

Tension Between Site and View

By Stanley I Grand
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Reviewing Cindy Tower's solo exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994, Roberta Smith observed in *The New York Times* that "Themes of destruction and preservation, waste and recycling put in regular appearances, without pressing the point or becoming preachy."¹ At the time Tower was creating installations that included a mix of her own paintings, found objects, and on occasion great quantities of panty hose. With titles like "What To Do With Old Boyfriends" and "Pirate Cindy," her installations were characterized by energy, outrageousness, and humor, but fundamentally expressed an underlying concern with transience, decay, and the passage of time.

Around 2000, Tower turned from self-constructed to ready-made installations, which she painted. Her brightly colored "Clutter Series" depict quotidian, messy environments such as classroom interiors full of stuff or marine engine repair shops brimming with scattered parts. In an article published in 2005, Tower explained her motivation: "Basically, I decided to paint paintings honoring vanishing American industries because everything I love is disappearing."²

Her paintings are more than documentaries of superannuated industries. Raised a Catholic, Tower views the human condition as somehow trapped in a kind of Purgatory and "that is up to the viewer to decide whether or not to be trapped in."³ The prospect of escape, of the transmutation of material into spirit, is frequently suggested by snippets of sky glimpsed through clerestory windows, ruptured roofs, or other openings that beckon the eye

upward. On the other hand, Tower notes, "If the viewer wants to slide into hell, I always provide a portal somewhere around the bottom for them to flush themselves into."⁴

Long concerned with detritus and disintegration, Tower's vision darkened after 9-11. Since then her "Workplace Series" has focused increasingly on the industrial ruin. Once the apogee of optimistic, entrepreneurial capitalism, these crumbling structures, like the values they symbolized, are stark reminders of battles waged and lost. The collapse of the Twin Towers also marked a personal transition for her. Like Thomas Cole's (1801-1848) series *The Voyage of Life* (1842), now in Washington, Tower's "Workplace Series" is an allegorical investigation of aging with machines representing the corporeal. But whereas Ivan Le Lorraine Albright (1897-1983), the great Chicago master of decay and corruption, favored the face and body, Tower grabs the entrails: pipes, gauges, and valves interlaced in their densely packed spaces.

Painted with raw, loose, at times even gloppy, applications of pigment, her palette lacks finesse; she disdains a mere facile handling of hues ("I am not a colorist."⁵). She is not interested in aestheticizing, but rather she wants her rough, gestural surfaces to evoke feelings, provoke viewers, and convey in a very haptic and tactile way the textures of the subjects themselves.

The space in her carefully constructed compositions, however, contradicts her anti-aesthetic approach to color and paint handling resulting in a dynamic

tension between formal elements. Her mix of deep and shallow space, surface pattern, multiple vanishing points and shifting perspectives often seems claustrophobic, disorienting, and discomfiting. Her 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, are in a state of flux as am I and the world.”⁶ Formal elements, in other words, echo and amplify content as she transforms the site into a view.

Stool is set amidst the ruins of the Forman Family Factory in Brooklyn, New York (Plate 1). Founded in 1918 by Sol Forman and two of his siblings, the company manufactured stamped-metal items including trays and pitchers until the 1980s when foreign competition forced the business to close. Thereafter, the once thriving workplace fell into disrepair. No easy access occurs in *Stool*. A barrier of stacked fluorescent lights, tools, gears and pulleys blocks the viewer’s approach to an abandoned lathe. To the right, in the painting’s only uncluttered spot, a solitary stool appears as a metaphor of absence.

Unlike the Forman ruin, the engine room of the *S.S. Diamond State*, a crane ship (T-ACS 7) owned by Pacific-Gulf Marine, Inc. hibernates at the port of Houston while awaiting a call to serve (Plate 2). Part of the Ready Reserve Force (RRF) administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Maritime Administration (MARAD), the ship can be called into action on short notice to sealift military matériel and supplies around the globe.⁷ Cluttered, but shipshape, the painting expresses well many of Tower’s formal concerns: the contrast of elements advancing (the diesel engine to the right) and receding (the staircase to the left), a tranquil, empty space at the lower left, linear patterns (pipes) at the top of and parallel to the picture plane, repetitive forms (wheels, dials, cylinders), an abrupt terminus at the back, and an escape route (staircase).

Back in Georgetown, Connecticut in 2005, Tower began to paint the abandoned machinery and decrepit buildings of the Gilbert and Bennett Manufacturing Company (established 1874), the predecessor of which Benjamin Gilbert (1788-1847) had founded in 1828 with his partner and future

son-in-law Sturges Bennett to produce horsehair sieves. In 1837 the company successfully created a metal woven cloth using fine wire on a borrowed carpet loom. Largely through the efforts of Edwin Gilbert (1822-1906), Benjamin’s son, in 1863 the firm became the first in America to produce wire cloth and market wire screens for windows. The company prospered and grew for decades, but changing economic conditions, environmental concerns, absentee ownership, antiquated equipment, loss of foreign markets, and low profit margins, among other factors, caused its eventual demise. All manufacturing in Georgetown ceased in 1989, followed by bankruptcy in 1998. The site in Georgetown is now undergoing rehabilitation and the scenes that Tower painted such as *Wire Cloth Factory* no longer exist (Plate 3).

The peripatetic Tower also painted at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 2005. Like Gilbert and Bennett, the Navy Yard is no newcomer to the American industrial scene. Established in 1801, the facility built ships that helped transform the United States from a provincial outpost to a superpower. The Civil War ironclad *Monitor* was outfitted and commissioned at the yard. The *Maine*, whose 1898 sinking in Havana launched the Spanish-American War, was built there, as was the *Connecticut*, the flagship of Theodore Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet, with which this nation muscled its way onto the international scene. At its height during World War II, over 70,000 employees worked round the clock building, converting, and rehabilitating aircraft carriers, cruisers, and battleships including the *Missouri* on whose deck the Japanese formally surrendered in 1945. In 1966 the Department of Defense closed the yard and sold the bulk of the property to the City of New York in 1967. Today, it is an industrial park managed by the not-for-profit Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation (BNYDC) for the City of New York.

Building 128 was built in 1899 and used initially to assemble boiler engines and sections of naval vessels (Plate 4). Converted in the 1940s into a machine shop where impellers and shafts were fabricated, the great steel shed was filled with silent, rusting machines when Tower painted its interior. Spatial depth is accentuated by the orange-red orthogonals

that race back into space. The rafters, joists, roof trusses add a brittle, fractured energy to the painting as if one were looking at the scene through a large pane of broken glass. The sharp, edgy angles in the top half of painting contrast with the green, organ-like machines in the lower portion that appear like statues lining an ancient sacra via.

Since moving to St. Louis where she teaches painting at Washington University, Tower has painted the looming skeleton of the Armour meat packing plant, now long abandoned and fallen into ruin (Plate 5). Roman in scale, littered with glass shards, rotting boards, syringes, and condoms, stripped by pickers and scavengers, the plant exudes an aura of violence and decay, malevolence and danger. Once proud machines with embossed nameplates reading “Frick 1902” stand watch over rotting domains as their innards are slowly eviscerated: first the copper, then the brass, and finally the steel itself. The machines recall those of the painter Walter Tandy Murch (1907-1967), but stripped of cobwebs, haze, and nostalgia.

The Armour meat packing business began when Philip Danforth Armour (1832-1901) headed west to the California goldfields in 1852. When he returned East in 1856 with \$4,000, he saw an opportunity as he recounted to Theodore Drieser in 1898: “I had been studying the methods then used for moving the vast and growing food products of the West, such as grain and cattle, and I believed that I could improve them and make money.”⁸ Thus began an enterprise that would become one of the greatest—and most notorious after the publication of Upton Sinclair’s 1906 muckraking novel *The Jungle*—names in industry. The Armour Packing Plant in National City pioneered the assembly line, or more fittingly the de-assembly line. In its time, the plant was a marvel: a world-class production facility where pigs were slaughtered by the thousands, cut, cured, and methodically processed into meat, glue, pharmaceuticals, and fertilizer. Everything, but the proverbial squeal was captured and utilized.

Today the site is an isolated wasteland where members of the underclass gather old bricks and sell them to developers who seek a simulacrum of age in

their mic-mansions. In the weeds, in abandoned cars, others traffic in human flesh, drugs, and violence. The ancient, ghostly rivers of animal blood now nurture a new generation of entrepreneurs.

This is where Tower paints. She does not photograph the view and retreat to a studio. (“Somehow just taking a picture of these places isn’t enough. I want to feel these places and record them slowly so that a viewer might also gain a sense of the place in a soulful way.”⁹) Rather, she works in the midst of the chaos itself accompanied by a small dog and bodyguards (one of whom is real; the other a stuffed dummy). At night she hides her canvases among the ruins. Frequently, the paintings suffer cuts and tears. Daughter of a test pilot, she appears to relish adventure, risk taking, and pushing the limits.

Tower’s painting process has an absurd, theatrical aspect: Her entourage seems to have stepped out of a Fellini parade. An acolyte of Allen Kaprow, Tower believes in transformation through humor and self-deprecation, and for this reason creates videos documenting her adventures among the ruins. The erstwhile performance artist comes through here, but there’s nothing funny about the paintings themselves.

In *Grates* a staircase leads ominously into a subterranean realm (Plate 6). There’s no way of knowing that the monumental staircase in the painting is but a small incident in a vast space. One can imagine Tower and her entourage approaching this modern mouth of hell and wondering who or what might scamper up the rusting stairs to confront, challenge, threaten, or worse.

The Carondelet Coke Plant, another Saint Louis area industrial site, provides the backdrop for *My Brothers and Myself*. In this painting Tower employs cylindrical forms to represent herself and her two brothers (Plate 7). Clearly, the smallest of the three, the oil drum from which shoots an intense flame, represents the artist herself.

The buildings of the Carondelet Coke Plant (formerly the Great Lakes Carbon Coke Plant, and

before 1950, the Laclede Gas and Light Coal Gassification Plant) date to the first decades of the 20th century. Previously, commencing in the late 1850s, the Vulcan Iron Works had converted ore from southeast Missouri into iron at the Mississippi River site. During the Civil War, James Buchanan Eads built his ironclad gunboats here. As iron production shifted northward to the Great Lakes, smelting ceased at Carondelet. In 1902 Laclede Gas and Light built a Coal Gassification Plant to provide St. Louis with lighting and heating gas. Coke, a byproduct of the coal gasification process, is an essential ingredient in the manufacturing of steel. In 1915, Laclede upgraded their equipment and facilities to be competitive with other coke producers. Great Lakes Carbon Company purchased the plant in 1950 and continued operations there until 1980. The new owners, Carondelet Coke Corporation, closed the plant in 1987. Two years later, back taxes led to the St. Louis Land Reutilization Authority acquisition of the property. Reflecting changing times, a casino will soon occupy the site.¹⁰

Most recently Tower has been painting at the Federal Mill #3, Leadington, Missouri, which the Federal Lead Co. built in 1906-07 to process the rich deposits from the area's lead belt. In 1923 ownership of the mill passed to the St. Joseph Lead Co., which greatly expanded production. At its height it had "twenty-six buildings and much large equipment spread over twenty-five acres. It was the largest plant of its type in the world, the hub of an enterprise with 1,000 miles of mine tunnels and 250 miles of underground railroad track beneath all the nearby communities."¹¹ With the development of mines in the Viburnum area, southwest of Leadington, operations at Mill #3 slowed and then ceased altogether in 1972. Thus ended an exploitation of natural resources that had begun with the French in the early 18th century, been expanded by the Guggenheims among others in the 19th century, and overall produced more wealth than almost any other mining enterprise. Today the site is a Missouri State Park.

A *Tommy Knocker*, according to legend, is a miner's ghost who warns the men of an incipient cave-in (Plate 8).¹² Recalling Tower's propensity for recycling—whether her Dot paintings from 1993, which were painted on salvaged western shirts, or her installations adorned with plastic containers—*Tommy Knocker* and other paintings from Leadington use silk or upholstery instead of canvas as the support. Purchased locally, the woven materials remind viewers that mills and mines were often found together with the former providing employment for the miners' wives and daughters.

Tower's paintings embrace simultaneously a Romantic and a Pop sensibility. Ruins, of course, have a special place in the Western imagination and evoke hubris chastised, like Shelley's *Ozymandias*. But Tower's is an eye that embraces destruction dispassionately like a Warhol car wreck or portrait of "Old Sparky." Her content, however, is neither cool nor detached. Rather her paintings are, in one sense, elegiac meditations on impermanence.

Like the Indian-painter George Catlin (1796-1872), whom she admires, she is recording an endangered way of life. Tower compares herself to the canary in the mine that signals imminent disaster, and taken together her "Workplace Series" is a clarion call "to preserve a way of life I see reflected in older technologies in which human touch, toil and sweat was evident in the making/manufacturing process itself."¹³

She longs for an idealized time when "American Industries had different values, offered pensions and insurance to employees and built things to last" and rejects the present "culture of impermanence, planned obsolescence, instant satisfaction, exploitation, sloth, ease, and greed."¹⁴

By capturing the raw beauty and tragedy of industrial ruins, she hopes to help reduce wastefulness, replace disposition with preservation, and encourage a more equitable sharing of ever-diminishing natural resources. Devoid of irony, glibness, and cynicism, her paintings and outlook are fundamentally affirmative.

NOTES:

1. Roberta Smith. "Art in Review: Cindy Tower 'Westward Expansion Inward' New Museum of Contemporary Art," *The New York Times* (July 22, 1994).
2. Cindy Tower, "Capturing America's Vanishing Industries: The Workplace Series of Artist Cindy Tower," *MARAD Update: Official Journal of the Maritime Administration*, vol. 4, no. 4 (April 2005), p. 3.
3. Correspondence to author (February 1, 2008).
4. Ibid.
5. Interview with the author (December 7, 2007).
6. February 1, 2008, correspondence.
7. On August 8, 1961, Todd Shipbuilding, Los Angeles, launched the container ship SS *Japan Mail*, which was subsequently renamed SS *President Truman*. Later converted to a crane ship and re-christened *Diamond State* (T-ACS-7), the ship entered the Ready Reserve Force February 22, 1989. Due to its ability to process seawater, *Diamond State* was dispatched to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
8. Yoshinobu Hakutani, ed. *Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser: Life and Art in the American 1890s*. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), pp. 123-24.
9. Tower, "Capturing America's Vanishing Industries," p. 3.
10. <http://www.eco-absence.org/stl/car/>
11. Susan Flader, ed. *Exploring Missouri's Legacy: State Parks and Historic Sites* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), p. 139.
12. The term also refers to trapped miners knocking on the walls to communicate with potential rescuers. In Stephen King's novel *Tommyknockers* (1987), the knockers are aliens, not ghosts.
13. February 1, 2008, correspondence.
14. Ibid.

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