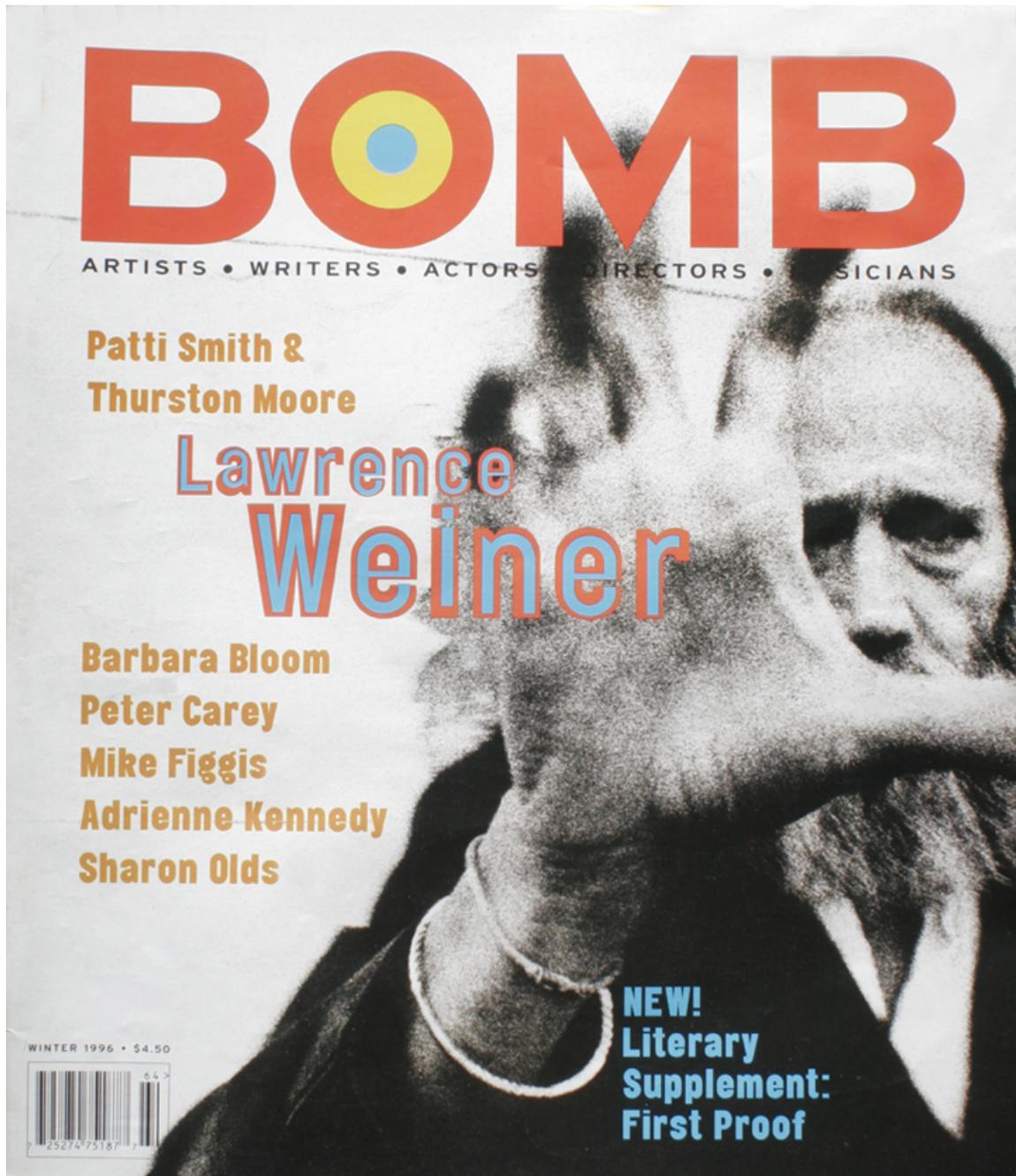


BOMB 54, Winter 1996



## Barbara Bloom by Kiki Smith



Barbara Bloom, *Pictures From the Floating World: Scale Picture*, 1995, Iris print 20 x 16", courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art.

When I first saw Barbara Bloom's art-stage sets for life—I had to stop myself from moving in and making myself at home. Inviting in their clarity, hauntingly pristine, elegant in wit, tableaux from rooms and the adornments of life wait for their namesakes, wait for us. Her work collects remnants of lives lost or left behind ready to be taken up by an invisible presence. A presence activated by our gaze. The longing her work generates is profound: we are the vicarious vessels of our own desire, and the space she leaves for us in her art reflects this. Kiki Smith and Barbara met at Barbara's home in lower Manhattan. Kiki's reaction was not dissimilar to mine: it would be so easy to move in with Barbara, there is a fluidity to her home and her thoughts which is soothing, compelling, and easy to be around.

—Betsy Sussler

**Barbara Bloom** I gave my dad a fig tree for his birthday last year and he just called and said, "Barbara, I'm eating one of the figs." Isn't that nice?

**Kiki Smith** Yeah, totally. One of the reasons I was late-ish this morning was because I was ordering these porcelain tea cups which were originally designed for Catherine the Great's

wedding, and then redesigned for the bourgeoisie. We've talked about having the same porcelain from KPM Berlin—that might seem incidental, but there's a deep connection to using things from everyday life in your work, objects that are in the domestic domain, adornment. In your living space and in your work, there's a precision, an attention to the surroundings that has an abundance to it.

**BB** My ex-boyfriend used to tease me, he'd come in when I was working and say, "Working on your dowry?" At certain times I'll put myself on an art diet, I'll say: no more dishes, no more 19th century, no more household objects. The use of them becomes a habit and then a style, which is not ever what I intended, it's embarrassing. But then I think, why am I so drawn to these things? It's not that they're from the feminine domain, although I'm certainly aware of it, but it has more to do with scale. I'm attracted to the enormous, important matters of life that take place on a small, everyday scale. Nabokov, a favorite writer of mine, pays incredible attention to details, like a glass breaking. In our culture everything which is large and grandiose is assumed important, and everything which is small is considered of less importance. I don't think that way. I'm interested in a gesture or an expression on someone's face. And that gets paralleled in the object-making world as well.

**KS** It's non-threatening stuff.

**BB** I guess. It's quite presumptuous but I want the experience of looking at my art work to change someone's life. And I feel that if you give someone a big experience then they have to translate it back into the normal world. But if you give them a small experience which is somehow confusing or profound, but in the realm of their own world, then it doesn't have to be translated, it's already there. Because it's not that far away from theirs. Does that make sense?

**KS** Yeah, it has an accessibility to the here and now, except that it's an altered accessibility.

**BB** What I present is not the real world, it is fantasy, but the fantasy world spins off the real world. It's not about War and Death; it is about loss or absence. Recently, I've been thinking that I'm attracted to these objects because they are breakable. I've always been attracted to objects which because of their fragility have an implicit absence, like glass and porcelain. I'm slowly working on this piece that has to do with things that have been broken and repaired. They're based on the traditional Asian art form of repairing broken objects with gold. It's almost like dental work.

**KS** It's making the repair evident and obvious, a part of the experience.

**BB** Rather than hiding something that's broken, it aggrandizes it, saying that something that has a history, that is not perfect anymore, is more beautiful and more valuable than something which has no history. It's the opposite of our culture. When I was in Japan and saw these for the first time, they were so beautiful that they made me cry. And then with this accident that I had recently where I—got so broken. This is the perfect metaphor: to think about objects that are repaired with gold. These objects are stand-ins.

**KS** We take heart in ourselves for being a conglomerate of things that don't necessarily work out. We are temporal and fragile, but we get a strength from being mended and repaired. That in-between of existence . . . Glass and ceramics are the two materials that are the most

telling. Pot shards are found all over at archeological sites, glass ceramics all over the Roman colonized world.

**BB** I love that a culture could be told by its pots . . .

**KS** Both of those materials in terms of art are marginalized, and regarded in low esteem as crafty-wafty.

**BB** Not anymore.

**KS** I think ceramics is pretty marginalized in the art world.

**BB** I don't think that I'm making ceramics.

**KS** Yeah, I know. Porcelain. (*laughter*)

**BB** I don't make stuff, I alter it. I don't have the handmade element. I'll never forget you asked me one time, "What do you do with your hands when you're watching TV?" I don't have hobbies. (I have time for a lot of bad thoughts.) What I do as an artist is talk on the phone, and work with the craftsperson who produces what I want and make sure they do it right. There is no messy room, I work in my home.

**KS** So where is the pleasure element that comes from making things with your hands? Where is the moment of satisfaction?

**BB** Take this Japanese art of repairing broken objects, I wrote about it a long time ago and used it in a piece 10 years ago. And I recently thought, Oh, this is perfect, I've got to do this. So the thought wanders around for awhile, I do research, I call the Japan Society and talk with someone there. And then I have a friend who makes ceramics and she asked her Japanese teacher about it for me . . . I don't sit down at my desk and say to myself, Now it's time to think about this. It comes to my mind, it goes away. I was in a taxi yesterday thinking: Do I want to take photographs of this? Do I want to make the real objects? What would the real objects be? Eastern objects? The actual Japanese objects? Some Western object? Should they be objects that get broken and then repaired? Do I want to learn the whole traditional art form? The pleasure is in the meandering, the thinking about it. I never force myself to come to a conclusion. I'm very generous with myself. I know that I love this whole process and at a certain point . . . So I was in a taxi and there was another thought, that these objects should be gift wrapped. I want making art objects to be closer to giving gifts. The better you know the person the more subtle the gift can be. I want to get away from this "the lowest common denominator of making art objects." I don't know if this is clear to you.

**KS** Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a very beautiful way of saying that, it's more subtle.

**BB** In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes writes, "How submerged does a reference have to be before it drowns?" When you know a person very well you can give them a very specific gift. The less you know a person, the more obvious the reference has to be. If I know that you love rose petals, I can make you something which subtly reflects rose petals. If I'm making a work of art for thousands of people it's hard to be that specific, and yet I want to make a piece that is so subtle that there's an intimacy for the person who sees it, they will feel that

I'm doing it just for them. That's the perfect analogy, giving gifts. I would like to gift wrap these. I love Japanese packaging, and I could finally do something with my hands, and I could actually do something much more flamboyant. The work is usually pristine. The way I would wrap these could be way over the top. So yesterday I'm in the cab thinking, Maybe there could be a photograph of the object, and then the object would be gift-wrapped, and then you'd have to decide whether you wanted to open it or not. (This reminds me of your sculpture of the bronze figure with its x-ray behind it, revealing a barometer inside.) So that's the pleasure for me. I can keep an idea in my head and move it around and not own any of the different permutations of how it will eventually be. That's the pleasure.

**KS** And does "it" tell you it's right? Maybe it's because I don't want the responsibility—but I always think the work's coming from someplace else. It's not mine. Do you own the things in your head? There's a consciousness when you're in dialogue with your own work of being in a very private space and having to re-circle things again and again to explain them to yourself or to keep unfolding them, cannibalizing one's own history.

**BB** We can count on you to get that kind of body metaphor in there.

**KS** You're in a path moving around your own path.

**BB** You're in dialogue with yourself. For someone who physically makes something, the making of which takes place in time, painting or sculpture, there's a point in the process where the thing talks back to you and tells you what to do next. I don't work that way and yet thoughts can do that too. It's not as though I'm being directed. My gift is to be so concentrated or obsessed on some thought or notion or image that I start seeing everything in connection to it. And then some really interesting combinations take place. I let my thoughts go, but over the years I've developed a way to recognize a truly interesting combination of thoughts and images. It's the making of combinations between an image and a text or between thoughts that makes my process incredibly rich and enjoyable.

**KS** You work on large, precise ideas. I'm in the chotchke business. I'm always jealous of people who don't have to make so many things themselves, like you or Charlie Ray. Where the pieces contain, like an envelope or a big umbrella, a long thought process.

**BB** Once I have the whole work, then I make what I refer to as my "gift shop." On one level it's very pragmatic, because realistically you can't ask people to show these large works without having objects to sell. The stuff that you can buy is related to the larger works. I have nothing against making stuff that you can own, I love objects.

**KS** For someone who makes concepts you pay high attention to the physical world.

**BB** I just finished these folding screens that have Japanese erotic drawings on them which are visible only if the screen is lit from behind. Otherwise the ink is invisible, the same color as the cloth.

**KS** Oh, totally cool.

**BB** Without the back light all you see is a red blushing cheek and the black censorship dot which forms a little repeating pattern. It looks like a '50s pattern on silk until you light it from behind, then it's dirty pictures.

**KS** It's wonderful to have an idea and then have access to a process that can actually configure the mechanics to make them happen physically.

**BB** What was wonderful was to work with people like Heptagon Creations in Brooklyn, who built the screens, and The Fabric Workshop, who produced the edition and who mixed a zillion colors of ink and dye. They said, "What color do you want the silk to be?" And I said, "Like tea," and I dunked it in some tea. And they had the silk dyed that color. Then they got the ink to be exactly the same color with enough opacity so that you couldn't see through it. That's another pleasure, working with fine crafts people, to have things made beautifully and perfectly. I don't have to apprentice myself, I explain to somebody what I want. These people are really good and I give them an opportunity to do something that is a little different than what they normally do. A man at The Fabric Workshop hand painted on all the blushes. What a job, to paint blushes on naked people who are screwing. (*laughter*) I'd get a Fed Ex package: Do you like this blush or do you like that blush? I said, "Can you believe this is your job?" And then we had a whole conversation, because the drawings are of a heterosexual couple, as to whether one panel would be the guy blushing and the other the girl blushing. I liked that balance a lot—not only the woman's blushing. I'm fascinated with blushing. I'm a blusher. People who are control freaks blush, because they don't want to reveal something. And yet your body reveals it and you're trying to cover it up. Actually, my goal in life is to make an art work that blushes when you look at it. You realize that this thing is being actively looked at. So much of my work is about looking and being looked at, watched. Once someone in reviewing Robert Irwin's dot paintings said that if you looked at them they blushed because they leave an after-effect. I want to do that, but more psychologically, not necessarily physically. It's also part of being a woman. I'm so aware of being looked at, and looking at, that's so much a part of my life. And that's so much a part of what I'm doing in my work, making that the content, making that the subject matter. It took me a long time to know what it is that I'm doing.

**KS** How important is it to you to have a piece of what you make? The power of being an artist is that you can make a whole physical world. And I want everything. I'm semi-insatiable, so I think if I can make this then I can have it. Do you want to have one of your screens in your life?

**BB** Yeah, I'm going to get one.

**KS** And your tea cups, do you have some of those?

**BB** I keep them and I use them. I have a "Titanic salad bowl" from my piece, *The Tip of the Iceberg* and I've got "Barbara Bloom tea cups" from *The Reign of Narcissism*. I use them as I would any cups.

**KS** That's a radical notion in relation to art. It's a rarefied piece, and then you might see it in your dishwasher.

**BB** Yeah, I put them in my dishwasher, and sometimes people are over and I'll grab a saucer with my signature all over it in gold and I think, Oh, I shouldn't use this.

**KS** Too ostentatious. (*laughter*)

**BB** Maybe with this person it's a little bit much. They're not going to understand this. They break a lot and you know what? It doesn't really bother me. I could break the "Titanic bowl." I could live without it. My great-grandchildren won't have the "Titanic bowl." But yes, I do like having stuff. But I've moved so much in my life, I've lived in so many different places, moved and schlepped all my junk around. I have a lot of stuff now. And I have a nomadic spirit as well. So what would happen if there was a fire here and I lost everything? I'm not being facetious. I would not like it. But what would I miss? I would really be sorry if I lost all my photographs and slides because I haven't used them yet. I would like someday to use the pictures I have taken or that I have in my archives.

**KS** You came from L.A. and you were in Germany a long time . . .

**BB** I lived in Holland for 10 years and in Berlin for seven years.

**KS** That gives you an interesting perspective as an artist, to be a visitor and have access to different cultures . . . I've been doing the Lower East Side for 20 years.

**BB** It's interesting for me not to do that anymore. I'm here in New York, I like it here, I live here, I'm not going anywhere. I'm certainly not European but I'm also not completely American. It's some weird hybrid: if you speak other languages and know quite a bit about other cultures like Germany's . . . I'm relieved not to be there now, it's so problematic and it's not really my problem; there are other problems here. Before you arrived, I was reading this article in *The New Yorker* about O.J. and the race factor: there are racial prejudices about how you perceive that situation and whether you believe him to be innocent, or believe him to be guilty. I find that completely fascinating. I have to remind myself, Barbara, you're American, this is your culture, and you can't stand outside of it. I'm so used to being an anthropologist and watching from the outside. For the first time, I'm saying don't stand outside, this is where you're from. It's a real experience for me to not be so distant. My relationship with the art world used to be: I really want to make movies or theater but in the meantime I'm making art because it's much easier to produce, but I'm actually not an artist. I've been making art for over 20 years, this is what I do, I'm an artist.

**KS** True life.

**BB** Wake up, you know? I always positioned myself as an outsider and this is the first time in my life I'm not an outsider, I don't feel like an outsider. This is my community. And after this accident that I had, I feel that it's a very nice community. People who I barely know sent me letters. I was wished well from this community of artists of whom I'm a member and it felt very good. What a wonderful group of people, artists, who are trying to put into the world some kind of objectification of imagination. What a positive, good thing to do in the world. So much of my work has been about absence. Either it's something that went on that you didn't see, but is the remnants of what happened; or someone is no longer there and you see the remains of that. And this last piece, *Pictures from the Floating World*, was not about absence, it was about presence. It was about what you can't and can perceive: you can't

perceive the public arena and the private arena at the same time. You can't look at them at the same time. I wanted to make a piece that was obnoxiously big and ridiculously small. It's out of character for me to make something big and bombastic, but I did. I make you schlepp across this big bridge and all around you are a sea of miniature faces, couples. And then you get to the punch line which is the tiniest of all things, a drawing on a grain of rice which can be seen only through the magnifying glass. I wanted it to be physically comical.

**KS** You were still using a different culture in that piece.

**BB** As a stage set. I'd found out about this ancient Chinese and Japanese art form of painting on a grain of rice and that blew me away. I don't remember how it came together. It took five years to come into its present form. I wanted to do something that would be the stage set for those rice grains, not with the traditional drawings on them but with Shunya prints, Japanese erotic drawings. In these Japanese drawings the genitalia are way out of scale, enormous cocks and vulvas. Then there was the technical problem of getting these images onto the rice. Originally, I tried to commission these few traditional artisans who are left to draw them on but forget it, they'll do their landscapes and calligraphy, but they're not going to do big dicks! Then I tried dealing with hi-tech people from labs who have electron microscopes because I thought we could print the images on with lasers like on microchips—this turned out to be very complicated because the surface of a grain of rice is a complex curve. So then I was talking to these guys up at Cornell and MIT, and when I got to know them a little better on the phone I'd tell them they'd be working with Japanese erotica. And they'd go, "Oh we're going to have trouble with this!" And then, of course, one guy starts calling me up for dates! It's very complicated trying to get the right people to do this work. Finally, someone at Cornell said, "Why don't you do it photographically?" I said, "How could I get the image that small?" And we both said it at the same time—"Microfiche." Because microfiche can give you a 64 time reduction in one shot.

**KS** Wow!

**BB** One shot! So after all that I just brought these over to a microfiche company five blocks away from here. Neil Runyon, a fine photographic printer, worked for a long time developing this technique to get them on the grains of rice.

**KS** Charlie Ray said all these people criticize artists, but we make tons of employment. You're really a productive member of society.

**BB** A real friend to cottage industry!

**KS** You were talking about not being able to see the public and private at the same time. This woman came to my house the other day who has spent a lot of time in the Middle East near Saudi Arabia. The people's houses are walled in, they all have exterior walls . . .

**BB** You have to go in.

**KS** There are gates on the windows and people wear very drab over-clothing, but when you get in to the homes, there's this enormous sensuousness. The internal lives are very rich. The Middle East is a place where you can't see the public and the private at the same time.

Here, we're all facade; it's super-showy. So tell me more about making this installation about the public and the private, this sculpture that was really big and really small.

**BB** *Pictures from the Floating World*. The sea of people—the plaster heads of couples floating on the red floor was the public domain. It was, to me, this sea of the people of China, millions and millions of people that extends further than your eye can see. You don't see the individual, it's the public arena. Then you walk over the bridge with the sea of faces all around you and if you look into the microscopes placed on the bridge, you see what's not in the public arena. When I'm on the subway from time to time I think, All these people have had sex, that's incredible! It's intense how they actually all have this knowledge. Everybody experiences intense parts of their lives and you don't see that at all. Anyway, on the bridge, you look down through the microscope to see these individual acts. You can't really focus on the rice drawings and focus on the large sea of figures at the same time. It's literal, what I mean by it. And so, yes, I'm enormously interested in this difference between what's public and what's private. It's interesting how this subject matter of public and private has taken on new meaning in relation to my recovery

**KS** It might be nice to end with your future.

**BB** I don't think that I ever—do you ever know what you're going to do?

**KS** I know I'm leaving the body. About four years ago, I started making birds, one bird every six months, like snow falling. I'm going back to where I was 15 years ago, before I split animals from bodies, before I went into the body business as opposed to nature and animals and plants. The work starts telling you what you're supposed to be doing, but it's really slow. Then you see that all the signs are showing you, are making themselves apparent. You are told, but then it takes off on some other weird trip that you didn't expect.

**BB** Yeah. For instance, I have all these bird cage stands. There are some back there, there's one over there, they're hiding around the loft now. But I have no idea what I'm ever going to do with them.

**KS** But they're telling you to pay attention.

**BB** Yes. If I'm at a flea market, I can't resist getting another. It's like having pets without having the pets.

**KS** I do think things start sending you messages. Obviously the object or the image holds power for you.

**BB** I would describe it differently, but ultimately it's the same thing. I would say I'm attracted to certain things. I'm attracted to bird cage holders. I don't get the cages, I don't get the birds, I just like the holders. Sort of like collecting frames or like pets in absentia, collecting the space for pets, or pet stand-ins or pet metonyms.

**KS** Weird! Man, you're weird! (*laughter*) You can see that people think of similar ideas, but the individual forms a language that expresses their thoughts in totally different ways. Listening to you speak is to hear this distinct evolution of how an idea comes into its own personality, into be