

NEW OBSERVATIONS

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Pilgrims & Pop Pioneers



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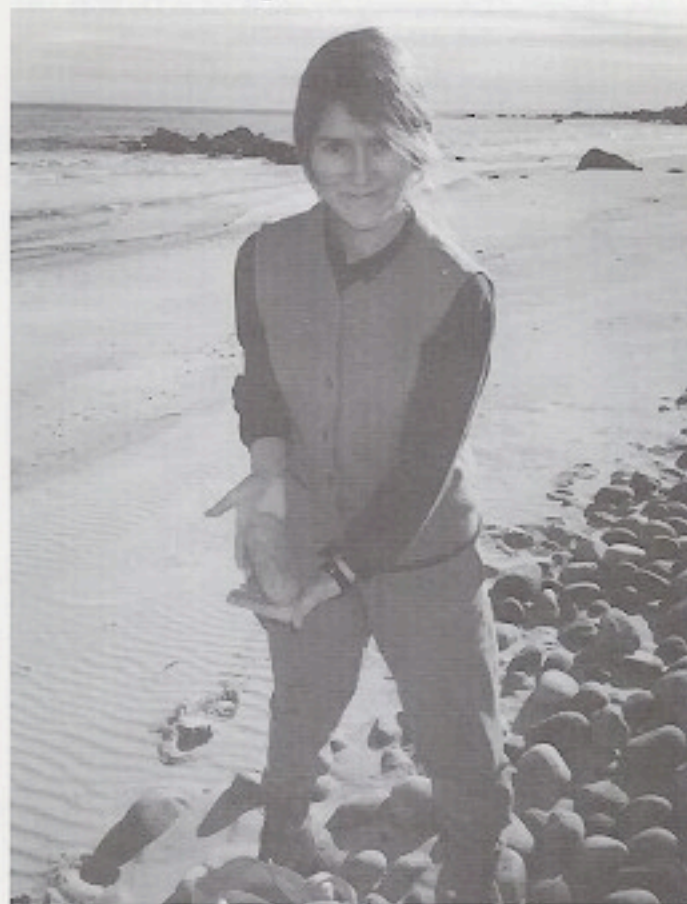
MOUNTAIN of the HOLY CROSS in the GREAT NATIONAL RANGE of COLORADO



Annie Taylor
with her barrel,
Niagara Falls,
NY, 1901

Cindy Tower

Pilgrims: On Exploring Cracks in the Earth and Extracting What's American



Cindy Tower with a rock, Fisher's Island, 1995

I needed to get a bunch of smooth, round rocks for a sculpture. I heard there were some in New London, but that it was illegal to take them from the beaches. Figuring that in winter beaches would be less policed, I drove out there – but there weren't any. Miraculously, I ran into an artist friend who told me she used to live on an Island off shore where there were rocks, and she offered to come with me. Fisher's Island was a wealthy private Island. You had to know someone just to go ashore. However, in winter, the place was deserted, houses boarded up and the hired gate house guard was only seasonal. We caught the ferry, arrived in an hour, drove to a beautiful stony beach in the foggy, snowy twilight, loaded up a bunch of rocks and sat on the beach for a while before getting the final ferry back. Waves tumbled on the egg shaped rocks and then raked them back down making this incredible rasping sound. I wondered how all those rich people could sunbathe on that rocky shore and pictured them lugging their chaise lounges up and down the cliff, being careful to avoid twisting their ankles. The marina man told me the rocks all had something to do with winter currents. He said that in the summer the beaches aren't rocky because summer currents deposit the rocks way up on shore. In winter, waves bring the rocks back down to naturally protect the sand from erosion by sitting on it. All winter long, each weekend I drove to New London, caught the Fisher's Island ferry for seven dollars, and loaded my truck up with rocks. I put clothes on top of my buckets of rocks to disguise them. Eventually I had an entire private rock beach in my loft in Brooklyn. At home with my cargo, I realized that, like a Pilgrim, I found my rocks.

As an artist, I make art because it enriches my life and takes me places I'd never go otherwise. I live little stories which I turn into installations. One show required that I live in a little western town, Banner, CA, population 12, and paint a mountain with a giant letter 'B' carved on it over and over again for a couple years. I ended up having a wild adventure (which turned out fine in the end) getting kidnapped by a wrangler and having friends killed in a gold mine duel over prospecting rights. The show after that was about an obsession with trees, genealogy and a quest to fight alienation and become more rooted in general. That installation took me out painting specific portraits of trees every place I'd ever lived up and down the East Coast for three years. In the process of painting trees, I also became acquainted with a great, great grandfather of mine, Galen Clark, a tree lover, who became a national hero for finding big trees, (in what was later to become Yosemite, along with Muir and Olmstead).

I consider myself a typical American beauty – in a generic sense. I drive a generic truck, am a daughter of a test pilot born on a base in New Mexico, was in a sorority in college, use a chain saw, wear jeans mostly, wander and am a tom-boy. Shopping and watching TV bores me. I'm active rather than passive. Yet, I feel I've become a stranger in my own land. Today, peers are afraid to live their lives through direct experience. We let in those wimpy Tory values after all. We've become voyeurs. We march in lines with matching

uniforms. If fabricated products do not have a certain streamlined, excreted look, we judge them inferior. The art world has that spent inbred feeling – having become insular and self-referential. Politically, our self-righteousness has caused us to become a control-freak culture of mercenaries. What happened to the pilgrims, the pioneers, the Paul Bunyans, the silent, hard work, sharing the land, helping each other with barn raisings, Yankee values? As an artist, I'm interested in extracting what is truly American. I want it to be recalled and acknowledged before it shrinks into oblivion. I want to know more about Annie Oakley and Gypsy Rose Lee. I'm questing once again for an accessible avant garde. America has not yet lost its wild heart (although its beat is faint). We should enjoy it while we still have one. We should enjoy our passions, emotions, eccentricities, freedom and our country's raw, sometimes tasteless uncensored beauty.

So, this issue is about contemporary pilgrim friends: wanderers, lovers of nature, spiritual people who put themselves at risk in the process of making art, similar to a leap of faith. They are interested in process, testing boundaries and exploration rather than commodification, intellectual superiority, insular art world discourse, or emperors new clothing. I just want to breathe again, have a little fun, and feel some genuine feelings and materials.

What can be considered truly "American" is disappearing. I'm speaking about expressive America when it was formed a couple hundred years ago; I'm speaking about the time spanning our pioneering past until the filming of the *Perils of Pauline* and the early Tarzan flicks. America was crudely naive and there was an optimistic belief in the frontier, a belief in

freedom of spiritual pursuit, expression, and a rough-hewn, make-shift aesthetic which embarrassed later generations of immigrants. Since World War II, Americans have been trying to suppress their identity rather than embrace it. During the revolution, the colonialists beat the Tories because they were comfortable in a wild and natural habitat. They learned this from the Native Americans, but we have forgotten how to be one with nature.

True early Americans worked with nature. Yankee New England farmers thought of themselves, as did Native Americans, as keepers of the land rather than as land-owners. They thought in terms of cycles rather than in permanence. They were not afraid of disorder. Harmony was in entropy. Living off the land, they were forced to work with chance and circumstance. Getting "down and dirty" felt good. It was a British and French thing to have to plant things in rows, espalier trees and be fearful of brambles.

Orderliness, control and "sophistication" conceal fear. What's wrong with rolling around in the hay and letting one's hair down? Why did early immigrants bring along their hoop skirts, wigs, whale-bone corsets and egg-shell porcelain tea cups? Who thought up neckties? Clearly the Puritans were not Pilgrims. Was that European sophistication, or evidence of an early obsessive compulsive desire to control? As an artist, I am fascinated by the current cultural amnesia and insecurity of what is "American."

Cindy Tower's recent work was shown in two simultaneous one person shows in New York: Westward Expansion Inward at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and What to Do With Old Boyfriends. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



CINDY TOWER. *After the plunge a little white arm emerged waving handily – She was alive!*