

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

## CINDY TOWER

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SHELDON ART GALLERIES

By Ivy Cooper

ST. LOUIS Cindy Tower's "Riding the Rubble Down" at the Sheldon Art Galleries presents (through May 2) 15 paintings from her recent "Workplaces" series, plus a short documentary video on the artist by Malcolm Gay. With allover paint handling and hallucinogenic clarity, Tower depicts the interiors of abandoned industrial sites—factories, meatpacking plants and the like—in and around East St. Louis, Illinois, in canvases that range up to 8 feet on a side. Among the consistently strong works, *Last Stockyard* (2007) stands out. Dizzying in its forced perspective, it's a view from within a building's decrepit and utterly parched wooden skeleton—a tinderbox waiting to ignite. *Brooklyn Armour* (2006) is a cavernous yet stifling interior littered with snarls of defunct machinery and random detritus. *Frick* and *Collapse* (both 2008) tighten the focus on obsolete engines and electrical fixtures; the dripping paint seems to sweat off the canvas.

Tower's paintings translate the derelict remains of 20th-century industry into metaphors of the 21st-century economic meltdown. The work also gestures toward various American traditions. Her dry-eyed take on her subject owes something to 1930s Social Realism, and her forms decompose spectacularly, in the mode of Ivan Albright.

Tower paints on location, moving her enormous canvases about the sites, creating tightly woven composite views. This modus operandi would be challenging enough, but in these contexts, it's actually illegal. At night, Tower finds ingenious onsite hiding places for the canvases; during the day, she competes for space with squatters and graffitiists, and hurries to finish canvases before scrappers strip the sites bare. Gay's video documents a few of these encounters,



including an exchange between Tower and a contingent of Bosnian immigrant paintballers who regularly use the abandoned factories as ad hoc rec centers.

While these canvases record the effects of illicit efforts to reclaim the sites, Tower is no architectural crusader. Her paintings neither call for the buildings' salvation nor lament their demise. But Tower considers herself an activist, and her 20-year career in installation and performance art, not to mention an education at UC-San Diego under instructors like Eleanor Antin and Allan Kaprow, have steeped her in strategies of artistic engagement. In "Riding the Rubble Down," the engagement all happened during production. The finished paintings take a step back, allowing a long, hard look at the slow-motion disaster that is economic decline.

*Photo above: Last Stockyard, 2007, oil on canvas, 68 by 72 inches; at the Sheldon Art Galleries, Courtesy of Bruno David Gallery, St. Louis.*

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#### ABOUT THE BRUNO DAVID GALLERY

Established in 2005, the Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

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