

Jill Downen: The Posture of Place

Conversation

Shannon Fitzgerald: Jill, let's start with the title of your three part installation, The Posture of Place, can you tell me about that?

Jill Downen: The Posture of Place is about the Contemporary's new building settling into its position and its social identity. I am interested in its physical body and the way in which it literally settles into St. Louis. My main preoccupation is with space and the philosophical implications that arise from the notion that a building is a body. The exhibit explores the symbiotic relationship between the body and architecture. The work has an interface that sets up an open dialectic between the body and architecture through similarity and difference. It is not just addressing the body and architecture, but also the absurd, the viewer, forces of nature, and culture. The in-between space is critical to my work. I am interested in breaking down boundaries where complexity, contradiction, and mystery unfold.

SF: You apply human attributes to the building as a visual analogy or metaphor to address capability and action. This relates to the body, how we take care of our bodies, our health, and the effects of time on the body? How do you see this aging process act in architecture?

JD: Yes. Posture fails over time. Think about the marketing targeted to women to stay youthful and counter wrinkles. People are constantly fighting gravity. Architecture is the same way, look at our environment, the way buildings sag and decay due to gravity and natural forces. Likewise, when I drive through a part of the city that is in decay and see large gaping holes and crumbling areas, it is like looking at a wounds on the buildings. I visualize flesh, just as I see the concrete sidewalks as skin – all the cracks look like wrinkles. I see the Contemporary as a body, and the entire city as being flesh. This flesh affects its inhabitants and requires care.

SF: Many of the cracks in our building are not intentional, but as a flexible space, they are staying and are permanent. Why raise the floor, swell the crack? Is your interest in the buildings' flaws about perfection, the impossibility of perfection that refers to the perfect body?

JD: I want people to look at the walls and the floor and think about what is underneath it and why it cracked. Despite all the planning and all the intention, the building has a life of its own. The building did what it 'wanted' to do and that could not be controlled. When we speak of posture, we are not always speaking of good posture. Posture, positioning and place are temporal, my work hones in on the ephemeral nature of the body in various spaces. Additionally, I don't think perfection exists.

SF: The work is born of an architectural space to address the simultaneous strength and fragility of human anatomy and the human experience. You stress an equal interest in the inter-mechanics and armature of the body and its protective skin. Are you interested in the precise passage from strength to weakness, the exercise of that moment?

JD: I am continually astounded by the strength of the human body. At the same time, I am amazed at its fragility: how easy it is to get a cut, break a bone, or get shut down by a virus. Buildings are the same way. They are icons of strength and yet if they are not maintained they ail. I am interested in the opposition of simultaneously being strong and vulnerable. We hold together, yet experience stress, tension, and conflict in such a way that posture changes immediately.

SF: Much of the stress, tension, and conflict you address is a progression, like the way blood moves through the body as parallel to the way a crack moves through the city rather than trauma or impact. Are you looking at notions of self preservation through the subtleties of movement, an action, or context?

JD: The stress and tension that comes out in the work is prolonged rather than sharp, articulated and immedi-

ate. The Contemporary has transparency and gesture in the way it follows the curve of Spring Street bringing the exterior into the interior, with street level windows for viewers to look through the building and appreciate what is inside. So the work is a gestural opening up and connection between the exterior and interior. I wanted to incorporate the idea of flexibility with the installation of tendons in the corner. The 90 degree turn is softened into a sweeping, bending gesture which speaks to the fluidity of space.

SF: But there is also an exposing rupture and seamless mending happening simultaneously in this exhibition. As if the work and space are always moving, perhaps even healing?

JD: Bodies and buildings are in perpetual motion. The tendons, blister-like forms, and cracks reveal what is already present in the architecture.

SF: You blend and smooth hard edges in the space that maintains a welcoming sense of geometry and balance. With all the contours and movements in the piece are you interested in softening hard spaces? To speak of swelling, opening, rupture, and exposure implies a seduction. Are you sensualizing the space?

JD: Absolutely, I am drawing out the subtle sensuality that exists in the space and magnifying it. I think the Contemporary is a sensual place; its patina, light, and lines relate to my sensibility. The sensuality also comes from the production of the work. Carving, applying drywall mud, and then sanding by hand is an extremely sensual experience. It is one of my favorite stages in the creative process. It requires that layers be sanded over and over. It is very meditative, calming, and quiet. Somewhere in the process of addition and subtraction the form finds itself under the contours of my hands. It cannot achieve a surface quality akin to human skin without this hand-touched process. I think labor actually unifies the body and architecture.

SF: Your schematic drawings included are three dimensional. How do your drawings interface with your large scale works? It seems they expose that which is not visible in the installation?

JD: The drawings augment the installation by offering a different vantage point. They reveal the sub-epidermal anatomy or interior flesh of the walls and floor. The drawings diagrammatically set up visual analogies between anatomical studies, muscle and cell structures, floor plans, building materials, and sketchbook notations. My physicality with the treatment of the paper links back to the installation.

SF: Do you have a goal in mind for the viewers?

JD: I hope they would have an experience in the exhibit that makes them realize space is subjective, in particular our built environments are not objective spaces based on mathematical paradigms, but are a places of relative energies. The museum is a body with a life of its own. People and exhibits pass through it, transform it and redefine it with art, ideas, exchanges, dialogues and events. I can't predict what will happen, but if people become aware of the body/building relationship and leave with a heightened awareness of space and their bodies within it, I will feel satisfied.

Interview between Jill Downen and Shannon Fitzgerald, curator, Contemporary Art Museum took place June 10, 2004.