

PAST THE PENUMBRAE

Duende flows throughout Holly Downing's work. This nearly untranslatable term, frequently applied to Spanish art, refers to the mysterious force "that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained."¹ Downing transforms familiar, mundane settings into brooding scenes of solitude. *Duende* rests in her deeply cast shadows that demand our silent contemplation, in places we might otherwise pass by without a second thought. We wonder what exists beyond the edge of the shadows— past the penumbrae— just as de Chirico's paintings leave the viewer with an uneasy, faintly foreboding feeling of stark isolation, not because of what is visible, but because of what is unseen but may be lurking just beyond our sight.

...*duende* loves the edge, the wound, and draws close to
places where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible
expression...²

Architecture, the apparent subject of Downing's art in this exhibition, is the

product of human creativity, yet her paintings and mezzotints show no trace of human figures. People are eerily absent, yet the implied human presence conveys a full sensation of their lives. Downing's critical eye transforms familiar and banal structures into almost mystical scenes. We observe formalist concepts of shape, light, and composition in her work, but her architectural views are more than just academic exercises; rather, they are emotionally intense psychological interpretations. Humble everyday buildings, and pure geometric form become infused with meanings other than their own, and the physical world transforms into a metaphor with which one might explore his or her inner world.

Downing frequently uses images of passageways (*passaggi*), including arches, doorways, and alleys. Not only interesting formal structures, they are also symbols of transitions and journeys. Perhaps these *passaggi* are akin to Aldous Huxley's "Doors of Perception"³ which, according to philosopher Alan Watts, can lead away from the shadows toward the "clear light" of enlightened self-awareness. It is fitting, then, that Downing connects with and embraces historic precedents in both art technique (mezzotint engravings and glazed oil painting) and subject matter, because her art is

about making connections between past and present, male and female, darkness and light—that lead to balance and wholeness.

Although Holly Downing takes inspiration directly from her extensive life travels, her work transcends the personal and approaches the universal. She invites the viewer to consider her silent courtyards, empty arches, and abandoned alleyways as pathways to our own souls, our own *duende*.

—Linda Cano, Executive Director,
Fresno Art Museum, September 2010

Footnotes

1. Manuel Torre (1878-1933), Andalusian Flamenco singer, quoted in Garcia Lorca's lecture, *Theory and Play of the Duende* (Buenos Aires: 1933).

Translated by A.S. Kline, 2004, www.poetryintranslation.com.

2. Ibid. Garcia Lorca, *Theory and Play of the Duende*.

3. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954). The title of Huxley's book is taken from William Blake's poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hel* (1790-93): "If the doors of

perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up til he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.”