



LOOK/LISTEN

Tower/Bonetti: Answering "Schtick" With Handmade Kitsch

Above is artist Cindy Tower's YouTube response to David Bonetti's negative review of "Riding the Rubble Down" at the Sheldon Art Galleries (you can read the review [here](#)). And she's not kidding about folks being able to buy their own Bonetti cheese-cutting board ... just call the number, or visit the address she gives in the clip, and she will make one for you, by hand.

So: this is all part of the firestorm that erupted after the publication of that aforementioned review. Much of the brouhaha took place on the Critical Mass visual arts listserv (Bonetti responded to that debate on the P-D's Culture Club blog).

It's no secret that I like Cindy Tower's work. I know Cindy, I wrote about her, and in order to do that went out to East St. Louis and watched her paint. I may be lacking in many things, but my intuition never fails me, especially when it comes to detecting phonies. Cindy is no phony; she is the opposite. She's also one of the hardest-working artists I've ever met, and her process may be part performance, but it's no "schtick," if you're going by the Wikipedia definition of something done "deliberately but not sincerely." What's more, I've seen the sites she paints in person, as well as the finished canvas, and there's no question she knows how to paint. I've never met Bonetti, but I have heard from several people that he's a nice person; I only know him only through his art criticism in the *Post*. For years, I've heard complaints that he tears down local artists, and I have definitely seen him do that. But I've also seen him do the opposite (a fact he notes in his response to the Critical Mass debate). Two other consistent complaints I've heard about his criticism: 1. He'll state his distaste for a show, but not provide sufficient concrete detail to explain why he doesn't like it; and 2. His reviews can sometimes come across as personal attacks on the artist, rather than the art. What I see more than anything is a guy who is miserable in St. Louis, and whose reviews are colored by that fact, for better or for worse.

The conversation on Critical Mass has ranged from opinions on Bonetti's approach as a critic, Cindy's approach as a painter, how St. Louis needs more than one art critic (actually, we DO have more than one art critic; what about Ivy Cooper and Robert Duffy?) to whether it's a good thing or a bad thing to get slammed in the *Post*. My personal feeling was that the review crossed the line. I agree that artists are adults, and should be able to take a bad review; however, the problem here is

that a good portion of the review was not a critical description of the show, but a sarcastic attack on the artist (I am not the first person to call that writeup a personal attack; that observation was made several times on Critical Mass). Also, what difference does it make that Malcolm Gay gave her a good review, in light of that? The problem is not that it was a critical review, but that the tone was inappropriate.

During the Critical Mass back-and-forth, Byron Kerman (yes, that'd be our own Byron Kerman, who I quote here not because he writes for us, but because he hit upon a brilliant point) put forth an interesting hypothesis: "The harshness of the Cindy Tower review bespeaks frustration with something that to him is akin to charlatanry. He couldn't help himself--he had to explode at the folly of her career." That is, she abandoned hip New York art stardom and reviews in *Art in America* to take up figurative painting in the Mississippi River Valley. I also think Jonathan Jones' posts on The Guardians' culture blog, "[Art As We Know It Is Finished](#)," and "[How Art Killed Our Culture](#)," are relevant here:

"Not so long ago the British painter [Leon Kossoff](#) held an exhibition at the National Gallery. His drawings after the Old Masters got almost no press attention that I can recall – yet Kossoff is a veteran artist with great achievements to his name. He has painted the life of London's East End with a sombre honesty and compassion. Artists such as Kossoff, or [Frank Auerbach](#), or [Paula Rego](#) are a lot less fashionable today than artists who do things with gold bricks. Why is that? No, it is not because they are 'figurative'. [Marc Quinn](#) is figurative; [Antony Gormley](#) is figurative. What makes artists such as Kossoff seem out of date? *It is their melancholia*. The contemporary art world can cope with melancholy as style, but taste revolts at the reality of sad, severe, serious life in these painters' work. The problem is, you can't parlay it. You can't fantasise on it. The authenticity of these artists annoys us because it tells us there are realities that rule us, The world, since the 1980s, has stopped believing in such a thing as reality. Money was unleashed from facts of any kind. Art became its delusive mirror."

This, I think, is the *real* gist of it; we have lost our ability to emotionally grapple with brokenness, messiness and melancholy. So of course Cindy's paintings of collapsing factories, mothballed military ships in Texas and dead mines in Leadington, Mo. evoke an emotional response. Cindy told me at the opening that the drips in her paintings became more and more pronounced as the money markets melted down; they are images of the end of a cycle, and the implications of that ... well, it makes for uncomfortable speculation, for sure. That's the double meaning of riding the rubble down. It's not just 9/11. It's *everything*. The Armour Factories aren't just our past. It's a reflection of the future, something that [other artists are acknowledging right now, too](#).

If you want a real art critic's take on the situation (meaning *I'm* not a card-carrying art critic, despite my long post here -- that's not a poke at Mr. Bonetti) Robert Duffy of The Beacon will be giving a talk about the role of the critic, specifically in relation to this show, in the Kranzberg Gallery at the Sheldon on March 25 from 2 to 3 p.m. Cindy also reports that she's working on another product in her line for Al's store, a mysterious something called "The Schtick," which I don't have details for, just now, but I'm sure you can look forward to its debut later this week.

--*Stefene Russell*

http://stlmagblogs.typepad.com/looklisten/galleries_and_openings/