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ARTIST CINDY TOWER



ARTIST CINDY TOWER of Brooklyn paints the silent machinery inside the shuttered Gilbert & Bennett wire factory in Redding. Tower documents in her paintings the vanishing machines of the Industrial Revolution. The factory is being converted into a residential/commercial village.

INDUSTRIAL ARTS

PAINTER CAPTURES COBWEBBED MACHINES, AGED FACTORIES BEFORE THEY DISAPPEAR

STORY BY ADRIAN BRUNE | SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

PHOTOS BY RICK HARTFORD | THE HARTFORD COURANT

Painter Cindy Tower doesn't wait for the muse to come to her. She goes to it. Once it was in a maze of steamy pipes in the belly of a Navy ship; another time it was a tiny parcel of a work site, while bulldozers flattened an old building nearby.

On a sunny, warm day last week, you could reach Tower's latest workspace by walking down stairs littered with rubble, through several rows of ancient mill machines and just beyond boxes of forgotten paperwork. In a corner stood Tower's easel. A work in progress, the 5-foot-high, broad-brush-stroked canvas paid tribute to mill machines.

"I paint what is left behind, considering the debris to signify cultural detritus," said Tower, who was raised in Darien. "But my paintings are sort of like portraits. I paint the places where the workers would be standing."

Her latest project, a series of life-size paintings of the closed Gilbert & Bennett wire mesh manufacturing plant in the Georgetown section of



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"BIG BLUE ROOM," one of Tower's "Clutter Paintings" series, was made at the Nutmeg Steel plant in Branford.

Redding, is part of her five-year quest to capture America's Industrial Revolution in paint, before the evidence is destroyed.

As the real estate market continues to boom in Connecticut, and hungry developers look for new building opportunities, Tower has traversed the state — and the country — looking for and painting factories and mills marked for leveling.

"I'm like a fireman. People will call me and tell me of a building that's about to go down, and I rush out to paint it," said Tower, whose brother, a West Redding resident, told her about the Gilbert & Bennett demolition. "The time I can spend on one series of paintings depends on the other crises out there."

Tower currently divides her time between the Gilbert & Bennett pieces and, close to her home in Brooklyn, a series depicting the rough-and-tumble mechanized environs of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, part of which is being razed to make way for an

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apartment building.

"Occasionally I paint a landscape, and I'll make sure it has some water in it," Tower said, adding that she currently does not have an agent or a gallery because "mine are not the type of paintings that would necessarily go over a couch."

But the retired manufacturers, building owners and even the current developers certainly find Tower's work aesthetically pleasing, despite her strong preservationist viewpoints. Many have bought her works, which range in price from \$1,500 to \$4,500, and either kept them for their private collections or prominently displayed them in the new structure. The Georgetown developers will put one of Tower's paintings in its planned performing arts center.

Tower is one of many artists fascinated by the Gilbert & Bennett site.

Built in 1818 by Benjamin Gilbert, the mill was Georgetown's main employer and economic engine for 171 years — restaurants, inns, watering holes and churches went up around the mill — until it shut down in 1989, unable to keep up with modern manufacturers.

For many of the four decades she has lived in Georgetown, Lynda Patee has come to paint variations of the 35 or so angular brick buildings sprawled about the 55-acre campus that abuts a glimmering waterfall and several picturesque New England hills.

"That place is a gold mine of shapes," said the graphic artist turned architectural landscape painter. "Go to any side, and there are always great composi-



RICK HARTFORD / THE HARTFORD COURANT (RIGHT)

CINDY TOWER takes a break, right, from her painting in Redding. But she can't rest for long because, as always, she's racing with the redevelopers. The oil painting above is "Windows," made at Nutmeg Steel in Branford.

tions to be had, especially if you like to paint buildings and mechanical things.

"Nothing else like that looks like it anymore," she added. But soon, neither will the Gilbert & Bennett mill.

Bought last year by the Georgetown Land Development Co., headed by Stephen Soler, the mill will become a \$300 million redevelopment of apartments, retail shops and a new train station platform on Metro North's Danbury line. The mill's historical importance is not lost on Soler (his offices are lined with old drawings and maps of the factory), and neither is the importance of the artists.

"People have been painting

and doing things on the property for 75 years. Artists walk in the door every day and ask us to paint something," Soler said, adding that the development will preserve some of the historic buildings and include an artists-in-residence program. Major demolition will start by the end of the summer.

Tower won't be one of those artists. She recently accepted a teaching position next fall at Washington University in St. Louis.

Educated at Cornell University and the University of California, San Diego, Tower has spent most of her career creating installations across the country. Her installations have included "West-



ward Expansion Inwards," in which she re-created a National Park out of refuse at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in SoHo; "Pirate Cindy" at New York's Trans Hudson Gallery, in which she transformed her pickup truck into a pirate ship; and "Tank," a 25-foot-tall tower built out of appliances from a Texas landfill on the Southwest School of Art & Craft campus in San Antonio.

In 1999, Tower quit sculpting for six months and took a bike ride cross-country during which she discovered lots of abandoned factories to paint. "Everything I love is disappearing, in Connecticut especially, but all over the

country as well," Tower said.

Tower's "Workplace Series" has been an ongoing project.

"I've always loved being around workplaces, tools and machinery," Tower said. "It is important to see the fruits of one's labor directly and to actually see how things work."

In the past five years, Tower has frantically painted industrial environments as they are being demolished. One of her first was Branford's Nutmeg Steel factory in 2000, and she had to hurry. Tower got into Nutmeg Steel only when workers showed up to dismantle everything. "I thought I'd have a couple years to paint there, but cutting torches are

fast," Tower said.

Since she began the series, Tower has completed as many paintings of each place as time allows, usually stopping when "winter rolls around and the paint will no longer flow off the brush, or when I'm denied access to a site."

Besides Gilbert & Bennett, Nutmeg Steel and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, she's also painted the U.S. Maritime Administration crane ship S.S. Diamond State in Houston and the Sol Forman metalware factory in Brooklyn. "I have no idea how many I've done," she said. "I know I can never do them again. I'd have to travel to China to find factories."