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Exhibition view of "The Collections of Barbara Bloom," 2008, showing two Damaged BB portrait busts, *1989 (foreground), and the photograph* People at the foot of the Mother Russia monument at Volgograd, *1992 (on back wall); at the International Center of Photography. All installation photos this article John Berens/© ICP.*

Opposite, spread from the book The Collections of Barbara Bloom, *2008, published by ICP, New York/Steidl, Göttingen.*

Personal Effects

A chronologically scrambled exhibition of Barbara Bloom's work evokes an estate auction—and an identity whose elusiveness only increases with exposure.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

As assembled for a career spanning show that is now, the artist insists, a survey, Barbara Bloom's works since the middle 1980s fall into 11 categories, starting with "Stand Ins" and progressing for the absorbing, tantalizing exhibition, which opened at the International Center of Photography in New York and is now at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. Another is the bodies of Bloom's work it draws from—or, more accurately, dismembers (they include "The Reign of Narcissism," "L'Espirit de l'Escalier" and "The Gaze).

Then there is the accompanying book. Called, like the show, *The Collections of Barbara Bloom*, and not to be confused with a conventional exhibition publication (there is no checklist, nor monographic essay), It is designed to mimic an especially deluxe auction catalogue. The conceit, sustained in the show is that the works listed, and annotated in graceful, erudite entries by Susan Trallman—sometimes borrowed for wall texts—belonged to the late Barbara Bloom. The estate sale following the death of Jaqueline Onnassis (and its catalogue) was, the artist says, and explicit model, though given the diversity of works in Bloom's "Collections"—

The voile curtains in "Blushing" can be pushed aside to reveal photos of nudes both famous (Ingres's *Odalisque*) and not (three topless seaside bathers).

and the entire nature of this undertaking – Warhol is an inevitable reference, too. Having long since succeeded his cool cut of celebrity with a positively glacial celebration of self-absorption, Bloom here steps into an even more bracing zone of faux-posthumous pseudo-autobiography. And like Warhol, she makes every last confession a mirror-finished screen. When I asked her whether the whole show is essentially about mortality, she answered, "Yes, but also about control."

Hence the nested systems of organization, each at odds with the next, all at least a little misleading. Yet another, featured on both the book's cover and, at the ICP, the show's introductory wall, consists of a grid of colored squares, the labels under each announcing a decidedly incommensurate range of things: "same," "envy," "Ringo," "19th C.," "Richter," "Miranda Rights," etc. Inevitably, Foucault's deep-bore (and utterly idiosyncratic) historical analysis of classificatory systems in his landmark *The Order of Things*, comes to mind; so does the famous list Borges borrowed from "a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge,'" and cited by Foucault in his book's preface, in which "it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs," and so on through "(n) that from a long way off look like flies." Along with semaphoric signals to these two titans of linguistic subversion, one or two of Bloom's labels ("Lolita," "blush") make straightforward connections to the works on view. But most do not. Similarly, the color coding these squares introduce, like the colored frames around the wall texts—each a different hue, all unrelated to the introductory grid—promised a summary rubric that leads not exactly nowhere, but certainly, and tellingly, astray.

At the ICP, the show proper began with the series "Belief." It was introduced by a blank red rectangle beneath which was the caption, "A recent study in the UK demonstrated that people were more likely to adhere to an honor system if a poster of human eyes was nearby." A word of advice to entering viewers, then: look around, sharply. It's not the objects (or were plastered around a floor-to-ceiling column, including wry travel ads (from a 1981 series) and prints from a 1986 project, also called "Belief." One of the latter reads "The Building Blocks of Philosophy: Incredulity, Curiosity, Boredom."

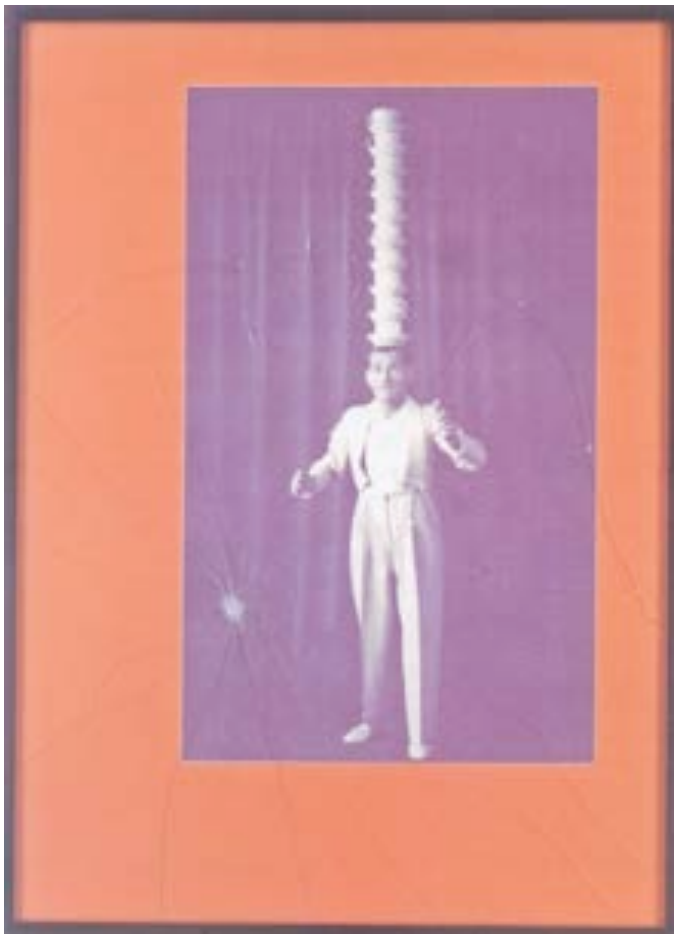
View of the section "Blushing," showing (left) Modernist Confessional, 1956, and (right) The Gaze, photographs behind gauze curtain, 1985-92.

View of the section "Broken" (left wall).

Right, Acrobat Balance, 2001, Iris print mounted on mat and framed under broken glass behind Plexiglas, 12 by 20 inches.

Again and again, in "Broken," damage is done, repaired and exposed, courted and breathlessly anticipated; bad luck is staged, suffered and mocked.

However snappy, these posters don't come close to the visual elegance of the works grouped under the heading "Stand Ins." Prominent here are inanimate things that often get personified, like chairs, of which there are half a dozen, including a café chair that plays a part in a 1986 *Monument to Godard*, a director's chair from a 1981 homage to Jean Seberg, and a pair of Empire armchairs upholstered in silk patterned with dental charts and horoscopes, from the 1989 "Reign of Narcissism" (still, perhaps, Bloom's best known project). A white marble tombstone for the artist offers her name and birth date and the gilt inscription, "She Traveled the World to Seek Beauty." It shares a vitrine with teacups and chocolates bearing her likeness. Striking in this grouping of objects is Bloom's *Homage to Frances Rey (aka Mom)*, 1999, a floor-length which satin evening dress on a black velvet-covered mannequin. Each of the buttons running down the side bears a photograph of Ms. Rey, who was a film actress long before her daughter's wary entrance on the stage of self-expression.



Seducing her audience with objects of surpassing refinement and wit, Bloom invites an intimacy that is endlessly forestalled.

The works grouped under the heading “Broken” have an autobiographical reference as well, though they also celebrate the traditional Asian approach to the breakage of precious things, which, as the wall text says, is “counter to the Western notion of sweeping damage, or age, or under the rug.” As bloom recounts in the catalogue, “Broken” was impelled in part by a freakish accident in 1995, a near-fatal fall from a window that caused many broken bones and was followed by a slow recovery. Prominent here are ceramic items—a plate, a teapot, a vase—all delicately veined with the lines of gold which, in the Japanese tradition, mark places of breakage and repair. X-rays, mounted on lightboxes, treat these objects as if they were injured and mended bodies. A video of a spinning dancer seen from the waist down, her skirt twirling, appeared on a tiny screen set into the wall. Above were three big photos of balancing acts, two of girl acrobats, one of a man with a stack of cups and saucers on his head; at their feet lay shattered glass, presumably from original frames, held safely behind second, intact sheets of Plexiglas. High overhead, a rectangular opening in the wall separating his gallery and the first was filled with precariously stacked glass stemware.

The linkage between the fine and the fragile, and that pair’s uneasy connection to femininity, is one theme in “Broken,” a section pivotal to the exhibition, and to Bloom’s career. No less important is its calm insistence that violence wrecks the orderly operations of time and causality. Across this wall of objects and images, damage is done, repaired and exposed, and then in an endless cycle, courted and breathlessly anticipated; again and again, bad luck is staged, suffered and mocked.

The wall text introducing “Doubles” notes that two is the smallest common denominator of narrative and also, with typical logical dissonance, that two is the first prime number. Identical or just slightly mismatched images and objects predominate here, installed at the ICP in rough symmetry on a long wall bisected by a doorway, itself flanked by mirrors. Once again there are objects from “The Reign of Narcissism,” including two 1989 busts of the artist, one broken, the other intact (Janine Antoni’s paired *Lick & Lather* self-portrait busts of 1993, one made of chocolate and the other of soap, are in their debt). Among images pinned like butterfly specimens into glass-fronted cases were paired photos of Vladimir Nabokov, a patron saint in Bloom’s world. Showcased pages from her

On left wall, Never Odd or Even: Carnegie Sculptures, *1992, photographs, and in corner on floor,* Takes One to Know One, *2007, photo panel and mirror; both works from "Doubles"; on right wall,* Shanghai Pigment Street, *2001, photograph, from "Naming."*

palindromically titled book *Never Odd or Even* (1992) also honor Nabokov's spirit, while suggesting the considerable significance of artist's books in Bloom's career. Just as important is a good laugh, here provided by two tall, narrow rectangular frames propped against adjacent walls in a corner of the gallery. One frame holds a mirror, the other two photographs (taken by Bloom in Sumatra) of a chicken regarding itself in a similarly tall, narrow mirror; these photos are visible in the real mirror too—along with us chickens, of course. *Takes One to Know One*, this work (of 2007) is called.

"Innuendo" favors the faint, shadowed, coded or

Safe, 1959, wall safe and framed 19-by-23-inch Iris print.

otherwise obscure, starting with a wall text punctuated by passages too blurry to read. Among Braille-lettered objects is an issue of *Playboy*, an ashtray with an alphabet around its rim and sheet music. A photograph shows a scientist performing an experiment—though perhaps it is a magician performing a trick: the caption is in Braille, rendered unreadable even to the blind by the glass of its frame; there is also a printed label with type too small to read (*Works for the Blind*, 1987). Much in this section is from "L'Espirit de l'Escalier" (1988), including two sheets of paper with tiny images of UFOs embedded as watermarks and revealed by backlighting (*Watermark Papers*). Gray rectangles painted on the wall to suggest pictures that aren't there are shadowed obliquely by a gray carpet on the floor, its pile permanently impressed with a swarm of little footprints (*Girls' Footprints*, 2007). It lies beneath a photograph of black-clad girls at play in a snow-covered yard. The image is cropped so the girls' faces aren't visible, which, as we add our temporary footprints to the field at their feet, only exacerbates a cumulative sense of our obtuseness amid all the shadowy nuance.

More visually solicitous, "Charms" is on the one hand an assortment of objects that court the dubious label "precious," on the other a meditation on scale (in the book—which refers to Bloom, per estate-sale protocols, in the past tense—Tallman notes that "BB's idea of the perfect monument was a charm bracelet"). Under this heading are faux postage stamps honoring Nabokov, Ed Ruscha, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Allan McCollum and others with relevant interests (1996), and a brooch in the form of a small gold replica of the olive branch brought to the moon (1991). Most sensational, and tiniest (it's the combination that piques Bloom's interest), is a grain of rice on which a pornographic image is engraved; a loupe is provided (from "Pictures from the Floating World," 1995).

Bloom explains that her choices here have nothing to do with sentiment or nostalgia—that it is not the individual artifacts that sustain the assortment's charm, but the relationships among them. That scale matters greatly in the tuning those forces of attraction is best illustrated by a photomural running floor-to-ceiling (and dramatically framed, at the ICP, by the doorway to this gallery): it shows tourists dwarfed by the base of a colossal heroic statue visible only to its shins. Below were additional photographic vignettes about scale, among them I.M.Pei playing with a model of the Louvre (*Pei and Pyramid*, 1995) and toy figures of world leaders *(HO Scale Dictators*, 1995). As the power to compel attention drifts, in "Charms," from things distinguished by size to those associated with esthetic or political authority, it also draws strength—as does much of Bloom's work—from alternating currents of iconicity and inscrutability.

"Blushing" again goes back to the 1980s, with work from "The Gaze" (1986-87), but there are newer images in this section too. All are hung behind voile curtains, which can be pushed aside to reveal photos, many fairly blurry, of nudes both famous (Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*) and not (three young topless bathers, in an amateurish show from ca. 1940). Some of these semi-concealed pictures themselves feature curtains or veils. The wall text here offers, as a meditation on blushing: "BB wondered if it were possible to extend this metaphor beyond the phenomenological effect to describe a relationship between a viewer and an object—a relationship that's intimate and active enough to make an object blush." The

patriarchal gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey by way of Freud, crosses paths in this little text with the curiously animistic regard W.J.T muses about in his recent book *What Do Pictures Want?* Similarly, viewers fingering the lingerie-sheer voile and peering at what's hidden beneath trip over their own self consciousness on the way to post-poststructuralist knowingness. It only conforms to Bloom's deviously intra-critical ways that all this coyness makes me for one of the most accessible components of the show.

Relatively literal associations also guided the selection of pictures installed salon-style under the heading "Framing." Chosen because in one way or another they feature internal frames, the images in this section—all distinctively framed, naturally—include reproductions of paintings and photographs of things in the world. One shows a gloved hand opening a safe, the frame mounted on a hinge and swung a little away from the wall to reveal an actual safe; it does particular justice to the wall text's observation that framing "is frequently an act of cunning." Fairly straightforward, too, are the choices of charts for testing vision and flashcards for learning various languages gathered under the heading "Naming"; all beguilingly combine simple graphics and unfamiliar information, lending support to the notion that "the sublimity of naming comes into view at the exact point that it fails." Finally, there is the scant collection of sheet music set up on music stands in "Songs" (2007), which seems a bit of an afterthought; not introduced by a text, and in most cases substituting thumbnail photographs for musical notes, it insinuates itself into the exhibition like a song you can't get out of your head though you can't remember the words.

In fact, a nagging sense of not being able to attain and integrate all the relevant information is fundamental to the experience of Bloom's work. Amid the thicket of texts, images and objects, cross-references and faint associations that constitute "The Collections of Barbara Bloom," the actual artworks, such as they are, come into focus only imperfectly. The show was on view at the ICP at the same time as an exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor called "Archive Fever" [see A.*i.*A., May '08); among the projects' affinities was a keen sense of the slippage between information and hearsay, original and copy. Indeed, distinguishing real and fake in "The Collections" is even harder than it looks, since in many cases the works shown are not "originals" but exhibition copies produced to limit the time and costs associated with insurance and shipping.

But then provenance, according to Bloom, is a matter of exhibition history, not ownership. And the ambiguity about the work's value, in market terms anyway, plays into her show's connection to the auction house, where drama is so often heightened by at least a little anxiety over just these kinds of questions. But Bloom's works always puts obstacles in the path of simple understanding (if not ownership). Even the most visually delectable objects must also be read, forensically, or analytically, and permissible interpretations proliferate in a way that is not exactly regressive but does seem nearly infinite.

And that is just the point. "Turning up the volume of difficulty turns up the volume of beauty," Bloom says. Often, as in the veiled photographs and tiny or faint images, she gives difficulty physical dimensions that match its more familiar conceptual ones. Seducing her audience with objects of surpassing refinement and wit, she invites what she calls a "conspiratorial, whispering relationship with the viewer," but the intimacy suggested is endlessly forestalled. If the language is distinctly erotic, the courtship remains beyond reproach: while there is no prohibition against visual indulgence, neither is there anything like consummation.