



Mpls.St.Paul Magazine,
September 2006

The World According to Carolyn

Carolyn Swiszczy refashions the banal into the oddly beautiful. By Stephanie Xenos

If you've ever been to the intersection of Lexington and Larpentur in St. Paul, you may have noticed the army of pink flamingos and other such ornaments clustered on the front lawn of Flowerama. Or, perhaps you've noted the large neon parrots painted on the window of The Pet Connection in the strip mall across the street.

It's also possible you've filtered out these unremarkable details: You know they're there but don't really see them. Yet these are the elements found in a peculiar American aesthetic (some might say anti-aesthetic) both captured and reimagined in the work of Carolyn Swiszczy, whose show, *Shelf Life*, opens this month at Highpoint Center for Printmaking.

In 1990, Swiszczy moved to the Twin Cities to attend art school. After earning a bachelor of fine arts in printmaking from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, she decided to stay. While her work could result in flat, ironic landscapes apropos of nothing, it doesn't fall prey to stale interpretations. "Sometimes people think I'm critiquing urban sprawl," says Swiszczy, "and sometimes they think it's all about quirky. Some people just see the seriousness, and some people miss the dread." For Swiszczy, it's somewhere in between.

Her show at Highpoint showcases a series of minitableaux, all of which are panoramas of locations in and around her adopted hometown. The images include collaged elements—acrylic, trace monotype, stamps—to create a lively interpretation of otherwise dismal settings.

Swiszczy says she often cannibalizes her work to create more nuanced scenes. "I like to purposely ruin things," she says. "It's more satisfying if it comes back like the Prodigal son, if I rescue it."

Despite a hefty resumé of work that includes permanent collections (including Microsoft's), Swiszczy remains grounded. Like any true artist, she's avoided the nine-to-five work world. "I've done everything I could to avoid working full-time," says Swiszczy, who has a part-time gig as an historic tour guide for the Minnesota Historical Society. "I love giving tours. I used to play tour guide on my street, except we called it 'monster tours' and talked about the monsters who lived in each house." She also volunteers at the Veteran's Home and plays in a Warren Zevon cover band. And the list of interests on her blog—radio, churchgoing, historic tours, running, desserts, knitting—all suggest a loveable nerd, a label that Swiszczy embraces.

Swiszczy grew up amid what she calls the "crumbling beauty" of New Bedford, Massachusetts, a possible early source of her fascination with places and things that have passed their peak. She says that many of the places that show up on her canvas end up disappearing from the real world and jokes that she might start targeting places she'd like to see disappear.

Either way, Swiszczy has a knack for remaking reality, and her work evokes a sense of potential in even the most dismal outposts of American public life. "Patterns and objects intended for utility or commerce can be transformed into decorative elements," she writes on her blog, *Joy to the Nerd* (Swiszczy's middle name is Joy). "Mundane buildings can become backdrops for real and imagined melancholic dramas."

Ultimately, Swiszczy acknowledges an undercurrent of existential angst, but says, "I actually embrace the dread. I decided to find a way to enjoy it."

Opens Sept. 9. 2638 Lyndale Ave. S., Mpls., 612-871-1326, highpointprintmaking.org