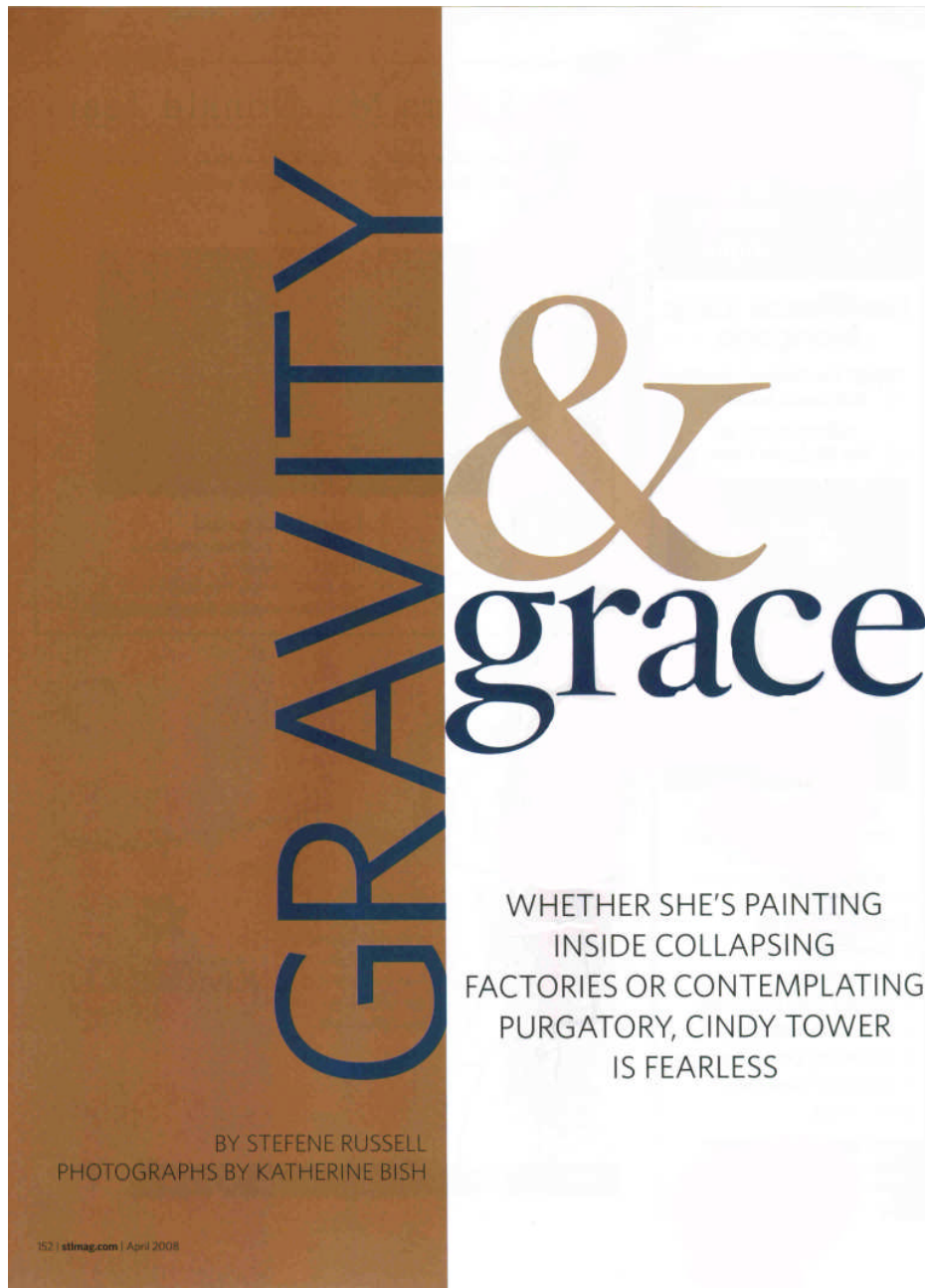


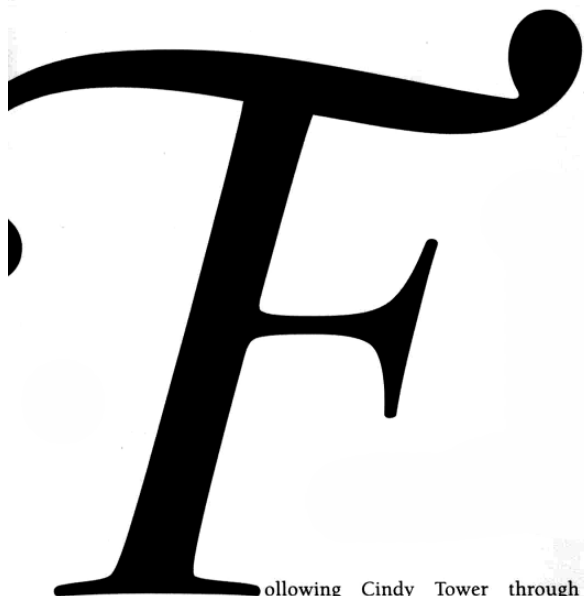
Cindy Tower in the April 2008 issue of St. Louis Magazine
Written by Stefene Russell





Angels of hysteria, tattle-tale virgins with nothing to tell whistle in their once bright air, where now just bricks fly, where once was a bird or two ... How come the hole in the roof isn't big enough so I can fly out but it's big enough so the rain can get in?

—STEVEN JESSE BERNSTEIN, “THIS CLOUDED HEART”



Following Cindy Tower through the crumbling hole in the side of the Armour meatpacking plant can make you feel a little bit like the tomb raider of the Apocalypse. You scramble over piles of asbestos-covered bricks into what's left of a massive room: Trees of Heaven sprout between piles of rubble. Moss grows on the brick walls. A machine as big as a garage is tipped on its side, its rusted ribs exposed. You can see the sky through the bones of the roof, hear the crows calling overhead, trains whining as they pass. The place leaves a weird feeling in your head, like you missed the end of the world and you're standing in the ruins of your own civilization, a century after the fact.

As Tower will tell you, though, this building has not just been touched recently, but ravaged. Scavengers sledge-hammered the hole in the wall just months ago, using heavy machinery to pull out anything with a copper part in it. The glass ceiling was shot out—there is so much glass on the floor, every footstep is crunchy—in order to strip copper from the window frames. Dogfighters held matches here, and now packs of abandoned dogs roam the periphery, ravenous enough to attack anything, including people.

This is what's left of nearby National City, Ill., a company town incorporated in 1907 by the big meatpackers of the time—Armour, Swift, Morris and Hunter—which maintained just enough population to qualify as a municipality. At their peak, the plants collectively

employed 10,000 people; the train tracks where thousands of cattle, hogs, sheep, mules and goats rolled into the adjacent stockyards are now overgrown with weeds. This complex was the prototype of today's factory farm, so massive it shipped out not only sausages and steaks, but also fertilizer, pet food, glue and shoe leather. It even attracted tourists, who in 1917 could take a one-hour tour to see carcasses being deboned or stand in the cooling room with 5,000 sides of beef.

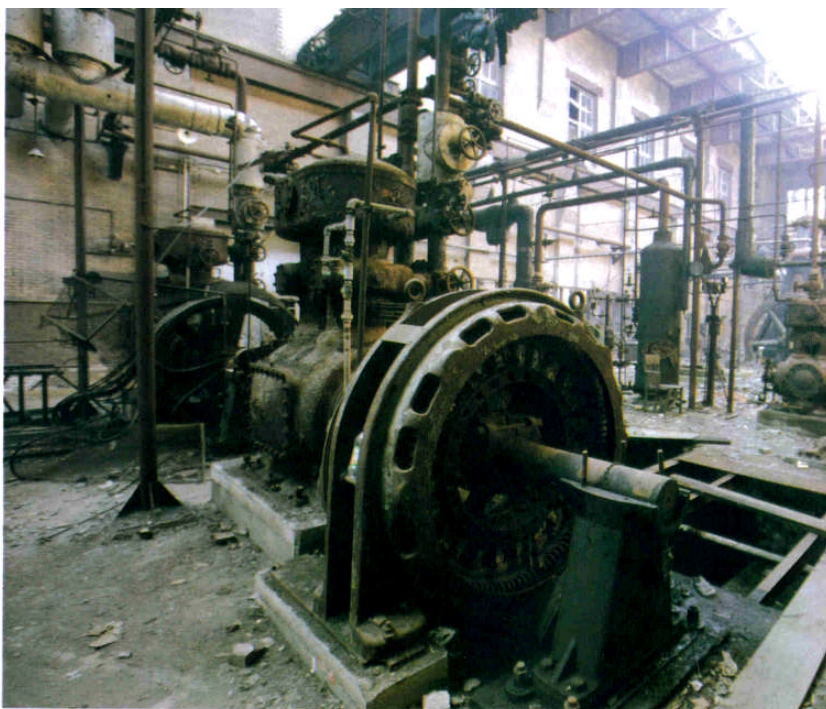
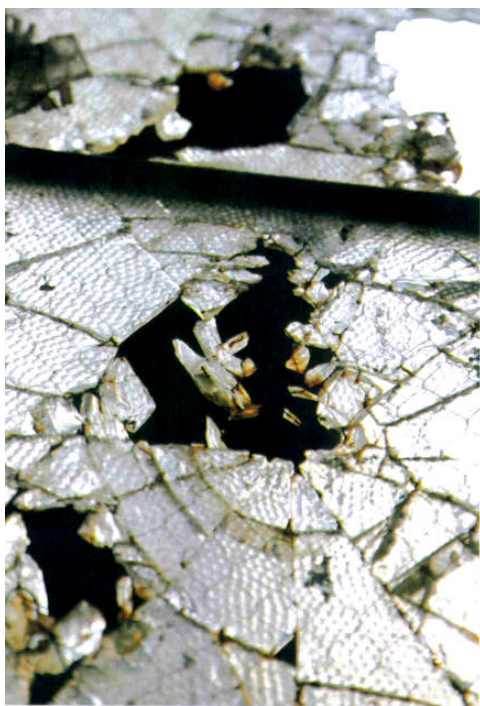
But the buildings aged. Rail shipping gave way to interstate trucking. Workers organized, and the pool of cheap, unskilled labor shrank. Morris shuttered in 1935; Armour pulled out and relocated to Iowa and Nebraska in 1959. Swift closed in '67, and Hunter struggled along until the early '80s; ironically, it was the first to succumb to the wrecking ball.

"I just think it's gorgeous," Tower says, as she climbs through another half-demolished wall to reach the factory floor, which is almost cathedral-like in its scale and beauty: Filled with enormous old machines, Armour may be more astounding now than it was in 1907, when it churned out thousands of tinned hams, and meatpackers' kids played in the stockyards, feeding cigarette butts to the Judas goats who led their fellow creatures to the killing floor. Rain falls inside the building, soaking the machinery and a lone desk, invoices still in its drawers; an ancient box of 33 RID weedkiller, still bright yellow, lies on a rusting grate. A graffiti artist has scrawled THE POLAROID KIDD inside a half-empty access panel, decorating its knobs with gears and fan belts. The axis of an enormous black turbine painted with fading gold curlicues reads: *Built and erected for Armour & Co. by the De La Vergne Refrigerating Company, New York, 1902.* Outside the shattered windows, all you see are the branches of the trees that are slowly engulfing the building.

Tower's headed for the rusting water tanks where she's locked up her canvas and her easel with a bicycle lock. Sometimes she slides her paintings through holes in the rotting floor or covers them in leaves. Her canvases are huge—as big as 64 by 96 inches—but she has become expert at hiding them. Still, they disappear. She works in oil, which dries slowly enough that it's often full of dirt, creosote or bits of vegetation by the time it leaves the site.

She's determined to paint the factory and all its ghosts, before it's demolished in the spring. Each time she returns, she anguishes to see another chunk of it gone. "This place is important," she says. "I have to paint as much as I can, while it's still standing."

As a silvery winter rain falls on Route 3, a hunched-over figure shambles along the side of the road. It's a woman: she's coatless, wearing only a



When Armour closed in 1959, the abandoned factory was donated to—some would say dumped on—East St. Louis. Though the building has become dangerous, a closer look at its details reveals that when it was built in 1902, no expense was spared.

hooded sweatshirt against the cold. Her arms wrapped tight around her body, her hair soaked, she raises her mascara-smudged eyes as Tower drives by in her truck.

"Prostitute," Tower sighs. The woman could be anywhere between 20 and 40; her eyes are completely blank, like her head's in a star chamber. Route 3 is crawling with girls just like her, Tower says. Likely, she used to dance at the sex clubs, got hooked on crack and ended up walking the highway, selling herself for a fix.

"I just wonder where the pimp is," Tower says, craning her neck to see down the road. "Usually they're nearby. Ick. It's like there's a parasite in them or a possession thing, you know? Like their eyes don't exist anymore, or a demon got into her. You'd like to exorcize her. But I'm not skillful enough. Sometimes I feel like I can barely take care of me."

Dodging prostitutes is just one of the vocational hazards Tower faces when she goes out to paint. She never goes alone, so she's on her way to pick up her bodyguard, Edgar Carter, who lives in nearby Brooklyn. Carter has been working with Tower for the past few years, holding court in a camp chair, a 9-iron by his side. He has worked with her at Armour, as well as at the Carondelet Coke Plant, where he bemusedly stood by as Bosnian paintballers crept among the decaying pillars, splattering each other with fluorescent green and pink paint. This is where Tower painted *My Brothers and Myself*, in which she personifies her siblings as two giant metal boilers and herself as a rusted-out, flaming barrel. Along the edges of the canvas, you can still see powdery residue of pink paintball splatters.

Tower's feelings for the abandoned factories along the Mississippi have nothing to do with nostalgic memories. She came to St. Louis in 2005 as a visiting professor at Washington University, but spent most of her life, she says, as "Miss Quintessential Brooklyn, New York." Born in Connecticut, Tower left home early and went straight to the

city. Aside from a few years spent in San Diego getting her MFA and some artists' residencies, she remained a New York City girl.

"I lived in a place where I wired off a street lamp for the electricity," she says. "The building was falling down, it was condemned and it had no water, heat or electricity. I had 28 apartments my first seven years in New York. I was living under people's dining room tables. You just do what you can do."

But by the mid-'90s, Tower had established herself as a sculptor and installation artist, with regular shows and reviews in *Art in America* and *The New York Times*. In '98 she had three solo shows, including the well-received "Pirate Cindy" at the Trans Hudson Gallery, where she reassembled her wrecked pickup truck into a pirate ship, complete with ship's wheel (steering wheel), cannons (axles) and a Jolly Roger (rebar, tailpipe and muffler). *Art in America* critic Janet Koplos' review noted that "Cindy Tower is a talented representational painter," but that in this show painting was "an afterthought."

In retrospect, though, perhaps her painting was just percolating. Not long after the success of "Pirate Cindy," Tower decided she'd had it with installations. They were expensive. And ultimately, hollow.

"I was hip and cool," she says. "And then to deliberately stop flat, and switch to painting, a really uncool thing ... I did that for a reason. I wanted to make things that were accessible—I wanted to address real issues in this country."

In 2000 Tower began her "Workplace Series," huge, intricate paintings that document vanishing American industries and the outsourcing of American labor. The Armour plant and the stockyards are part of this nearly 10-year project. Lately, Tower's also been painting the abandoned mines out in Leadington, Mo., using upholstery fabrics from the '40s and '50s, since the wives of factory workers often worked at nearby textile mills; it's a way, she says, of

bringing families back together, at least on the canvas. She calls her paintings "installations"—a way of saying the site and the process are as important as the canvas.

"I like to use everything in a site, like everything becomes part of it," she says. "I love it when we're here, and meet a prostitute who sees a painting and loves it. We totally had that experience."

It takes at least half an hour for Tower to set up the site before she can paint. Her other bodyguard, "Junior," a dummy she constructed out of an old couch, is propped on a chunk of concrete outside, armed with a large stick. She sets up a bed of towels and a water dish for Buster, her beagle, who she found wandering near the factory. "He was just comin' down the road," Carter says affectionately, patting Buster's head: "Hey, bow-wow." Tower carts in paints, brushes, water, food: anything she will need for the next several hours. When it's cold, Carter builds a fire in a barrel, feeding it with scrap wood from the factory or dead branches from outside. Sometimes, it doubles as a cookstove.

"Edgar, where's that meat locker? Where did we hide the grill?" Tower asks.

"I think somebody took it," Carter says.

"Is it underneath?" she asks, lifting up a splintered door on the ground and peering beneath it. "I think it's still there."

Eventually, the grill—a shelf from an old employee locker—is unearthed from the debris. Tower pops open her cooler, producing a package of hot dogs. "They're turkey franks," she grins. "They're the healthy kind."

Most germ-phobic Americans probably wouldn't use that adjective, watching hot dogs sizzle on a twisted bit of grillwork scavenged off the floor of an abandoned factory, or dare touch the grilled bread that goes over the fire next. In fact, some would even be afraid to pick up the bottle of mustard she places on a ledge near the barrel; its clean yellowness looks queer against the oil stains, the broken glass, the patina of age. Tower takes this all in stride; her painting process is really physical, and she needs to eat, it's as simple as that. This is the nature of painting *industrial in situ*. While walking Buster around the building, she tugs on his leash as he snuffles too close to a tumbled-down wall: "Buster!" she chides. "Don't eat the asbestos!"

"Cindy Tower is a thinker," says Bruno David, Tower's dealer, who is so far the only St. Louis gallerist to have given Tower a show. "The know-how, the craftsmanship, is important, but you have to be able to demonstrate a vision that nobody else has seen yet. Being a thinker means being 20 years ahead. She's doing the kind of work that doesn't get much recognition in the art world—at the moment—but it is very important, very necessary, and will be recognized. She's a painter's painter. She really doesn't do it in a fashionable way. She actually approaches a painting like a sculpture. When you see her, she's physically involved with the painting, and it's not a gentle sort of thing. The canvas gets beat up. Her paintings have bugs in them. Dead bugs. Who works like this? Nobody!"

On February 29, Tower's first major solo show since "Pirate Cindy" opened at the new Crisp Museum in Cape Girardeau. Crisp director Stanley Grand says that showing Tower was a no-brainer. "We got tons

of responses," Grand says. "We decided we were going to select one artist for this initial year—and we all agreed that it should be Cindy."

"I love that my show is opening on February 29—a day that doesn't normally exist," Tower says. That is, in a way, an uncharacteristic thing for her to say. She is in love with the material: trees, factories, things mended or made by hand. She scavenges and recycles, reuses and reconfigures. Waste upsets her, whether it's abandoned factories or forgotten stories: "No one's ever addressed the race riots of 1917," she says of East St. Louis. "How can there be healing when they don't even apologize? There should be a *monument*, the way there is with *any* kind of tragedy."

The Crisp exhibit includes Tower's pre-St. Louis work, including *Wired*, of the Gilbert & Bennett Wire-Cloth Factory in Georgetown, Conn.; *Building 128*, painted in the Brooklyn Navy Yard; and *Christmas*, depicting the *S.S. Diamond State* at the Port of Houston, Texas. The painting of the *Diamond State* in particular reveals that Tower is no literalist. The pipes and hand-valves are rendered in bright green and red, because she was painting on December 25. In *Stool*, she personifies herself as a small, battered metal stool in a cacophony of blackened gears, screen doors, engines and dead fluorescent tubes. Her brush strokes are exact, rendering a piece of equipment so accurately a machinist could tell you what it does. But her approach is poetic: Boilers or steam valves represent people she knows. Objects are overlapped, relocated in the scene, to evoke a specific feeling.

"She says she doesn't care about color, if it's an orange, it's an orange, rather than a specific [one]," Grand says. "But the compositions are very tight. What she does with space and the

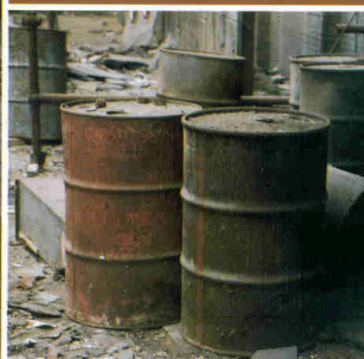
different layers of space and the tension ... she'll say she'll grab any old thing and just glop it on, but I don't think that's really the case."

Grand also marvels at Tower's "gutsiness," which didn't quite register until he made his customary studio visit before Tower's show—to the Armour plant. "You can picture Cindy, this little dynamo with bleach-splattered jeans and 8-inch worker's boots," he says. "I'm dressed with a tie, jacket and loafers. And we're walking over this place, which struck me on sort of a visceral level as like something out of *Blade Runner*. It's not beyond imagination that a hunk of something is going to come careening down from the roof. There are these dead-end corners, in places where people can be concealed, or where you would come around the corner and come on something that you perhaps wish you hadn't."

Edgar Carter lives in a neat little boarding house run by an older woman who rents to bachelors. When Tower met him, he lived in a cinderblock bunkhouse on the outskirts of East St. Louis. It has since been torched. One window is boarded; the roof's peeling off, the wooden bunks overturned. Carter lived here for almost 10 years. All of the other residents, Tower says, were crackheads, so in the morning Carter would lock his black-and-white TV and small bedside fan into the truck of an engineless car. "It was his locker," Tower says. "Now he has central air and cable," Tower says. "I don't even have central air and cable, which I think is hysterical."



From top left: A rusted shutoff valve at the Armour plant; Tower and Carter, outside Becker's; the exterior of the Armour plant; rusting drums inside Armour; Tower at work; vintage signage along Becker's tin overhang; a long-gone employee punch clock; Tower's brushes; center, Tower stands in the remains of the St. Louis National Stockyards.



Tower says her most uncomfortable experience took place on the Missouri side of the river. A homeless man who'd stopped taking his meds got too close to her, started talking crazy talk. "He started to talk to birds, to hawks," she says. "Luckily I was with a guy, I never go alone. But then I was still freaked out, because he was living there ..."

Tower's dad is an Air Force test pilot, and she learned, through him, to take risks—calculated ones. She's got permission from Johnny, the groundskeeper, to be on the Armour site. She carries pepper spray. But even Tower can't foresee every danger.

"Look at this!" she says, pointing at a deep hole in the ground—one she would have driven into, had she not parked when she did. "We came like seconds from disaster. This is how crazy this place is. I mean, that's amazing! Another second, we would have been stuck all day. I'm so thankful we didn't drive into this hole. Man, I don't know if it's my mother's spirit, or someone's, looking out for us or something."

The hole is there because scavengers have stripped all the manhole covers. Usually Tower puts a branch or a piece of scrap wood in the holes to mark them.

"There's a big animal bone," Tower says, pointing. "That's kind of a scary thing. That's why I have Edgar, I'm safe with Edgar. Edgar has magic powers. You're magic, right?"

"Yep," he laughs. "We'll never get stuck."

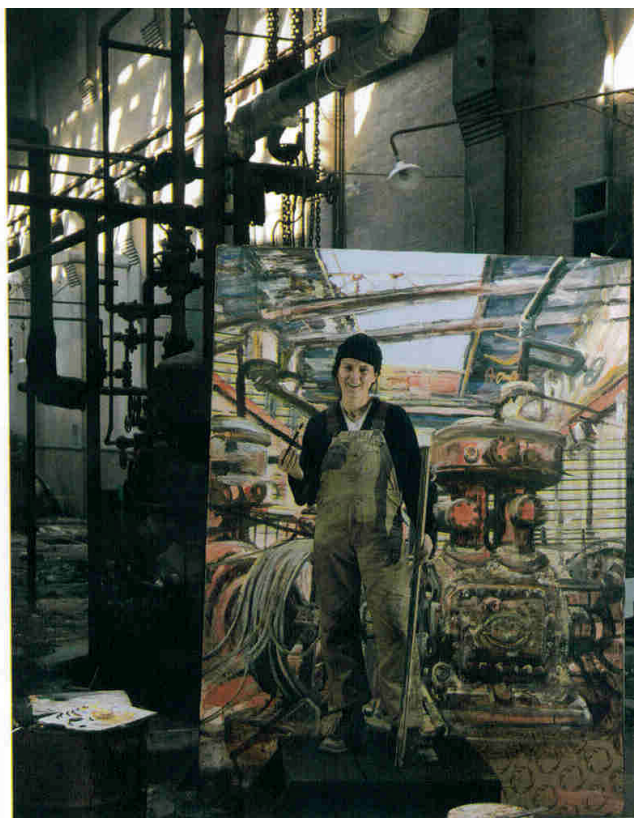
"The history of the village of Brooklyn and the companies that existed in the stockyards complex are entwined," says Roberta Obadan of the Historical Society of Brooklyn, whose dad worked at the packing houses. Someone sent her a YouTube video of Tower painting at Armour: "When I saw the video, I thought to myself, does she know the history of the ground upon which she is walking?"

For Tower, history is as crucial to her paintings as yellow cadmium. "It's really different than just going in and snapping a photograph," she says of her painting process. "You have to spend time and build a relationship with the building."

Founded in 1837 as the first black township in America, Brooklyn was a small agrarian village that found itself surrounded by steel mills and packing plants at the turn of the century. Since then, it's existed in a weird crossroads between agriculture and industry, rural life and urban. Nathaniel O'Bannon Jr. (whose son, the III, is Brooklyn's current mayor), a retired Granite City steelworker, grew up in a town filled with butcher shops and dry goods stores, though his family "owned about two or three cows, and we had chickens, hogs, guineas, all that little stuff." O'Bannon's former schoolmate, Ernest Banks Jr., (who taught at Lovejoy School like his dad, Ernest Sr., who founded the athletics program) worked at the stockyards on summers home from college.

"It was a thriving concern," he remembers. "One day, the guy said, 'I'm going to put you in the sweet pickles.' My imagination took over. They were hog bellies that weighed about 60 or 70 pounds, and you would put them in the pickling barrel. So it's not these little sweet pickles," he laughs.

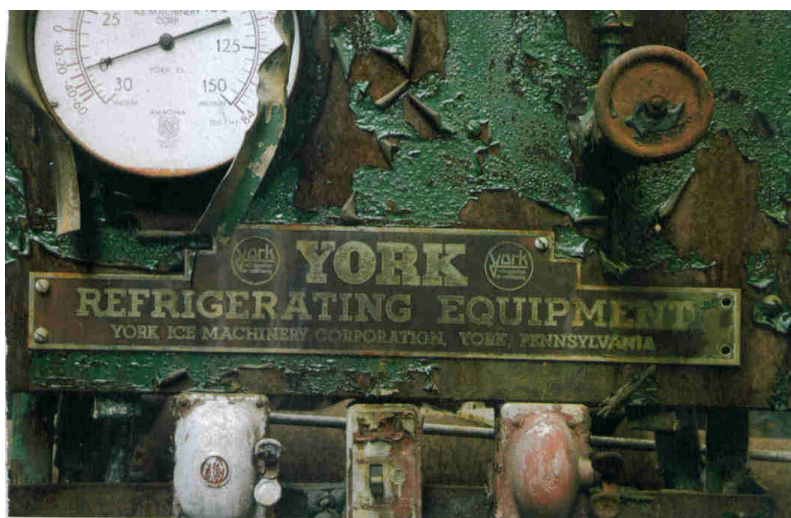
But Banks' memories turn dark when he remembers the stockyards' closing. A few years ago, he wrote a fiery letter to Gov. Blagojevich, attaching survey maps of Brooklyn that, curiously, do not include the village's valuable riverfront property or the former National City. It is painfully reminiscent of what happened in 1907, when the packers incorporated on what Brooklynites say was their land. Once again, Banks wrote, politicians had "cut up Brooklyn and Stites Township like



Tower at Armour. "I want the paint to be blocky, just like the expired industries," she says. "I like it being awkward and like it was a struggle. It would be uninteresting if I knew how I was going to render something."

a top chef cuts up a succulent roast beef at a top-drawer restaurant." After the packing plants closed, Brooklyn lost jobs but was left with an abandoned factory that attracted drug deals and dogfights, just as it has dealt with toxic waste illegally dumped within its borders and the cluster of adult bookstores and strip clubs, which currently provide the town's only tax revenue. Yet Brooklyn boasts more churches per capita than any other town in the metro area; it is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, and perhaps no painter could have captured this better than Tower. Her "Workplace" paintings depict this uncomfortable in-between state, laying out a sort of industrial *Divine Comedy*: the world as Purgatory, embodied in burnt-out, cluttered factory floors; Hell as holes in the floor that will take you down if you're not paying attention. And always, an escape hatch to heaven, a bit of blue sky or trees seen through a fractured skylight, a gash in the roof. "I think there is this sense of the possibility of transcendence in her work," Grand says. "With Hell, it's like, you're there—enjoy!" he says. "Purgatory is a cleaning process where your sins are burned away. You put in your time, and there's the possibility that you *do* go to heaven. It's the difference between the body, which degenerates and starts to fall apart, and this hope that the spirit is immutable, that it will persist after the material withers away."

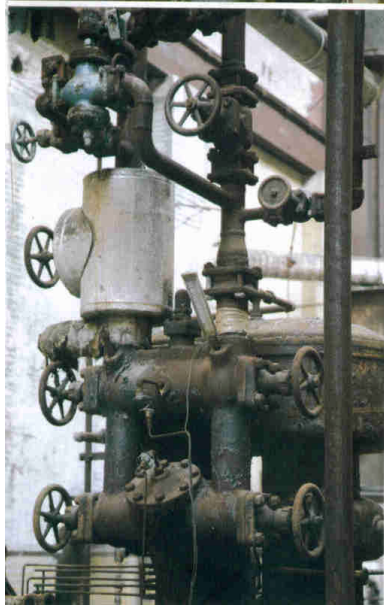
Becker's Farm Supply carries saddles, pink detergent in white drums, dog food, horse food, lime-green extension cords, work gloves in



was my first choice," Watson says, "because he fills all the requirements. One, he's from the area. Two, everyone knows him. And he knows everyone else. Consequently, his presence keeps her secure." Perhaps Watson's paternal side comes out with Tower because, like her father, he served in the Air Force. But he doesn't worry himself sick when Carter's with her.

"I would like to see you become famous," Watson says, "but not posthumously, OK? I worry about you."

Tower quizzes Watson about the fuzzy boundaries around here. He explains that the store is in East St. Louis; Goose Hill's over that way; the stockyards stand on the former National City, which is now Fairmount City. When you see actual homes, you know you



every weight, pig ears, rat bait, caution tape, shop towels, sump pumps, Carhartts and several kinds of grass seed. (There are serve-yourself grass seed bins near the front door.) And if you can't find what you need, they'll order it.

The store dates back to the stockyards and has antique tin signs along the overhang to prove it. The store's warehouse stabled mules from the plants, which were sold to the military. It attracts a cross section of farmers with sunburned necks and cellphone buds in their ears, horse people, contractors, lost travelers and owners

of mobile carwash businesses, a niche market most people don't realize even exists.

"This is the last bastion for Americana on this side of the river," says Frank Watson, a retired Air Force pilot who's worked here since 1991. "It'll be Rural King or Buckeye, when Becker's Farm Supply closes ... There ain't no more like it."

When Tower first started painting in Brooklyn, she stopped at Becker's for crackers; Watson feared for her. "My primary concern," he says, "was that because she was not of this area and her persona was out of context for the people around here, people would take advantage." At first, she and Watson kept in touch on walkie-talkies. "But Frank couldn't work," Tower says. "I felt that was really a burden on him, it felt like babysitter, like a baby monitor." She asked if he could recommend a bodyguard; he suggested Carter, who was living across the street in the bunkhouse at the time. "He

are in Brooklyn.

"So I'm working in a city without homes," she says, savoring the strangeness of it. "I like that: 'I work in a city without homes.'"

"Isn't it sad that the only industry is taking apart America?" Tower asks, driving by the scrapyards on Route 3. "Then we put it into weird little piles. We've just turned into this primitive hunter-gatherer society, we don't make anything anymore. We've turned into Neanderthal cavemen."

She has just dropped Carter off at his apartment, where he plans to take a nap. Tower doesn't seem tired. She's hoping the weather will be good Thursday, so she and Edgar can go out and paint. To watch Tower work is to watch a woman possessed—by *pneuma*, something higher.

Tower wants to stay in St. Louis. She's picked out a new site in Granite City, but needs a new bodyguard. "They love Edgar so much at his job," she says, "that they want him to come in every day. Frank hasn't been able to hook me up with anyone since. That's how rare Edgar is." Her contract with Wash. U. is up. She needs to sell paintings to stay. Though Tower loves the material world, she still grapples with its challenges.

"I sold a painting recently," David says. "But it's very difficult. It's not the kind of painting you put above a sofa. It takes a special collector. They say, 'I have to have it,' not, 'My house needs it.' So there's a few, but they are very, very rare, unfortunately. She and I are very happy and jump up and down every time I sell one of her paintings."

David says that to have a painter of Tower's caliber leave St. Louis because she can't find work is "tragic." But not just for the art scene. Or for Tower, who is a survivor, marching over mountains of glass and bricks and asbestos in her 8-inch work boots. The tragedy is also ours. Losing someone like Tower, who fearlessly walks into dark and sooty corners to glean the stories we have abandoned, means that when the Armour plant falls—or Carondelet Coke, or the Cahokia Power Plant—a part of us disappears with it.

See "Cindy Tower: Workplace Series" at the Berkel and Crisp Museum (518 S. Fountain, Cape Girardeau, Mo., 573-651-2260 www.5.semo.edu/museum) through April 27. ●

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