

barbara bloom

Dena Shottenkirk: How important do you think the issue of style is to your work, and what do you think about the so-called debate about a lack of meaning in contemporary art?

Barbara Bloom: That whole discussion about there being no meaning is because people are so used to seeing meaning only in style, and that once style becomes redundant and redundant again . . .

Shottenkirk: It becomes fashion, which is why it's necessary to go back to a prestyle time.

Bloom: Yes, absolutely. I'm not interested in the nineteenth century. I chose that setting because I wanted invisibility, a given, like the set of a museum.

Shottenkirk: Your work actually avoids the trap of aesthetic style by confronting it in an historical setting instead of adopting the style as your own. The work seems to me more like archaeology than like an aesthetic style. You look at it and reconstruct the social history that is at the basis of that setting: Who was here? What were they like? What did they do? etc. It's not at all like a mystery where the audience gets to decide whether or not the butler did it. It's not a one-liner at the end of the narrative but a more elaborate cultural story: Who are these people who sat in these chairs, who created this room?

Bloom: Right. You see, I'm not coming from painting. I'm coming from literature and film. But those things take place in time. So I gave myself this really peculiar job of doing work like that in a still setting.

Shottenkirk: Would you like to work in other media?

Bloom: Yes. Actually, I'm collaborating with Pina Bausch now, which is wonderful because now I can deal with things actually taking place in time.

Shottenkirk: To have something take place in actual time is really about the slow read; the viewer absorbs the actions and meanings in an orderly, sequential, and slow way. But really, all your work is about the slow read; it seems more akin to traditional religious iconography than to, for example, a fast-paced media read.

Bloom: I think of the objects as being more like metonyms, stand-ins for the person who's not there. They are not symbols. Symbols are much more general; they have a larger presence. A symbol has to read to many different kinds of people in many different contexts in order to be a symbol. The objects that I used are more specific than

that. They are much more about an individual's use of them.

Shottenkirk: So the objects that you use in an installation gain meaning vis-a-vis the other objects and from the situation, and not in their status quo as that object.

Bloom: Well, yes. For instance, in the drinking glasses that I made from a 1920s photograph I found in a flea market, the photograph printed on the glasses is like a monument to something no longer here. Those people are long dead but their presence, through their image, continues. It is still real for us. A thing doesn't necessarily have to physically be there in order for you to feel its presence.

Shottenkirk: That again points to the fact that these things exist in time. It's about memory. Not memory in a nostalgic or nihilistic way but as it relates to our summing together the sources of our experience.

Bloom: When I think about my favorite writers, particularly Nabakov, I realize that everything can be said about a person without directly pointing to those facts. That's how he writes. You feel that you know everything about this person without him spelling it all out for you.

Shottenkirk: An implicit narrative. You use objects like relics; they obliquely point to a system of thought, a generalized experience. To think that it is reducible to an explicit narrative is a mistake with your work. It's not about an external situation that has to be deciphered but about the more abstract experience of being human: What is it like to sit in that chair, to walk through that room? Those kinds of human interactions are much more like archeology than they are like traditional narrative art.

Bloom: I don't tell people what things mean, but I describe the way they occur, in order to stir people's curiosity.

Shottenkirk: The thing that I found interesting in your work is that you've separated yourself completely from the issues of style by dropping little tidbits of information of a scene, giving them to us in a very filmic way and not drawing attention to the meaning of any one specific object but instead to the way in which people in that situation would interact with one another. There seems to be a whole community of people that exist in each of your pieces.

Bloom: Yes, the Titanic installation at Jay Gorney was very much about that. I always felt that the sinking of the Titanic was so very sad. When you see the pictures of what it looked like, it is like this debris field that is still there under the water. And it's just like all the debris and human garbage that the astronauts have left up in space; it's like what you said — an archeology.

Shottenkirk: It's about the human meaning.

Bloom: Well, I would hope that.

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