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Installing an Identity

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The American artist Barbara Bloom (born 1951) is known above all for her wit. Starting in the 1980s, Ms. Bloom captured the attention of the New York art world with a series of prankish installations featuring photography, sculpture and a range of found objects.

Her best known work is a room-size piece called "The Reign of Narcissism" (1989). It presented a pageant of objects, like crockery and furniture, often labeled with Ms. Bloom's signature or profile and even included her tombstone, with the year of death left open. In spite of the title and the omnipresence of the artist's imprint the installation was actually rigorously impersonal -- hence the joke, and a certain attendant sinisterness, which came from the impression that in promoting a superficial aspect of her identity, Ms. Bloom had actually erased it.



'Safe,' 1998, by Barbara Bloom, on show in Berlin.

Some of the objects from "The Reign of Narcissism" are on display in "The Collections of Barbara Bloom," a vast, fragmentary retrospective at the Martin-Gropius-Bau. In bringing together work from three decades, Ms. Bloom shows her era if not exactly her age. She has what must be called a late Cold War sensibility, which combines a boundless reverence for the past wonders of Central Europe -- obscured during her formative years by Europe's ideological divide -- with an American baby-boomer's fascination with fame. In an early photograph called "Goethe's Corridor," taken in East Germany in 1977, Ms. Bloom displays a series of narrowing door frames from a hallway in Weimar's Goethe Haus museum. By drawing us into a tunnel of compelling, but cut-off historical spaces, Ms. Bloom creates something very beautiful -- we are aware of plank floors and traces of objects beyond the doors -- but full of melancholy, as the constricting view seems to echo our own inability to possess the past.

—*J.S. Marcus*