative aspects of the installation. Designed by Brad Cloepfil, and only opened for the past year, the Contemporary building has been the subject of some controversy. As if being situated adjacent to the austere splendor of Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation for Arts was not a difficult enough design dilemma, the building's floor and some interior stairs began to show cracks very early on. A recent *New York Times* article (Julie Iovine, Aug. 8, 2004) added to this dispute by discussing dissatisfaction with American construction standards asserted by certain prominent foreign architects, and illustrating the Contemporary as an example.

Comprised of polystyrene and covered with drywall mud, the bulbous, flowing wall prosthetic is reminiscent of Surrealist illusion with multiple sexual allusions intact. The most prominent feature of the installation, *Tendons*, links the only right angle wall juncture with enormous elongated flowing forms, evoking the subcutaneous sinewy stretching of tendons connecting muscle and joint.

Three School of Art students, Mark Bartholomew (BFA in sculpture, 2007), Christina Cosio (BFA in sculpture, 2005) and Emily Renner (BFA in sculpture, 2005) were employed as Downen's studio assistants for the project. They initially worked directly with the artist in her studio and then for 16 days helped transform the studio work into the final pieces at the site, a process that Fitzgerald described as "so intense for such a simple, elegant result." The project also became an extension of her teaching as Downen imparted an awareness of her consummate concern for craft and an example of her own working procedures by thoroughly engaging the students in significant aspects of the final work. An experience described by Bartholomew as influencing how he views himself and his future art making, and perhaps more importantly that "I learned from her as an artist, rather than her as a teacher."

*Written by Jeffrey Hughes, a professor of art history and criticism at Webster University*