

# Art in America

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That Cindy Tower is a talented representational painter comes as an afterthought to this show. Skill is incidental; the work runs on pure, high-voltage energy. As always, Tower pummels propriety and taste. I first saw her work about four years ago, in a SoHo solo that included revealing portraits of men in a series called "What to Do with Old Boyfriends." A simultaneous installation at the New Museum combined a family tree and portraits of trees; many works made use of log slices from a tree that had fallen on friends' property some time before. Always a recycler, she had cut it up with her chain saw and used it for studio furniture until it became part of her art. More recently, Tower organized "Brookworld," an exuberant show of installations by fellow Brooklyn artists, staged in a derelict Manhattan tenement.

Thus one expects something between outrageousness and kitsch from her, and this show, "Pirate Cindy," did not disappoint. It consisted of two bodies of work: paintings to which found bottles or goldfish bowls were crudely glued, and an installation made of the parts of her recently deceased 250,000-mile-old pickup truck. In materials and manner, both are closer to folk art than "high" art. The truck bed became the deck of a pirate ship, the cab was its cabin, and a structural column in the gallery and three expanses of cloth formed the mast and sails. The truck body was dry-brushed, theater-scenery style, to mimic boards. On the roof of the cab, the truck's steering wheel, a few wooden handles added, became the ship's wheel. A compass was set into the center of a gilded tire; the muffler and exhaust pipe, propped up with rebar, made the staff for a pirate flag. Elsewhere in the gallery, the truck's axle impersonated a cannon and its hood, fenders and miscellaneous parts (painted silver, gold or copper) together represented a treasure chest. All this was accomplished in gleeful, reckless improvisation.

The paintings, a series she began in 1996, were equally fun (not a word commonly attached to an art exhibition since the Pop era). They range from the straightforward (a telescope view of a tropical isle) to the sentimental (graduated fish bowls attached to a gorgeous shore scene enclose the words "They should bottle a day like this") to the insider joke. In 15 Men on a Dead Man's Chest, bottles attached to the canvas enclosed magazine cutouts of macho or hefty men. The bottles pile up on a painted "corpse" of an ample, naked, clearly identifiable New York art-world figure. The same guy can be recognized by his eyes as Octopus, his multiple tentacles holding bottles (again real) containing, this time, snapshots of dealers, artists and art journalists. Tower is probably destined to become a cult figure. This kind of eccentricity is too lacking in irony to attract the pundits who write the scholarly books, but it dazzles viewers with force of personality and will, to say nothing of manic irreverence. [A selection of Tower's recent work was also seen in a solo show at Serge Sorokko Gallery, New York.]

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