

“Riding the Rubble Down”

Cindy Tower

Essay by Ivy Cooper

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One glance at a Cindy Tower work is enough to convince you that you’re not looking at a typical *plein air* painting. Large in scale, with strong but confined color palettes and riotous detail, her works bespeak a level of energy and artistic investment rarely seen in painting today. Of course, Tower’s paintings won’t let you off with a glance anyway. They pull you in, demanding that you probe the snarled pipes, beams, and rubble of the abandoned industrial sites she selects as her subjects.

As it turns out, even close scrutiny of the paintings isn’t enough to grasp them in their entirety either, because Tower’s process—her practice of painting, the why and how and by what means—are integral to the works, and knowing something about this process greatly enriches an understanding of them.

Tower scouts out abandoned and forgotten sites of industry, the kinds of places most of us never knew existed. (We probably wouldn’t venture near them if we did.) A Brooklyn, Illinois meatpacking plant; the Great Lakes Coke Factory in south St. Louis; stockyards and factories once teeming with workers, now overtaken by wildlife, or scavengers looking for sellable scraps, or graffitists looking for walls to tag.

Cindy Tower is among these second generation inhabitants, salvaging what’s left of a site’s identity and translating it into a kind of monumental realism. Using industrial grade paint (salvaged, naturally), Tower works directly on her stretched canvas, moving it about a site, weaving the vistas she observes into tightly focused panoramas of dizzying heights and plunging depths. The results are painted purgatories, halfway points between grace and utter disintegration.

These works have a terrible beauty, but Tower is the first to admit that they aren’t pretty. In fact, they’re hard to look at, like the economic realities that have altered and ultimately destroyed many of these sites. Any attempt to read romance or sentimentality into these relics will be in vain. Tower is too much of a realist to turn these places into aesthetic follies or mere visual entertainment.

Instead, she’s trying to tell us something, in no uncertain terms. Her message takes different forms, but it’s particularly strong in “Riding the Rubble Down,” the work that lends this exhibition its title. It depicts a sun-drenched children’s playground in the upscale St. Louis suburb of Clayton, far from the stockyards and factories of Tower’s regular stomping grounds. The playground appears to be disintegrating, oozing paint, and threatening to buckle. Collapse seems immanent.

Tower wants us to know that no one, and no place, is immune from the meltdown. It’s a hard-bitten truth. But at least she has the courage to tell it.