

# LONG LIVE CHEESY BUILDINGS

Meet the Arthur Miller of architecture-based art.

West Saint Paul artist Carolyn Swiszczy is starting to think twice about what she paints. For a future show in Boston she's more than a little concerned her work may lead to the implosion of Boston City Hall.

Swiszczy (pronounced "swizz") makes prints and paintings of buildings for a living, and has a knack for painting structures that get flattened by a wrecking ball. The seemingly random impact of her art on the built environment is easy enough to explain. Her current muse is anonymous, B-team architecture from the '60s and '70s. Too old to be considered in vogue yet not old enough to be considered antique, the middle-aged office buildings, churches and roadside strip malls that tickle Swiszczy's aesthetic eye are also those structures most likely caught in the redevelopment crosshairs of aging neighborhoods and first ring suburbs.

The King of Clubs bar, formerly on Central Avenue in Northeast Minneapolis, is one such casualty. A windowless, white-stucco corner dive, with a billboard on the roof and playing card-themed wall graphics, it was a neighborhood icon with enough genuine grit to serve as the location for Steve Buscemi's intro scene in *Fargo*. Swiszczy captured it on canvas and shortly after the building was pulled down to make room for a new housing project. In other parts of the country, outside Boston and Miami, her subjects apparently drop like flies.

To be fair, many of the buildings she paints remain standing a bit longer. Her acrylic and rubber stamp ode to the blue checkerboard glass 3M tower on I-94, is a local favorite. And her Hopper-esque homage to the dust encrusted displays of American Surplus in Minneapolis's Warehouse district was a crowd pleaser when it first showed in Minneapolis in 2004. (The building is still there, but shortly after the gallery opening, the owners cleaned up the dis-



plays and the building, scrubbing clean the delicious grime and pathos.)

Swiszczy admits that when she first considers a new subject, it's a gut reaction to how awful the building looks. "But then I wonder why a building bothers me," she explains, "and I start seeing something I find

"Hope Lutheran Church, Minneapolis," acrylic and relief ink on canvas, 36" x 24."

interesting, like a certain brick pattern or the signage in the windows."

A native of New Bedford, Massachusetts, and



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graduate of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Swiszczy spent much of her early career painting and drawing people. Winning an artist residency in Miami in the late 1990s caused her to change gears. "I didn't know anybody there or what to paint so after a while I just started walking around," she recalls. "I thought, if I'm going to be uninspired I might as well be uninspired outside."

So she transferred her focus from people to buildings, but in a way different from other artists. While California artists Ed Ruscha and Wayne Thiebaud employ architectural subject matter as a departure point for more purely compositional explorations, Swiszczy maintains an un-theoretical fascination with a building's quirks and foibles, its sloppily accrued layers of history, its untidiness. Like a good portrait artist, she paints a building's personality.

Her ode to Hope Lutheran Church, a totemic cluster of dove colored stucco boxes at the intersection of Crosstown Highway 62 and Cedar Avenue, will be recognizable by anybody who ever rushed by on their way to catch a flight from Lindberg Terminal. Stripped of all suggestion of the adjoining neighborhood and freeway, Swiszczy's work takes the building inside the portrait studio, offering only the most scant suggestion of place—a brooding winter sky and slushy snow tracks in the asphalt parking lot.

Designed by the late and revered Minnesota architect Ralph Rapson in 1971, Hope Lutheran does have a substantial architectural pedigree, but the artist's rendition draws the eye to the structure's compromised aspects. Always enamored of cheesy signage, Swiszczy draws the white plastic letters H-O-P-E with loving care. Blazingly corny in its New Word quasi-calligraphic font, the ad hoc signage layered over Rapson's chiseled, minimalist bell tower pits highbrow against lowbrow. And yet for attention the unplowed parking lot wins!

Like classic portraiture, it's the stuff around the subject that tells the story—the map on the wall behind the piano, the letter left open on the table, the light reflecting off a pearl earring, whatever.

In a Swiszczy painting, you are more likely to find a gas meter, newspaper box or broken electronic sign telling the story. Recurring themes of neglect, commercialism, carelessness and hypocrisy would make the work dour and oppressive if it weren't for tangible sense of affection Swiszczy holds for her subjects. She's the Arthur Miller of architecture-based art. For even in a world filled with Willie Loman buildings, she reminds us, happily, "Attention must be paid." +