

Carolyn Swiszc: *Spruce Tree Centre*, 2002-04, acrylic, pencil and collage on paper, 31 by 38½ inches; at Gallery Co.



MINNEAPOLIS

Carolyn Swiszc at Gallery Co

Carolyn Swiszc's acrylic paintings on paper are markedly awkward in execution, but this makes sense considering her preoccupations. As in her exhibition last year at New York's M.Y. Art Prospects, the images in her recent Minneapolis show, "American Surplus," are mostly unpopulated city scenes painted in drippy, untidy fields of flat color on sheets of buckling paper tacked to the gallery wall. Most of the 23 paintings date from 2003 and 2004. Her work overall is a scrapbookish inventory of the set design of backwater urban and suburban America: empty parking lots, check-cashing joints, thrift stores and pawn shops, industrial parks, motor hotels and auto-body repair shops. In terms of painterly sensibility, Swiszc's work is an updated one-person Ash Can school.

Swiszc is taken by sights that the rest of us tune out. Her paintings revel in the gaudy chintziness of American commercial spaces, yet through her uncertain and reverently childlike rendering she makes such scenes seem appealing. The acrylic-and-collage *Spruce Tree Centre* (2002-04), for instance, depicts a nightmarish example of 1970s-era urban "improvement." The real Spruce Tree Centre, located in St. Paul, is an eyesore akin to those of the former East Bloc—replete with boxy faux Bauhaus design, a large Deco clock that never runs, and garish Kelly-green tile cladding. In Swiszc's hands, its ugliness becomes an attraction; that is, her quick brush and wide-eyed sensibilities make

its homeliness almost quaint—she shows us something not prefabricated, nearly marvelous for its own sake, a toylike and precious anomaly.

In this show, Swiszc appears to be particularly taken with low-rent stores and their window displays of uncomfortable shoes and bad antique ceramic tiger figurines, along with eye-rupturing fluorescent window advertising. The show is a poignant look at the constant struggle of humans to connect through cheap commerce. *Sale Today* (2004), for example, is a modest depiction of a sidewalk placard announcement, the title words on prominent display with balloons attached and floating skyward. Sadly enough, no one at all is in the vicinity, and we find ourselves rooting for the nameless salesperson so eager to move product. Such is the case in many of these images—we want this chintz to sell, for people to succeed in their modest ambitions. The strongest example, the eponymous *American Surplus* (2004), depicts an ageless military-surplus store in downtown Minneapolis. In the window is a sad collection of junk—camo jackets, army boots, military netting, sun-faded flannel shirts, odd-lot hats and three small missile-shaped advertisements—all against a fluorescent-greenish backdrop. The artist presents the array with a kind of doll-house innocence that disguises and makes almost poignant this attempt to sell the broken detritus of war. For all of Swiszc's studied naïve sloppiness, she captures something all the more real—the pathos of human endeavors.

—Michael Fallon