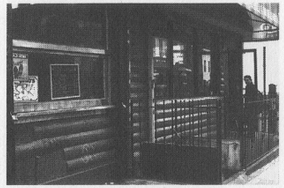
Home on the Range

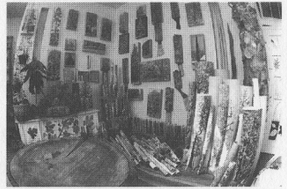
with Cindy Tower

In my neighborhood, people wear Timberland boots and sweatshirts, buffalo plaid and carry guns. The Marlboro man is the patron saint. Each morning I eat at a local place that looks rather rustic. It reminds me of a place my great, great grandfather lived in once.

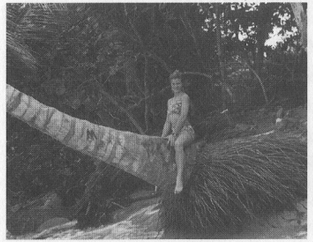


My parents took a trip to Yosemite and brought back a book about my great, great grandfather whom I'd never heard of before. He was a mountaineer who helped found Yosemite along with John Muir and Olmstead.

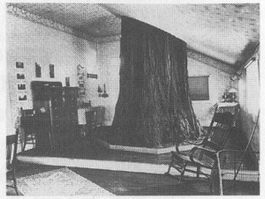
I'd been painting trees on everything I could find...And, flipping through the book, I realized I had a lot in common with him.



We both loved trees.



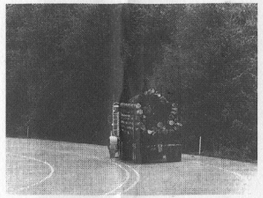
My great, great grandfather was a failure at everything he tried–he attempted around 30 or so careers. His wife died young and left him with 11 children he couldn't support, so he gave his kids to different relatives to raise. At age 45, he contracted TB and was given six months to live, so he went out to California to pan for gold. He ended up instead, living to 107, getting remarried after 26 years as a widower to a Spanish gypsy fortune-teller and becoming a national hero for finding big trees.



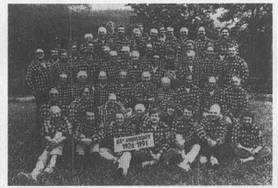
It wasn't until I came across this photo of his cabin, however, that I realized it had to be genetic...

My apartment in Brooklyn was the exact same thing–only a 90s version.

Last winter a tree fell over in a poet friend's backyard. I brought it home in eight truckloads. For some reason, I needed to have the whole thing.

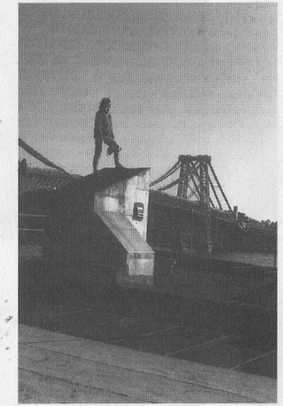


There are other tree lovers in my family. One grandfather was a nurseryman. An uncle of mine on the same family tree was a lumberjack.



I'd been heating my loft with a wood-burning stove and finally decided to turn my woodpiles into sculptures; the idea being that I could always use them for fuel if they didn't sell. In the *Lumberjack pile*, whichever man walked through my door, including the locksmith, had his portrait painted on a log. In this piece even men were treated as found objects. Eventually, there was a log-jam in my apartment. I had to get them out. I had to figure a way to market them.

This exhibition started out when I began painting my roots. I grew up in a Connecticut deciduous forest before moving to Brooklyn. I believe it is possible for memory to be inherited and that history repeats itself–only not exactly.



I'm in the process of working on an installation about my great, great grandfather and me–

two tree lovers; American, with a make-thrift aesthetic and a pioneer spirit.

Unlike most Americans, I'm interested in Westward Expansion; only inwards.

CINDY TOWER

WESTWARD EXPANSION INWARDS

Installation at
THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
New York, New York
MAY 6 through AUGUST 7, 1994
Organized by Laura Trippi, Curator

Cindy Tower has adopted what she calls a "raw and rugged" painting style, a style typical of rustic folk genres of the Western United States, to address experience often at odds with the sense and sensibility of fine art. Her colors are tawdry, her technique rough, and her subjects can be common to the point of cliché, while the exuberant abundance of her installations crowds the bounds of propriety.

On discarded objects and materials ranging from wood piles, bottles, cardboard tubes, furniture fragments, saw blades, and cross sections of trees to pantyhose stretched over small boxy frames, Tower paints landscapes and portraits, but above all she paints trees. These are not generic or imaginary trees, but portraits of trees from nature, individual trees. A dense tangle of personal and collective narratives, *Westward Expansion Inwards* is also an inquiry into complexities and contradictions that underlie ideas of American individualism and the frontier.

In the history of American thought, the West represents a conflictual and often romantic encounter with the concept of the land. The West as frontier is resource, raw material, acreage to be timbered, tilled, populated, and mined. But as wilderness the West

Installation view showing (left to right) *Adirondack floorplan, View of Yosemite, Deciduous forest tree paintings* (fall foliage)

Installation view showing (left to right) *Deciduous forest tree paintings* (fall foliage), *Western sawblades, Valence mountain*

has also come to symbolize deliverance from the corruption of civil society. During the course of the nineteenth century, the vast American wilderness appeared as both a dreadful obstacle to expansion and a touchstone of national pride, providing the U.S. with a unique "patrimony" to rival European cultivation. Landscape painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederic E. Church helped to consolidate the distinctive image of American land as, in Cole's words, "primeval forests, virgin lakes and water falls."[1] By the latter half of the nineteenth century, painters travelled to the West, including Albert Beirstadt, Thomas Hill, and Thomas Moran, along with such photographers as William H. Jackson and Carleton Watkins, promulgating a vision of the West as a realm of scenic wonders and spiritual regeneration. With pictures of the unspoiled majesty of Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and the Columbia River Gorge circulating in reproductions–through portfolios, stereoscopic views, and an incipient magazine industry–the concept of the Western wilderness as a sacred preserve began to take hold.

Combining wall-size photomurals with a multitude of diminutive and closely gathered *Tree Paintings* and *Forest* groupings, an idiosyncratic family tree, and painted wood pile sculptures, Tower's *Westward Expansion Inwards* is an eccentric reworking of the Transcendentalist notion of wilderness expounded by Thoreau:

> Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. . . .The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild.[2]

Where the West as frontier relies on the idea of rugged individualism in the domination of nature, Tower's installation emphasizes that the West as sign and source of preservation isn't simply a stand of trees, but more importantly an inner-oriented state of mind. As her proposal wryly states: "Unlike most Americans, I'm interested in Westward expansion, but inwards."

Employing an obsessively additive approach to refurbishing found materials, Tower's inward expansion evinces a keen and gendered ambivalence.

Installation view showing
(left to right)
Cindy Tower in highway pillar forest under Bruckner Boulevard
Home on the range
Family tree
Lumberjack woodpile

The work advances the cause of domestic, feminine, and folksy genres as it undercuts the mythic dimension of the Western legend and deposes the masculine lead. At the same time, the sheer mass and intensity of the accumulation tilts toward the maniacal, a fanatic stockpiling that recalls the *horreur du vide* of overstuffed Victorian interiors while suggesting overproduction, overpopulation, and exploitation of the environment.

Westward Expansion Inwards transforms the gallery into a thick forest in which two eco-systems are superimposed. A Connecticut deciduous woods indicates the main branch of the artist's family, while a ghostly stand of redwoods summons the Western retreat of Tower's great-great grandfather Galen Clark, black sheep of the family, who along with John Muir and Fredric Law Olmstead helped to found Yosemite National Park. Past overlaps with present as in the installation the natural forest gives way to highway pilings and painted debris, and Tower's own history as an artist becomes entwined with that of her great-great grandfather. The portrait of the late nineteenth-century itinerant naturalist and woodsman throws the image of the late twentieth-century painter into strange relief. If the installation attests to the passing of primeval wilderness areas, conceding that a domesticated, fabricated external wilderness is now a given, it also embraces the terrors and tranquilities of wildness as a figure for consciousness on the frontier of an unknown era of civil society.

Laura Trippi, Curator

[1]Thomas Cole, quoted in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 81.

[2]Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Excursions, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Tickner and Fields, 1863), pp. 176, 185.

Installation view showing
(left to right)
Redwood tree memories
Bottle forest (fall foliage)
Tree paintings
Flemish pile