

Factory Ghoul: Cindy Tower's large-scale oil paintings illuminate local relics of the industrial age

By Malcolm Gay
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Like its East St. Louis location, the Armour meatpacking plant here has seen better days.

Once a steam-powered marvel at the vanguard of assembly-line slaughterhouses, the abattoir now



stands crumbling in a field of weeds. The floors where workers once processed thousands of cows and pigs into everything from bologna to pork steaks are now covered with shards of glass and damp asbestos. The floor and the roof have collapsed in spots, and trees, growing through the factory's broken windows and cracked walls, are slowly reclaiming the structure.

Many of the larger machines were abandoned when Armour finally snuffed the factory's lights in 1959. Half a century later, the rows of rusted water tanks, the valves that controlled them and the hulking crank wheels they powered — one measuring nearly twenty feet in diameter, proudly stamped with its date of manufacture, 1902 — remain. The smaller, copper-rich machines have not fared so well. They've been looted by the scavenger class that now subsists on the idled wreckage of East St. Louis.

"This place has changed so much since I first came here. Like this room — it was scrapped overnight. These guys are like aphids," says Cindy Tower, cresting a rusted metal staircase that's missing several steps. "They went up here and sledgehammered out the walls and then pushed the machines and metal right out, stealing it. That's what's really fucked up: You have to share it with the people who are stealing. It's painful for me to watch, because it's all the stuff that I want to paint."

For the past two and a half years, Tower, a petite woman with shoulder-length auburn hair, a surfeit of fierce opinions and a mannequin fashioned from old sofa cushions to look like a bodyguard, has ventured



into abandoned local factories to continue crafting her "**Workplace Series**," a nostalgic paean to the nation's vanished industrial past.

The series of oil paintings, a nearly decade-long project whose tremendous canvases capture both the cathedral-like scale of the abandoned factories and the echo of the human industry they once hosted, is the subject of a solo show that opens Friday, February 29, at the Crisp Museum in Cape Girardeau.

"It's kind of like life is more interesting than art. Life already is art. This already is a perfect sculpture. You have little pointillist bits of broken glass, and beautiful little trees reclaiming it through the windows. It's gorgeous," says Tower, moving nimbly through the Armour plant's wreckage. "But I don't want to just run in and take a photo like a snuff film. I want to live it, experience it, breathe it, be part of it, so I can deserve to talk about it, because I'm sick of glibness.

It's easy to be facile. It's harder to just *be*. That's kind of my thing."

Tower first made a name for herself as a promising young artist in late 1980s and 1990s New York. Her willfully anarchic work — hanging more than 500 pairs of rock-filled pantyhose from a gallery's walls, disassembling her old truck and turning it into a pirate ship, replete with an engine for anchor, sails made of painted canvases and a front end-cum-treasure chest — blurred the lines between painting, performance and installation.

Writing about Tower's 1994 solo exhibit at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith compared the artist's "exuberant, slightly naive imagery" of trees and lumberjacks to the work of Jennifer Bartlett and Red Grooms (the latter of whom Tower worked for as an assistant in the 1980s and 1990s).

"Themes of destruction and preservation, waste and recycling put in regular appearances, without pressing the point or becoming preachy," Smith wrote in a decidedly mixed review. "Ms. Tower is in command of her various materials and media, and certainly has a clear focus. She paints with a certain distinction that could develop, once she gets trees out of her system."

Tower took note, and while she continued to exhibit widely through the 1990s — including three prominently reviewed shows in 1998 — she gradually began to sour on the vicissitudes of a cynical art world driven by faddish theories and market trends.

"I felt like a performing monkey entertaining all these rich people, making these experiences," says Tower. "I was also so tired of cynical, sarcastic artwork. Glibness bores the shit out of me. I'm not interested in it. It's just like coming on a canvas. To be rebellious now is to have integrity and shoot from the hip and

speak from the heart. That's how you really freak out people, because that's completely not where the art world's values have gone."

In 2000 Tower began her "Workplace Series" in the Brooklyn's rotting shipyards, then relocated it to St. Louis, where she has been a visiting assistant professor of art at Washington University since 2005. It hasn't been easy, and she says her decision to simply paint has been questioned by many in the art world.

"They say: Maybe you could project slides on your paintings, or maybe you could put some LEDs on your paintings. They were trying to make me hipper," Tower explains. "They were embarrassed that I was going out and just painting like an old fogey from the

1800s. They didn't think it was funny at all — but it's perversely funny in this age of technology with its special effects and trust-fund babies hiring fabricators to make their work."

Her plein air approach has required Tower to develop a relationship with the scavengers, crack addicts, prostitutes, feral dogs and drug dealers who frequent the abandoned buildings she paints. For protection she often brings along Edgar Carter, a native East St. Louisan who carries a golf club and acts as her bodyguard.

But even with Carter present, danger lurks. Tower paints big. Because she can't cart her canvases back and forth with her, she must stash them on-site, hoping to camouflage them enough to avoid theft. She's had plenty stolen, but her real nemeses are the scappers who loot the buildings.

"I have to paint fast," she says. "It's heartbreaking to come back and find a whole room missing that you were painting. That happens a lot."

Not always, though. "Workplace Series" displays an intensity of labor rarely encountered in painting today. The paint, heavily applied in bold, muscular strokes, evokes the physicality of the places it represents. There's very little subtlety to Tower's palette. The colors are stark; paint builds up in some areas, drips in others. The effect is that her intricate landscapes of pipes, flywheels, gauges and valves have all the hard-edged energy and tactility of the real thing. Coupled with her roving use of perspective and their massive scale, many of Tower's canvases can be physically disorienting.

Crisp Museum director Stanley Grand writes in the show's catalogue that "[Tower's] mix of deep and shallow space, surface pattern, multiple vanishing points and shifting perspectives often seems claustrophobic, disorienting, and discomfoting. [As she says, h]er paintings are 'more about dematerializing and rematerializing. They hold together and fall apart constantly and become abstract and then not, again and again. They pulsate.'"



If Tower's paintings pulsate between representation and abstraction, they positively throb with nostalgia for an age when the human touch was essential to manufacturing. Even as they mourn the passing of the industrial age, they indict the alienation bred of the wired digital here-and-now.

"Everything was machined to make a lot and last forever. There's something that's so beautiful about the making of products, the hand of the human — you don't see that in modern manufacturing," Tower



says. "People used to be in communities and try to be excellent craftsmen. Now we're all about planned obsolescence, greed and how to maximize profits."

Filled with social and painterly concerns, Tower's "Workplace Series" is a far cry from her earlier installation work, but a few days spent with Cindy Tower makes one thing clear: She's still very much a performer. Only now, instead of performing in the

galleries and museums of New York, her performance includes scouting the hidden locales of Missouri and southern Illinois, retrieving portions of our forgotten past and holding them up for us to see.

"It's a really old-fashioned thing to do, but I feel like I'm finally out in the world and contributing to the community," she says. "Otherwise, we just stay in our little gated communities, Googling each other."

Details:

Workplace

Friday, February 29 (reception 4-6 p.m.) through April 27 at the Rosemary Berkel and Harry L. Crisp II Southeast Missouri Regional Museum, 518 South Fountain Street (on the River Campus of Southeast Missouri State University), Cape Girardeau; 573-651-2260 (www5.semo.edu/museum). Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon.-Fri., noon-4 p.m. Sat.-Sun.

Series

Photos: Jennifer Silverberg

<http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2008-02-27/culture/factory-ghoul-cindy-tower-s-large-scale-oil-paintings-illuminate-local-relics-of-the-industrial-age/>

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