



Urban decay

by Dickson Beall - March 18, 2009

Are crayon drawings hanging by magnet on the refrigerator door art? Is a band playing toy instruments, a painter painting or someone squeezing an orange art?

Alan Kaprow, the man attributed with inventing “happenings” early in the 1960s, had viewers and performers lining up to experience these kinds of events and everyday activities as art. According to Wikipedia, happenings blur the distinction between life and art, between artist and viewer.

With *Riding the Rubble Down*, 15 recent paintings currently on view at the Sheldon Art Galleries, Cindy Tower demonstrates that she was paying attention to Kaprow’s lessons. However, Tower leaves the 20th century squarely behind and takes happenings to a new place, challenging the viewer to a new consideration of what is art and what is not.

Tower is a plein air painter, but she does not paint flowers in fields, clouds in a windy sky or reflections of light on lily ponds, as 19th century impressionists did. Tower paints rusting machinery in abandoned factories. She paints in stinking cold air with only a heavy coat and a fire in a barrel to keep her warm. Her approach to plein air is to capture not flora and fauna but icicles of oozing paint, dripping from saucers of hanging light fixtures.



Everyone knows that the basics of art are time and space. So what’s new about the way Tower works with time and space?

For starters, the first person to view Tower’s paintings is her bodyguard, who accompanies her into dangerous spaces and is able to observe as her paintings take shape. He is the first audience for her performance and provides protection. His presence also generates energy and raises questions about the relationship of artist and viewer.

Tower intentionally hides her works-in-progress somewhere in the abandoned factories overnight, where her large canvases can weather and warp in the soot and dregs of time, raising questions about the preciousness of art.

What happens to the value of the works when the context changes from the wasteland of obsolete industrial space where they were made to the high-minded walls of galleries and museums?

And finally, the artist's end product — the art package — is a document, created by Tower as a record of former activities that once found meaning by producing products that people wanted. This painted record of an earlier time — literally decaying over time and decomposing in space — is re-framed into a new context.

In the gallery, the viewer of the art performance is no longer Tower's bodyguard. The painted record, along with a companion video, is now on display, with a gallery guard protecting the art package and watching gallery visitors view the body of work made by the performer. In this sense, both viewer and gallery guard are pulled into Tower's vision of art-as-performance.

Tower uses loosely applied industrial enamel, not the materials of "fine art," to create her paintings. The viewer stands with the artist amidst the rubble and must check familiar fine art expectations at the door.

Often painting on discarded tapestries and found scraps of fabric with brushes loaded with lots of turpentine and pigment, Tower intentionally selects unstable materials that provide a rich counterpoint to her control and sureness of mark-making.

Tower is an in-your-face artist, pulling the viewer in to experience the sadness of an otherworldly time in a claustrophobic space. She offers the viewer an experience of the meltdown of life, presenting a graveyard view of the industrial revolution and a prophetic statement about current technology that will one day be obsolete.

Tower's work is smart; she reaches out to the viewer and creates a happening in the present moment that is connected to the past.

Two paintings are particularly noteworthy and indicative of the distinct style Tower has developed.

In "Frick 2008" the acid colors of the rusting factory equipment evoke a visceral response in the viewer. Tower is careful to keep her palette subdued enough to convey the corroded and decomposing objects, while stirring a pungent reaction.

The artist's flattened view in "Collapse" seems to be a metaphor for the disintegration of traditional vision. Tower's palette transitions beautifully between blue grays, yellow ochres, raw and burnt siennas and other restrained colors, making a proscenium of quiet sadness.

Complex work takes time, for both artist and viewer. *Riding the Rubble Down* may not be for everyone. So many works crowded into these small gallery spaces overwhelm the viewer. Yet that in itself may be a significant part of the experience Tower creates in her art.

- *Cindy Tower: Riding the Rubble Down* remains on view at the Sheldon Art Galleries, 3648 Washington Blvd., through May 2.

<http://www.westendword.com/NC/0/1244.html>