

Jill Downen's *Uneasy Opposition*

Physical space has no 'reality' without the energy that is deployed within it.

—Henri LeFebure

Jill Downen's installation *Uneasy Opposition* is a carefully calculated (re)articulation of social space wherein possibility and the contradiction of such possibility coexists as a construct based on the body and architecture. The body and architecture are explored through notions of beauty and time that while referring to a reality which engenders particular perceptions and experiences, also challenge various concepts of Platonic beauty (symmetry, harmony, balance, and proportion). Downen explores imperfection (asymmetry) to deflect such hierarchal certainties—that like other universal ideas (nature, truth)—can be rendered empty or abstract. She creates a space—which is transitory in nature—to impart meaning by offering physical engagements that correspond to the experience of the body and give validity to a sense of the self as bodily.

The energies deployed in *Uneasy Opposition* are culled from the everyday in a series of paradoxes. Downen effectively translocates human experience into a ubiquitous whitewashed architectural space. The experience is heightened through a consideration of organic form that shares a male and female sensibility. In a narrow, three-sided rectilinear room measuring 20x40 feet, Downen integrates the walls and white biomorphic elements that intertwine with the walls, floors, and ceilings with a monumental invocation of the body that renders the viewer diminutive. These sculptural elements depict bulges, folds,

and wrinkles that protrude, swell, and sag just as the human body does over time. Despite the slow gravitational pull on the flesh, the physical tension is visually seductive and arousing to varying degrees as the flesh retains its sensuality and erogenous zones are revealed within its folds. Male genitalia share a ripeness and swollen quality along with the female vaginal-like openings to articulate abundance and fertility and pleasure of the flesh.

The 'uneasy opposition' exists in the way the exposed flesh also acts like wounds and asserts a quiet repulsion in its magnification to expresses pain, absence, and loss. The seductive fleshiness that once was firm becomes flaccid and weighty as the body can no longer defy gravity. The density of the sculptural forms conveys a threshold of experience that requires a stabilizing gesture; a temporary gesture of futility. The weight and burden of time is briefly sustained by 2x4 wood props that are rammed into the flesh and precariously balanced in an effort of resistance. The thrusting energy of this sustaining endeavor is visceral and suggests constraint, oppression, and conflict. The attempt to stop the body from a slow deterioration and/or its rapid and literal collapse reflects a tired and uneasy exertion. This exhausted act brings forth the futility in the ways in which we seek to hold on to our youth, beauty, and health that threatens to disappear on a daily basis. Downen's installation is not so much an ideological critique as it is about creating a reflective space to momentarily resist movement in order to reflect, honor, and consider possibilities that are sometime overlooked or lost due to the fleeting and ephemeral nature of life.

While the bulbous forms are bodily, they emerge from an architectural built environment rather than a skeletal one wherein the fragmented body becomes a surrogate for social structure through an architectural lens. Rather than put the primacy of architecture and the body on a pedestal as a frozen construct—immutable from time—Downen explores fragile imperfections through a magnification of the various flaws that lead to the ultimate demise of the body and the social structures that contain, protect, and shield the human body. This consideration provides a mode of expression that engages multiple experiences in a variety of spaces: a bodily space; a social space; a sensual space; a sexualized space; a labored space; an economic space; an imagined space; and most importantly, a disappearing and temporal space.

Downen employs a tactical strategy as she directly asserts the ordinary: the domestic, blue collar labor, vocation, and earnest effort into her work. Walking through the inner city, Downen was struck by the efforts to preserve and momentarily hold up dilapidated buildings. Fascinated by the manual labor demonstrated by construction workers and the intimate knowledge of structure they inherently know by virtue of their volition, Downen utilizes the same support edifice. Just as The Situationist took to the street to *dérive* or literally drift the urban landscape for chance encounters within the existing environment—that which belongs to every person, everyday—Downen's wanderings produced an image

of decline and resurrection simultaneously to yield a literal and metaphorical tension that represents an internal and external dialogue, for which she relates to the human body. As these props are the visual reminders that a building's structural integrity is at risk, Downen harnesses the same energy and rearticulates the gesture on the part of the construction worker to signify that, the body, like architecture, is merely a temporary vessel that witnesses opposing forces and the effects of time not only on the surface, but from within.

Removed from the urban environment, *Uneasy Opposition* is absurdly white, polished, and clean. The decay, debris, and fallout are only implied. Stripped of the ugliness of deterioration, the formal austere, lab-like environment renders the rescued body, the rescued building, believable, if only momentarily. From within this disorienting white architecture a distilment and distancing occurs to illuminate the hopelessness of such concerted action.

The (concealed) perfected beauty is rendered tenuous at best and fleeting if it at all existed.

Downen makes elicit the absence of ideal beauty, as understood through particularly dialectics (symmetry, harmony, balance and proportion) to communicate the emotional and physical threat the pending possess. The stress of the "pending" is the overwhelming anxiety over loss. The 'uneasy opposition' is that which is yet to occur.

Downen's oblique gesture recalls how some of Richard Serra's weighty leaning and prop pieces presented a perceived threat as deriving from the seemingly apparent physical

instability of his sculpture. Downen likewise embraces asymmetry to convey instability, fragility, and a suppressed impulse of a pending threat. At any moment, the whole installation feels as if it may collapse, falling to the floor in ruins or in puddles of flesh. This juxtaposition subsumes a yin and yang manifestation that is ultimately an expression of care and concern.

The power of Downen's work lies in the emotional subtexts of her gestures and interest in humble materials culled from the ordinary. Her contained flesh milieu is a hybrid space suggestive of the public and private and the social and the intimate that creates a viable platform for the poetic. The impulse behind her built space is a fixity on foundation and time, and the vanishing of such structure. With only one way in and one way out *Uneasy Opposition* is a confrontational and inescapable place, albeit reflective. Whereas one can easily dismiss the urban banality and decay on the street, Downen's space is a void wherein the impossible exchange occurs: the sensual and the degenerate are simultaneously incited. While the abandoned and neglected are given new resonance—evident by Downen's deft attention to smoothing out raw material—the fight against disappearing seems pointless. With a stark potency, obsession and desire are confronted - as perfection is almost deemed a possibility. Despite the meticulous flawlessness given to the very flaws the artist magnifies, the labor is in vain. The earnest energy deployed in such a repetitive gesture of cleaning, rubbing, adding, and subtracting of humble materials - over and over again - will

not prevent the inevitable. The remnants of the gesture only impart a numbing comfort of eventual wearing away.

Simply put, Downen's work reminds us that things indeed do fall apart. In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe saliently foreshadows the end of a specific world that momentarily (and metaphorically) is held together by a string that refuses to unravel.

Similarly, Downen considers social vulnerability and the fragileness of society's inhabitants as she likewise momentarily suspends energy by a humble prop, which will eventually not be able to further endure. The strength of the prop (or string) is often all that holds one thing or one body together, tenuously asking for how long? For whom? And at what cost?

Downen's work toils with the human struggle, that of the human body and how one perceives it within its environment, particularly within its relationship with the essential (constructed) architecture that provides individuals their core needs: shelter, community, context, and a contained sense of belonging, which overtime, all break down and, fall apart. But within the space of decline, a sense of urgency emerges to create a place for repair and restructure, that thus becomes a fertile site to address acceptance that is about healing.

Downen states "that architectural space is not a passive container of objects and bodies but

an active dimension of relative energies. My interest is to stimulate the viewer's awareness of space and their bodies' relationship to the built environment." As such, it is the involvement of the body that completes Downen's installation. The engaged body in action is essential as it represents energy transference, as duplicated from labor in order for the viewer to find inspiration in the physical reality of the seemingly insignificant everyday. The body and how it aligns itself is the critical vessel. It is what necessitates—as it navigates through space—the *Uneasy Opposition* to illustrate the dis-embodied logic of a perfected space- a perfected body.

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Henri LeFebure, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA., Oxford, UK, and Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1974, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1st English translation 1991), p.13. Downen introduced this text to me as having an influence on her work framing her studio practice for which I have structured my text around.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* derives its title from a line from William Butler Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* which foretells the end of the world. Achebe's end of the world is the moment when the white foreigner enters the Ibo society of Nigeria and the subsequent dissolution of that indigenous culture. The image Achebe leaves us with is that, everything (people, tradition, and culture) is held together by a string that refuses to unravel and cause everything to literally fall apart.

Artist statement, June, 2005.