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Jill Downen: "Hard Hat Optional"



Yesterday I had the opportunity to pay a visit to Bruno David Gallery for a preview of Jill Downen's new show, "Hard Hat Optional." Downen, who grew up in St. Louis, is a sculptor whose work always returns to two concepts: architecture and the body. Her last show at Bruno David, for instance, was titled "(dis)embody"; at the Great Rivers Biennial in 2004, it was "The Posture of Place." And a year earlier, at the Ninth Street Gallery, she titled her show "Body/Building: Involuntary Anatomies."

Downen has been working on "Hard Hat Optional," the show that will open tonight, for two years. Prior gallery shows featured plaster forms built on top of the gallery walls -- in this show, her sculptures are three-dimensional and spread across the space, which Downen says might surprise people who are familiar with her work. Indeed, the gallery is filled with wooden pallets, crates and support frames that Downen fabricated herself, as well as hand-made plaster components that blur the line between built structure and organic body. The simplest description of the show is that it's like an imaginary construction site; Downen says she wants it to feel like the workers have just left for lunch, and will return and take up their tools again. Imagining these incredibly tidy, and incredibly whimsical, construction workers is part of the fun of the show: are they building a Gulliver, a Chimera, or some sort of folly with a fringe on top? A wooden frame holds long forms that simultaneously suggest rebar and strips of skin; another component on a pallet suggests the graceful



curve of a tendon. Other components are more forthright and literal (for instance, a neatly piled stack of what Downen referred to as "breast blocks.") Most of the sculptural forms are made of plaster, which Downen says goes through several phases before hardening. Right before it dries, Downen says, it can almost feel "like the skin of someone's cheek." She sands down and builds up each piece several times before it's complete, leaving it with a soft finish that also, somehow, suggests human skin.



Though the installation feels incredibly clean with all the light-colored wood and white plaster, each piece carries its own marks, scars, air bubbles or peculiar flaws. I fixated on a florescent orange squiggle on one of the wooden crates, which Downen told me was just a mark that had been made on the wood at the lumber yard. Another neat thing I discovered during our conversation is that Downen created tiny models of her sculptures, down to miniature sandbags actually filled with sand, so that she could move each component around in space and decide how it should work as a whole in the gallery. She then demarcated a space in her 3,000-foot studio that matched the measurements of Bruno David's Main Gallery, and moved the actual sculptures around. Many of the pieces, she says, are "weighted

oddly -- like a body," and need small pieces of wood (almost like doorstops) to keep them fixed in the spot where she wants them; though she adds that the various components may end up moving around in the space before the show closes.

Watch this space for a full Q&A with Downen (which I will post as soon as I can), where she talks about each piece in minute and scientific detail. I should add that there are two other shows opening concurrently at Bruno David, Chris Rubin de la Borbolla's "there was a silent tinfoil rapping against the front door," in the Project Room and Brett Williams' "Things You Will See," in the Media Room. --*Stefene Russell*

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