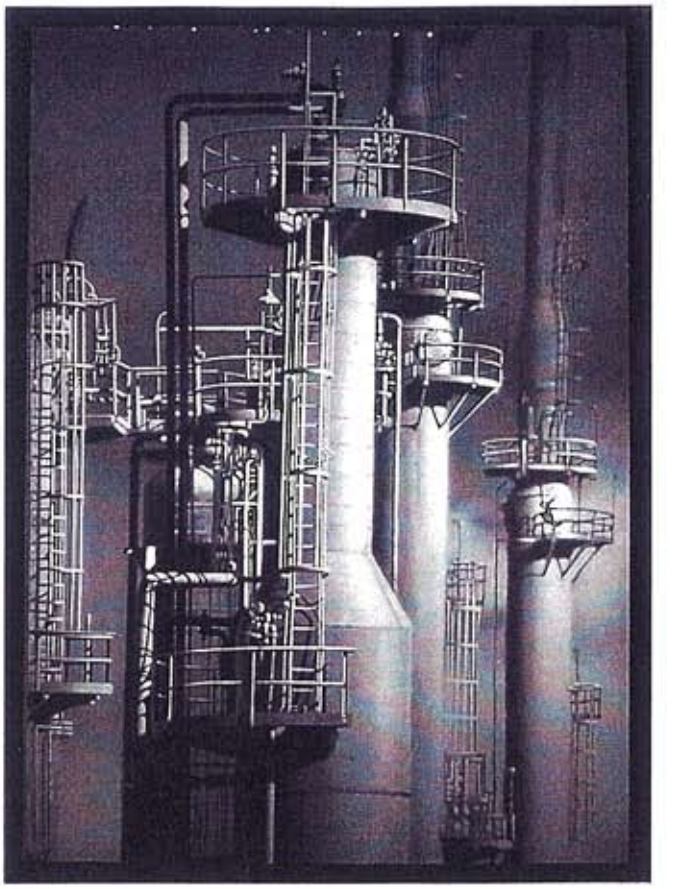
Joseph Stashkevetch

TURNER & RUNYON GALLERY

DALLAS

by Joel Weinstein



Joseph Stashkevetch
Richmond Towers #1, 1998
Photo, 61" x 84"
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

You have to wonder what Joseph Stashkevetch was thinking when he photographed the mechanized, steely American landscapes he draws and paints, settings almost clinically devoid of evident humanity. His compositions are so bold and frosty they could be emblems of a totalitarian ideal: orderly rows of machine parts, conveyer belts heaped with meat, refinery stacks jutting into filthy skies. You might take them not for drawings done by hand, but for giant black and white photographic prints that the very atmosphere has smudged with industrial haze.

But though Stashkevetch's scrutiny is precise and sere, the lavish way he prepares his paintings yields works that are lush, even deeply sensuous. What can this mean? That the heart of impending fascism beats hotly? Or is it the opposite, an elaborately arch portrayal of progress run amok, the American Rasputin in gingham drag?

You might assume that these sumptuous photo-realist renderings aren't smart at all. They come off as pretexts for some painterly virtuosity, some laying on of color and fashioning of light. Stashkevetch's approach is disciplined and reductive, paring the scenery down to metallic and asphalt geometries bathed in the fluorescent glare of the factory or the harsh sunlight of smog-enshrouded afternoons. It is as if he is looking into the white-hot core of late capitalism without even blinking.

On the other hand, this may be the case of a postmodern artist attempting to turn the nineteenth century on its head, creating with painstaking attention and effort what the camera does mindlessly in an instant. It shows a saintly disregard—or perhaps an ironist's scorn—for the very technology the work portrays.

Indeed, Stashkevetch edges and undercoats his expanses of black with saturated blues, yellows and browns, making what at first appear to be flat, monochromatic slices-of-life into moody narratives, washed suggestively with the sepia or blue of antique photographs and as noirish as street lights glimpsed through a rainy windshield. He further softens the works' hard edges by abrading the paper before he lays down color and line, which gives his scenes their heat-wave shimmer and makes the shadows as rich and soft as felt.

At times, particularly in the close-ups, the combination of velvety shading and suggestive form transfigures Stashkevetch's consummately mundane industrial relics. *Machine Parts #1* is a shot of drill chucks—talk about reductive, what could be more de clase for an artist than workshop tool attachments?—where light and darkness intermingle as in a Boschian crevice, making drill bits into minarets atop the eerie glories of an ancient, dilapidated empire. It brings to mind the works of Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, Russian fantasy architects who specialized in plans for architectural impossibilities that were at once witty, if morose, social commentary, satirical art rhetoric, and objects of whimsical, deeply affecting beauty. *Machine Parts #1* could very well be—though it is probably not—an homage to those blithe spirits.

But for something completely different, let us turn to Stashkevetch's mural-sized triptych above a stairway to the second-floor lobby of a new hotel in Manhattan. It is a picture of two steel gridwork railroad bridges converging on a distant station tower, a grey tableau yellowed like an old snapshot and looking the worse for wear around the edges. At the bottom of the stairway sit life-size cast metal sculptures of two Doberman pinschers, and the stairway railing is built like a sturdy steel fence.

This whiff of concentration camp chic in the heart of a toney Soho lodging is deeply weird, as if a late 1990s fashion magazine had come to life, and it may signify some new corporate strategy to tease the jaded modern traveller. But the more provocative tease is Joseph Stashkevetch's, and just where his predilection for industrial nostalgia is taking him, and us.