

St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Arts & Entertainment
Sunday, November 9, 2003

“BODY/BUILDING”

Jill Downen’s installation piece is strictly structures

BY

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The title of Jill Downen’s installation, “Body/Building,” explains pretty clearly where her interests lie and what her work is about. Although one category is organic and the other not, human bodies and buildings have much in common. Both are structures that contain things - bodies, the organs that allow life to function; buildings, those bodies and the repository of objects accumulated by them to make living and working possible.

But in her unsettling sculptural installation, an environment that surrounds the viewer on four sides, Downen focuses more on their differences than their similarities. Walls that are ordinarily planar swell and contract into a void. Strange protuberances bulge, and hair-like lengths of metal sprout.

In an artist’s statement, Downen writes that her work investigates the question, “In what ways can sculpture endow architecture with a human sense of being while maintaining the architecture’s integrity?”

She succeeds at achieving that balance through subtlety. Although the gallery space, a classic white cube, has been transformed, its architectural nature has not been violated, and you don’t fully notice the effects of Downen’s interventions until you have been in the space for a while. But once perceived, her results upset expectations, creating feelings of the weird and the unnatural that you might find in a surrealist painting by Magritte or Dali in which the organic and the non-organic occupy each others realms.

It would probably be inaccurate to call Downen’s work surreal, however. Her interests share more in the contemporary interest in bodies in extremity that you find in work by, for instance, Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith. But her work is as much about delight as it is about distress.

“Swollen and Cracked,” one of Downen’s most dramatic “events” in the installation, is actually one of the most subtle. I was standing in the gallery for a full 15 minutes before I was aware of the extent of the work’s swelling. The piece is a lunar-sized boil that appears to be emerging in a perfect half-circle from the wall. A jagged crack that runs through it like a cracked egg looked, from across the room, like a long stick dangling from the ceiling.

“Swollen and Cracked” shares a corner with “Architectural Cellulite,” in which rolls of fat seem to cascade down the wall, to puddle at the bottom. With the recent news of the local obesity crisis, you could see this as a real St. Louis piece.

A long wall hosts an array of small individual works collectively titled “Involuntary Anatomies,” which exhibits a number of bodily references. One sequence of vertical bumps suggests a set of vertebrae, and a mound-like swelling with a centered bump recalls a breast.

Downen writes that in addition to wanting to contract and expand form in her work, she wants to use space “in order to suggest psychic, sexual, anxious and absurd states of being.” Naturally, with so many bodily references, the installation abounds in erotic content. A separate sort-of X-rated gallery includes a slit in the wall with marked vaginal associations and a cluster of curly metal wires that look like architectural pubic hair. (And you thought mold was a problem!) Art-lovers, beware: not for children or prudes.

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