Art in America

RIDDLES FOR MINDS AND BODIES

Barbara Bloom's work brings warmth and formal wit to the cerebral stategies associated with her Pictures Generation cohort.

by Bean Gilsdorf

View of the exhibition "As it were . . . So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue with Barbara Bloom," 2013, at the Jewish 1uscum, New York. Photo David Heald.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Barbara Bloom: The Rendering (H X w X D =)," at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, through Dec. 16.

BEAN GILSDORF is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in Portland, Ore. Sec Contributors page.

PASSING THROUGH archways and halls of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, which is modeled on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, visitors are unlikely to suspect the resonances these features will shortly acquire in Barbara Bloom's exhibition "The Rendering (H x W x D =)."Within the high-ceilinged space that houses Bloom's work, everything-walls, sculptures, and exhibition furniture-has been painted a calm, even gray. Hung salon-style on the large wall nearest the door are twenty paintings from the museum's collection, produced between 1650 and 1978. Bloom has partially obscured each work with a boxlike cover, effectively reframing the images so that only select architectural elements are revealed: a column, an archway, a portion of a three-story house. (All signs of human presence are hidden.) The other walls in the gallery sport reproductions of three Japanese woodblock prints and two Mughal drawings. On the floor in front of them, Bloom has placed three-dimensional replicas of architectural elements depicted in these images, such as a window and a walkway. Taken as a whole, "The Rendering" explores how architecture creates and frames the scene, within both the modeled space of the images and within the physical space of the gallery. It asks the "viewer" to become an "experiencer."

In an essay for Gifts-Bloom's limited-edition book on the cultural associations of exchange, which includes eight wrapping paper designs by the artist-critic and art historian Susan Tallman writes: "Most of Bloom's projects operate ... in an ambiguous realm where it is difficult to tell whether the artwork is a single object, an arrangement of objects, or the exhibition as a whole."[1] This is certainly true of "The Rendering," where the installation facilitates shifts of focus from the 2D images to their 3D counterparts and back again, provoking the viewer to track doublings throughout the gallery. Curiously, in her interviews and writings, Bloom often says that she feels a stronger affinity to literature than to visual art. "In conversation, when someone asks me what I do, I tend to get flummoxed," she wrote in a book accompanying a recent exhibition. "So I've prepared an apparently satisfactory response, or one that at least allows me to stave off farther inquiries. I say I was actually intended to be a writer, probably a novelist, but somehow I ended up standing in the wrong line and inadvertently 'signed up' to be a visual artist."[2]

Given these leanings, it is no wonder that Bloom continually doubles back on the various denotations and connotations of objects, and the relationships between image and text. At the far end of "The Rendering,"in front of a large window, there is a vitrine containing an oversize folio of architectural elements open to a page of columns. The window looks out onto a massive wooden column by Robert Venturi, while on the floor, a painted gray line ends in an arrow pointing to one leg of the vitrine, whose contours echo those of both the columns in the book and the one outside the window. It is a perfect example of Bloom's propensity for recursive observations: the artist as a contriver of riddles that often engage the body as well as the mind.

BLOOM WAS BORN 1951 in Los Angeles to a lawyer and an actress, and grew up in Brentwood. At seventeen, she went to

Bennington College, but she remained in Vermont for only a year and a half before dropping out. In 1970, she enrolled in the brand-new California Institute of the Arts, where she was mentored by John Baldessari. "He was a phenomenally generous teacher," Bloom recalls. "You know, how do we know when we call it art? That's what his whole thing was. Look here, look here. It was a philosophical practice. "3 She received her BFA in 1972 and shortly thereafter moved to Amsterdam, where she lived for about twelve years. She went to Berlin on a fellowship in 1985, and stayed there for five years before taking up full-time residence in New York.

Looking back over Bloom's forty-year oeuvre, one sees the ghosts of prior exhibitions that are echoed in "The Rendering." Many of the strategies employed point taxonomically to other installations, such as "As it were ... So to speak," her sweeping remix of the collection of New York's Jewish Museum in 2013. There, Bloom distributed symbolic objects throughout the second floor. Her display, which combined items from the collection with custom-made display cases shaped like household furniture, highlighted the domestic history of the building, which was home to the Warburg family until they donated it to the museum in 1944. A vitrine in the form of a grand piano with a glass top revealed thin silver Torah pointers in place of piano strings; a case resembling a dining table supported twelve ritual glasses, which were doubled in the glass shades fabricated for the chandelier hanging directly above. One section featured sculptures inspired by the Talmud, in which each page presents a central text

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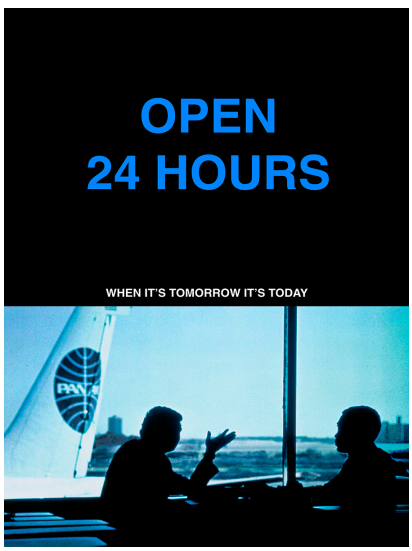
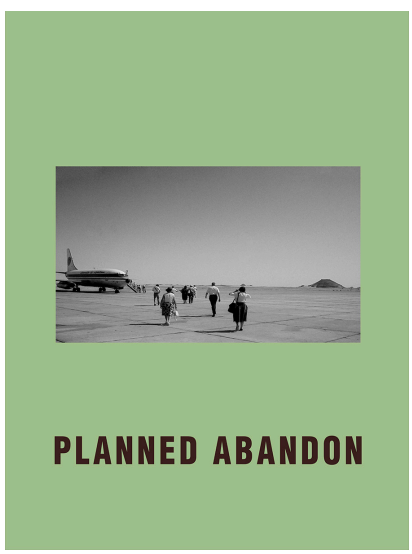
Two views of Bloom's exhibition "The Rendering (HxWxD=)," 2018, at the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Courtesy FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art and David Lewis Gallery, New York. Photos Field Studio.

surrounded by commentary. Bookshelf-vitrines held open books that in tum functioned as display apparatuses for miniature books about books: *Miniature Books: 4,000 Years of Tiny Treasures* by Anne C. Bromer (2007) and *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm* a Tiny Book by Edmond Jabes of (1993). The recess cut into a copy of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) contained a miniature Bible. Like the page of columns atop a columnlike leg of the vitrine situated next to a window showing another column in "The Rendering," the reflexive displays of "As it were ... "reiterate the "look here, look here" ethos that made an impression on Bloom at CalArts.

The large cluster of paintings in "The Rendering" also reflects Bloom's methodology of implying narrative connections by placing images in proximity. The artist has remarked, "I rarely think of or use singular images—I prefer the way meanings and allusions ricochet off each other when images are seen next to one another, so that the reading takes place in time."[4] The sense of time that arises from viewing rectangular, screenlike images placed in sequence is essentially a cinematic strategy—what film theorist Pavle Levi calls "cinema by other means." In his book of that title, Levi defines this as "the practice of positing cinema as a system of relations directly inspired by the workings of the film apparatus, but evoked through the material and technological properties of the originally non-filmic media."[5] Bloom's tendency to aggregate images in this way is also seen in *Framing Wall* (1977-2015), presented in a 2015 exhibition at the Museum of Modem Art in New York, in which she implied an association between her own photograph of a hallway, a series of cropped film stills, and a Vermeer, staging the images in an arrangement that suggested multiple story lines occurring simultaneously; here, Bloom placed viewers in the role of editor, allowing them to choose which "cuts" to make by shifting attention from one image to the next. In typical Bloom fashion, language had a role to play here, too: the word "framing" in the title suggested both restrained and expansive meanings: the literal frame around the matted images, "frame" as in "structure," and the "frame" of cinema, but also "frame" as in "fabricate" or "contrive," implying, by placing the images in proximity and linking them visually and linguistically to film, that a coherent narrative may connect or unify these seemingly disparate pictures.





Top to bottom, *No journalists*, *Open 24 Hours*, and *Planned Abandon*, from the series "Travel Posters," all 1981, digital prints, 30 by 24 inches each. Courtesy David Lewis Gallery.

The artist's reticence to offer firm conclusions—let alone impose explanations—is magnanimous.

Bloom has used the term "visual innuendo" to describe her interest in revealing something to the viewer by intimating rather than showing.[6]

BLOOM HAS OFTEN used appropriated images and text together, as in her "Travel Posters" series (1981), which juxtaposes somewhat typical vistas from travel-office photos with ambiguous, sometimes forbidding phrases (DID YOU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE EURASIAN? reads one; another says simply, NO JOURNALISTS), or her "Fake Film Stills" (1984-2007), digital photographs with added idioms such as IT'S ON THE TIP OF MY TONGUE and THE ENEMY IS AT THE GATE. For Bloom, images and language in combination "act simultaneously as illustrations, fulcrums, references, starting points, captions, extrapolations, and footnotes, to and for each other."[7]

Bloom shares these fundamental strategies with other members of a cohort that is now codified as the Pictures Generation, including such artists as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman. In his influential 1979 essay for *October*, Douglas Crimp emphasized the analytical aspect of these artists' practices: "Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation ... not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification."[8] But a side-by-side comparison of Bloom's early works with Kruger's collaged black-and-white photographs of advertising images-which were often combined with direct addresses such as YOU ARE NOT YOURSELF and YOUR GAZE HITS THE SIDE OF MY FACE—reveals Bloom's practice as less concerned with the explicit cultural and political statements of agitprop than with the sort of nuanced, multivalent readings that cinematic expression make possible. Likewise, where Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" evince a preoccupation with the representation of women and their cultural roles, Bloom's work explores the mechanics of cinema and the perceptual phenomena of vision and memory that influence the creation of narrative itself.

There are several other ways in which Bloom's practice differs from those of other appropriation-minded artists who were working in the 1970s and '80s. The first of these concerns geography: artists of the Pictures Generation were American and mostly based in New York; though Bloom maintained close friendships with figures such as David Salle and Allen Ruppersberg and was respected internationally (she won a prize at the 1988 Venice Biennale and received a Guggenheim Fellowship the same year), her decision to stay in Europe distanced her from her peers and curators.

In a 1986 roundtable, Pictures Generation artists discussed creating work as a critical reaction to ideologies latent in contemporary mass media. Ashley Bickerton said: "Much of the work produced . . . was essentially deconstructive and task-oriented in its spectacular didacticism." Peter Halley elaborated: "I think that a work of art has to address critical issues; the topical political issues of the day, to the extent they exist, are certainly of concern to people as individuals, but in a work of art it is the structural questions behind those topical issues that are important."[9] Bloom pursued values more aligned with her narrative

leanings, namely her interest in the construction and interpretation of relationships between image, object, and text, the cinematic implications of images that evoke the technique of shot and countershot and the play of double and triple entendres. This stance differentiates her from the ideological positioning associated with Pictures Generation artists. Further, she is ardent about aesthetics in a way that goes beyond a coolly cerebral manipulation of found images and "task-oriented" structural issues. "I think I was absent from school the day where they taught me you're not allowed to make things beautiful," Bloom said. "It's like what's the problem? Things can be really rigorous, and really complex, and very beautiful. It doesn't seem to me to be a problem."[10]

WITH SCULPTURES AND installations that directly implicate the body, Bloom's later works seem warmer and more capacious. Frequently, her practice is conceptually and materially connected to the space of the home. She has produced work that takes the form of clothing *(Homage to Frances Rey [a.k.a. Mom]*, 1999, and *Fingerprint Scarf,* 1996), plates *(Seance Plates, 1988)*, glasses *(Champagne Flutes [His/Hers]*, 1996, and jewelry (*Thank You bbbbrrrruuuuuuuuccccceeeeee,* 2010*)*. These works feel more centered on the domestic than even Laurie Simmons's staged photographs "Color Coordinated Interiors" (1982-83), perhaps because Bloom's objects are firmly linked to their intended use. Though one can sense a lively intellect at work in Bloom's systems, they are also layered with affect that is connected to their physicality. Dave Hickey has noted that Bloom's work operates "at the intersection of devotion and admiration, of humility and desire, of loathing and admiration, recognition and romance."[11] Indeed, there is something ardent about her fascination with the lives behind her found images and objects. Intriguing fragments, points o f reference, and allusions are heightened by Bloom's obvious investigatory dedication and precise craftsmanship; the artist's revelation is transmuted into the patron's delight.

In 1995 Bloom fell three stories from her apartment window to the parking lot below. The accident resulted in several shattered bones and a new appreciation for *kintsugi*, the broken-and-repaired Japanese pottery that she had been collecting. At the final stages of her recovery, Bloom photographed, X-rayed, and wrapped pieces of *kintsugi* as gifts, but with a twist. The description of one such work, *Broken (Teapot)*, reads:

> Celadon ceramic teapot, broken and repaired with lacquer and gold, encased in a purpose-built gift box constructed with paper pattern digitally altered to include images of the teapot, sealed with a paper strip printed with an X-ray image of BB's reconstructed vertebrae, which is fastened to the box with two wax seals, each impressed with the image of the sun emerging from behind a cloud and the motto '*In Caligine Lucit*.' [It shines in the dark.] Accompanied by photograph and X-ray, 2001.[12]

The revelatory unfolding of the description epitomizes essential qualities of Bloom's work. Her practice feels fundamentally linked to a deconstructionist literary analysis, which recognizes that meanings shift depending on context and that interpretations are never quite fixed. The artist's reticence to offer firm conclusions—let alone impose explanations—is mag n animous; she invites viewers into the shifting plays of meaning within the work, to investigate alongside her the various connections among its elements. Being in the presence of Bloom's work is less akin to the conventional experience of contemplating art than to entering a text that takes a small part of the known world and shows it anew.

Broken (Round Vase), 2001, broken celadon object repaired with gold, computer-generated paper box, matted and framed X-ray o f the vase backed by wall-mounted lighting. Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo Simon Vogel.

1. Susan Tallman, "Gifts,"in Barbara Bloom, *Gifts*,, Antwerp, Ludion, n.d. (released 2016), p.12.
2. Barbara Bloom, foreword,*A Picture, A Thousand Words,* New York, David Lewis Gallery, 2017, p. 9.
3. Oral history interview with Barbara Bloom, Oct. 18, 2012-Jan.31, 2013,Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, aaa.si.cdu.
4.*John Baldmari/ Barbara Bloom: Between Artists*, New York, A.R.T. Pres April 27, 2011, no page number.
5. Pavlc Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 27.
6. Barbara Bloom, foreword,p. 9.
7. lbid.
8. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in *October* 8, Spring 1979, p. 87.
9.Artists quoted in Peter Nai,'Y, "From Criticism to Complicity," *Flash Art* no.129, Summer 1986, p.149.
10. Oral history interview with Barbara Bloom.
11. Dave Hickey," Barbara Bloom," in *The Collection of Barbara Bloom*, New York, International Center of Photography, 2008, p. 11.
12. *The Collections of Barbara Bloom*, p.187.