

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Cindy Tower: *Last Stockyard*, 2007, oil on canvas, 68 by 72 inches; at the Sheldon Art Galleries.

on a side that are propped against the wall. Each base precariously supports a squashed cardboard box coated with lumpy white plaster, suggesting a relief sculpture that has slumped floorward. Bulging out from each box is a mess of more plaster, bits of brightly colored felt, scraps of plywood and studio detritus like plastic strap fasteners or a piece of wire rack. Tucked behind these bundles are round white cushion-like forms made of the plaster-coated gauze of old medical casts. These act as funny prostheses, bracing the works against the wall and furthering the idea of form-as-accident-victim.

Four other works on stiffly coated paper keep their grip on the wall, but just barely. From the 2008 series "Rock, Paper, Scissors" (all 19 by 25 by 1½ inches), the papers are swathed with fleshy white plaster and messy confetti-like arrangements of more candy-colored bits of felt, and mounted on rectangular panels that thrust the brittle confections an inch or more into space, objectifying them and increasing their air of vulnerability. These tactile pieces look impossible to handle, already fraying at their tender, unprotected edges.

Another series, "Fractured Fairy Tales" (2006), continues the crumpled motif. Four wall-hung sculptures (ranging from 24 by 18 by 12½ to 16½ by 13 by 13 inches) each centers on a single small, battered cardboard box. Again, the surfaces are coated with white plaster or plaster cloth. Exposed interiors reveal tangled scraps of plywood, paper, colored felt and Poly-fil. These sad,

bright little constructions bring to mind homemade dollhouses drop-kicked by an angry child.

In press materials, Fujita names wide-ranging sources for inspiration and titles, including, besides Hawthorne, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens and Jay Ward's animations of the 1960s. A playful but powerful tension between static form and evocatively unstable materials is equally at work. Gloomy metaphors of things falling apart abound lately, but Fujita's witty charm seems to spill from an intrinsic, more enduring "home of wild mirth."

—Ann Wilson Lloyd

### ST. LOUIS CINDY TOWER SHELDON ART GALLERIES

Cindy Tower's "Riding the Rubble Down" at the Sheldon Art Galleries presents (through May 2) 15 paintings from her recent "Workplaces" series, plus a short documentary video on the artist by Malcolm Gay. With all-over paint handling and hallucinogenic clarity, Tower depicts the interiors of abandoned industrial sites—factories, meatpacking plants and the like—in and around East St. Louis, Illinois, in canvases that range up to 8 feet on a side. Among the consistently strong works, *Last Stockyard* (2007) stands out. Dizzying in its forced perspective, it's a view from within a building's decrepit and utterly parched wooden skeleton—a tinderbox waiting to ignite. *Brooklyn Armour* (2006) is a cavernous yet stifling interior littered with snarls of

defunct machinery and random detritus. *Frick* and *Collapse* (both 2008) tighten the focus on obsolete engines and electrical fixtures; the dripping paint seems to sweat off the canvas.

Tower's paintings translate the derelict remains of 20th-century industry into metaphors of the 21st-century economic meltdown. The work also gestures toward various American traditions. Her dry-eyed take on her subject owes something to 1930s Social Realism, and her forms decompose spectacularly, in the mode of Ivan Albright.

Tower paints on location, moving her enormous canvases about the sites, creating tightly woven composite views. This modus operandi would be challenging enough, but in these contexts, it's actually illegal. At night, Tower finds ingenious onsite hiding places for the canvases; during the day, she competes for space with squatters and graffiti-ists, and hurries to finish canvases before scrappers strip the sites bare. Gay's video documents a few of these encounters, including an exchange between Tower and a contingent of Bosnian immigrant paintballers who regularly use the abandoned factories as ad hoc rec centers.

While these canvases record the effects of illicit efforts to reclaim the sites, Tower is no architectural crusader. Her paintings neither call for the buildings' salvation nor lament their demise. But Tower considers herself an activist, and her 20-year career in installation and performance art, not to mention an education at UC-San Diego under instructors like Eleanor Antin and Allan Kaprow, have steeped her in strategies of artistic engagement. In "Riding the Rubble Down," the engagement all happened during production. The finished paintings take a step back, allowing a long, hard look at the slow-motion disaster that is economic decline.

—Ivy Cooper