

A FORCE OF NATURE

Humor, Cindy Tower says now, is an important ingredient in art because of its transformative ability. It certainly seems to have been so in her own life. It's hard to reconcile the wit, brightness, exuberance and even effusiveness of her recent works such as this "Gardenia" project for the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, here in Summit, with the angry, rebellious youth she says she once was. Outrageous, yes. But angry? Really?

Well, if she was, she must have been dangerous, because she's long had a chain saw in her hands, and the muscles to use it. The anger was, she claims, a reaction to being assigned all the female, indoor chores because she was the only girl in her family. So she bought her own chain saw as a teenager and has taught herself many skills more commonly associated with boys than girls. Her resentment of specific and general male roles still seethed when she was studying in California for her master's degree in fine arts, and produced a series of paintings and chain-sawed wooden sculptures depicting mostly naked men eating raw meat, or being turned into it. Looking back from the context of her present work, these "meat men" art-works can seem funny, but it's humor with an edge that might make some people uneasy (especially males).

Tower has always been a person with great resources of energy—she might be described as a force of nature—as well as with what she conceded is a certain obsessiveness. She has been amazingly prolific in the less than 20 years she has been making art. She typically works in series that have sometimes numbered in the hundreds of pieces. In the many paradoxes of her life and work, she found in this excess the key to balance, in chaos a route to order, and in her anger an integral humor. She recognizes that she carries out her compulsiveness to such a degree that it becomes ridiculous and thus funny.

Excessive quantities are a constant in her work. Viewers will recognize that here in Summit. Also constant is a desire for specificity and concreteness that can be seen both in her interest in varied materials (many with their

own evident life histories) and in her determination to make art that relates to the places in which she works. That has meant the landscape of a certain locale—the California desert, the grandeur of Wyoming, a fishing village in Connecticut. It has also meant social context. For instance, she sometimes takes the art world as her subject, and often her own personal history, which she presents in the proportions of myth (how many people would have the nerve to make an exhibition of revealing portrait paintings called "What to Do with Old Boyfriends"?).

At the same time, Tower looks at frames of reference larger than a single person or place. She is determinedly American in her manner and mindset. She is interested in Native American culture and in regional character, such as New England Yankee conservatism. She is also concerned with some of the larger American issues, such as the ecology of recycling, urban loss of relationship to nature, suburban isolation and alienation, alcohol as the cushion in a hard life. These varied topics may seem too broad for one artist to encompass, but Tower sees them as parts of a whole; she does not propose an ideal harmony but rather a recognition of the interrelatedness of all things.

She combines personal facts and cultural observations; her productiveness allows her to work through them. For example, a 1994 solo exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Soho centered on her family history and noted coincidences between her life and that of her great-great-grandfather, Galen Clark, one of the founders of Yosemite National Park. The show consisted primarily of painted log segments, a material that was appropriate to her subject and had come to her providentially: a tree had fallen on a friend's property, and Tower cut it up with her chain saw and used the sections as furniture and décor in her studio loft until they became the materials of the exhibition. She used the punning notion of her family tree, with related portraits (as well as portraits of the trees). Tower represented herself as a deciduous New England forest and her ancestor as a California redwood forest. For a visitor to the exhibition, the family portraits meant nothing individually, but as an expression of rootedness and heritage they were easily

understandable, as was her reference to the forest of concrete in which city people live today. Tower believes that ordinary people can relate to her works because she is so typically American in her interests and attitudes her audience is people like herself.

Recently Tower has also focused on identifying and building a sense of community among her peers in the art world. Her prodigious energy, channeled productively instead of anger, enabled her to pull off the “Brookworld” exhibition in Manhattan last year, an event whose theatricality presaged that of “Gardenia.” Tower has for several years maintained a studio in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood; she wished to transfer its funky ambience to Manhattan in a show. She arranged to use a tenement-style building on the western edge of Soho. She recruited 25 Williamsburg artists to create installations or hang existing works. The whole thing went together in five days and was open for only ten. Viewing hours were restricted to daytime because the building had no electricity. The artists acted as attendants, with a great display of communal spirit and good will—and clever, provocative and even beautiful art works, as well.

In the “Brookworld” show, Tower herself presented an installation called “Niagara,” a waterfall created mostly of white pantyhose, stretched taut and set to vibrate by the breeze from a few oscillating fans. This work, which is recreated as part of “Gardenia,” has several typical Tower aspects: it’s made of used/junk/recycled materials, it’s assembled not with finesse but with a sense of energy running full throttle, it creates a sensory environment, and it reveals unsuspected beauties in stuff we take for granted. And one more thing: it has an autobiographic meaning. The pantyhose commemorate Tower’s brief life as a stenographer and secretary, when she had to wear stockings and dresses. The beautiful shimmer of the hose might be called seductive, but it could just as easily be regarded as a mirage: the illusion of a prim and proper Tower employing the fall-back skills parents think girls should have.

Tower’s concern with community extends beyond the boundaries of the art world. For an

outdoor exhibition at Roosevelt Island last summer, she sewed a flame pattern of orange netting and yellow “caution” tape and hung it over a circular bicycle rack to look like a huge hibachi. She invited a class of third-graders to don black garbage bags and do a dance impersonating charcoal briquettes. She looks for ways to connect with people wherever she finds herself. Her interaction with the volunteers who have helped create the installation in Summit is as important to her as the end products—think of the Girl Scouts using drills and other tools, not restricted to “female” tasks, or to the boy who had never considered the blades of a fan to be like flower petals, but now may discover for himself such correspondences. In Tower’s view, art can be an object and equally it can be a way of looking at, and engaging with, the world.

--Janet Koplas
Senior Editor, [Art in America](#)