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CURRENTS | Q&A

Speak, Memory, Kvetch



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The artist Barbara Bloom selected the pieces for the exhibition in the ornate rooms at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan.

By JULIE LASKY

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On Friday, “As It Were ... So to Speak,” an exhibition of 276 works of Judaica, art and decorative objects, opens in New York. The pieces were selected by the artist Barbara Bloom from among 25,000 in the collection of the [Jewish Museum](#) and are arranged in a suite of ornate rooms in early 20th-century Upper East Side house the museum occupies.

Ms. Bloom, 61, has long occupied a border between art and design, creating and arranging domestic objects that are lush with commentary. Working with Ken Saylor, an architect, she commissioned display cases that look like furniture; each piece holds works related to quotes or imagined dialogues by figures from far-flung epochs. For instance, a game table featuring a reproduction of a 19th-

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century Dreyfus Affair board game as well as a first-century die is accompanied by a scenario Ms. Bloom wrote of a card game played by Nefertiti, Emile Zola, Amy Winehouse and Jesus. She led a reporter through the installation earlier this week.

Q. How did you even begin?

A. I worked with the curator, Susan Braunstein, and we sorted through things on a database, just taking a look at what was interesting. I had really no understanding of Jewish culture or Jewish religion. I grew up in Los Angeles, and “secular” doesn’t describe how atheist my family was.

Q. But raises the question of why you were chosen for this project.

A. I don’t know. You’d have to ask the director, wouldn’t you? I think because of the work that I do. She thought I would make something interesting with objects.

After a while, I had lists of objects that were interesting to me and subjects that were interesting to me, and I kind of warmed to the idea that these are the formal reception rooms of a house, why don’t I just treat them as such? One of the things I was finding along the way were these Talmudic texts. They’re these phenomenally beautiful texts in which a primary text is written and 100, 200, 500, 1,000 years later another text can be written as a commentary on that, and then you have a commentary on that, and a commentary on that.

And it’s not so much the argumentative nature of Judaism — you argue with God, you argue with each other — but the fact that these discussions and arguments take place over an enormous amount of time that became really interesting to me. I thought, what if we “furnished” — that’s with quotes — the house, but that it wasn’t really furniture. The objects that we ended up building are between furniture and cases and sort of ghosts of places where people could have congregated.

And so for instance, here, I’ll take you to the piano. We kept

going through the objects, and all of sudden there were these strange things with hands on them. Susan explained to me those are Torah pointers you need to read the Torah with. I decided to make the pointers almost like the strings of the piano.

Q. And the sheet music on the piano relates to your conversational ghosts?

A. Two figures who are extremely interesting to me are George Gershwin and Arnold Schoenberg, who were very good friends. I kept reading about that whole Hollywood émigré community and wanted some kind of representation, so there's a description here of a tennis match between the two of them by a composer, Albert Sendrey. Everyone says that there are movies of the two of them playing tennis together, but they actually did not exist. Schoenberg would have been 62 years old if they had been playing together.

Q. But elsewhere you quote Einstein on the relativity of time.

A. As you go through the passageway, there are these portraits that hang behind the doors. We just masked out the eyes and they're kind of looking at each other as in conversation. I've made a sound work, which is people arguing. Everything from political debate to "Seinfeld" to "Curb Your Enthusiasm" to Nichols and May to people in cafes. I just wanted to have a cheeky thing of Jews arguing. It holds the whole thing together.

The show is on view through Aug. 4 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.

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