

## Cindy Tower

By David Brody

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Cindy Tower is a trespasser. Currently, she requires a bodyguard to protect her from crack addicts and salvagers, stray pit bulls and corporate security while she paints inside the dilapidated cathedrals of a collapsed industrial empire that has literally gone to the dogs. Paying encyclopedic attention to the sad grandeur of these sites-- abandoned mines, meatpacking factories, rotting shipyards-- with a painterly work ethic that approaches Ivan Albright-like, methamphetamine-level intensity constitutes two corroborating forms of dissent. First, Tower is testifying to the outsourcing of American unionized jobs to oppressed masses elsewhere, and second, she flouts prevailing art world glamour. The fact that she often paints on colorful patterned fabric made in the 1940's when her sites were belching with smoke and labor, in mills typically set up nearby to employ the workforce wives, adds historical focus to this reading. But Tower was schooled in the anti-commodity subversions of the Happening and of Pattern and Decoration at U.C. San Diego with the likes of Alan Kaprow, Eleanor Antin, and Kim MacConnel. Accordingly, Tower's use of old fabric as a

crazy-quilt ground is intended to erode the mythology of the precious object, while the historical context it adds is of a distinctly revisionist sort--a conscious stitching of P & D's feminist, radical craft agenda onto the masterly Precisionist factory landscapes of the '20's or the passionate Socialist Realist ones of the '30's; the medium being, for Tower, emphatically part of the message. And so is the act: Edgar Carter, the bodyguard who allows her to work with a modicum of safety, becomes part of the "performance," and this performance includes all the driving around, the hunt for access, the silent stand-off with the local underground that lives furtively off the industrial carcass, the climbing and spelunking, the stowing of her ladder and canvas in some secret nook on site, and even the making of a faux-folksy video of herself at her risky vocation. Tower's hybrid take on painting has long been goofily explicit. She has dressed up as a pirate, a butcher or a fairy in relation to painting projects and she has hung bodies of work--haphazardly, by design--in over-the-top, "culturally overloaded" museum incursions and in underground squat installations that were a

step ahead of the early 90's Brooklyn zeitgeist and the New York Department of Buildings. In her current project, the plein air painter "performs" in the void of the vanished steamfitter or meat packer, perhaps enacting a similar tragic obsolescence. The paintings are thus, like Spam, mere byproducts. She is apt to call them "installations."

Or are they? These new paintings surf her ability to paint faster and with more fury than anyone else around, and they are about this force of application, this trespassing on sheer human limitations, as much as they are meant to thumb their nose at political, social, or artworld status quo. Their hanging girders and bundled pipes limn out such glorious vectors of caged, twisted perspective across such baroque hierarchies of scale-- super-phallic blast furnaces attended by tiny pressure gauges, mounds of paper and broken bottles in the shadow of looming walls of gridded glass-- that they succeed in dancing away from any purely conceptual clinch. The factory interiors where Tower pilgrimages are like extruded still lives where the anatomy of space and light is laid out for dissection. Apart from all the "meaning," they are pure, readymade visions of order vying with disorder on the scale of a Last Judgment-- visions, however, which only the stout of heart dare pay the price to receive. Indeed, if ordinary painters had Tower's moxie--as exemplified by the long trail of dangerous mishaps which has led to Mr. Carter--derelict factories would be crawling with easels.

Why paint the vision, though? Isn't that pure nostalgia? Despite Tower's witty

complications, she appears sincerely invested in the old Cézannian notion that the struggle to process four cacophonous dimensions of sensation into a two-dimensional gestalt brings forth mystical powers of the human intellect, perhaps the soul. Surely the contemporary approach would be to photograph the place and digitally print it twenty feet high, or to make a three-channel time-lapse hi-def video of the light streaking through roof cracks and skylights and dappling across details for an instant before leaving them cold and dark. For that matter, how can one improve on Robert Smithson's gesture of simply pointing to the "site" as a "monument"?

But Smithson also coined the impossible phrase "ruins in reverse," a collision of ideas meant to ridicule industrial afterthoughts to which no nostalgia had yet accrued, while also, astonishingly at the time, to praise them. And has it been noticed that Smithson's bent logic accidentally pertains to that shamelessly nostalgic vestige, Painting? An old-fashioned, two-fisted, photography-be-damned painting, at any rate, arises as fragments and undergoes the anarchic process of integrating. A painter like Tower has no reason to assume that any collection of viscous conjectures can assemble into a whole-- unlike, say, dinosaur fossils or a wrecked plane. Rather, an induction evolves, if it does, to imply the facts. Ruins in reverse. Could this Smithsonian paradox at the heart of Painting explain its cockroach-like survival in the radioactive pesticide desert years of 60's and 70's critique, and beyond? Wasn't Painting supposed to be forced down a road that vanished in brine, in a gravelly death spiral impervious to nostalgia?

Tower's positively frantic answer is that nostalgia is the most contemporary way to process the American landscape with its layers of ruin, architectural, economic, and cultural. Her work is more in tune with Walter Benjamin's declaration that allegory is in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things. He was saying that

allegory can expose true history the way a building's essential, unconscious structure is revealed when its skin is peeled back. Tower's project viscerally confirms this famous insight, and it does so no matter where you locate the installation or the performance: on the site, in her various acts of trespass, in the museum, or simply enough, as the painting itself.

*David Brody is a writer and artist. He recently had an exhibition at the Pierogi2000 Gallery in Brooklyn, NY. This essay was written for the catalog exhibition "Cindy Tower: Workplace Series" at the Rosemary Berkel and Harry L. Crisp Museum, Cape Girardeau, Missouri. The exhibition is curated by Dr. Stanley I. Grand and is scheduled to open February 29, 2008.*