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Curator's Voice: Barbara Bloom on Barbara Bloom

by Kris Wilton
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"In some ways the exhibition began with the notion of the book," says Barbara Bloom, whose retrospective "The Collections of Barbara Bloom" is currently on view at the International Center for Photography.

Bloom, a conceptual photographer and installation artist often grouped with such contemporaries as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Barbara Kruger (she was also a student of John Baldessari and Robert Irwin), says curators had approached her to do a retrospective for years, but the idea didn't interest her – until she saw the catalog for the 1996 Sotheby's sale of Jackie Onassis's personal effects.

The catalog, which Bloom calls "a crazy, insane, interesting, perverse book where the objects are highlighted as protagonists in some kind of story of a life," prompted her to think about how objects can imply a narrative – and what happens to a person's belongings when she's gone.

When it came time to create her ICP catalog, Bloom conceived of the project as relating to her own estate sale. Most objects in the book are accompanied by texts, written by Susan Tallman, that refer to "BB" in the past tense, as if she were dead. But whereas estate catalogs are divided by object types, Bloom's book is structured according to 11 "collections" – thematic groupings with names such as "Doubles," "Innuendo," and "Broken." All in all, it's a conceptual project grounded in physical objects, testimony to the artist's claim that her practice is more "stuff-based" than those of her conceptualist peers and influences.

At the ICP, Bloom has installed a much smaller selection of the objects, trying to create “a showroom quality” appropriate to the estate-sale theme. There’s a carpet manufactured to replicate the cover of Vladimir Nabokov’s personal copy of *Lolita* (Nabokov is Bloom’s favorite writer), and a collection of works from her 1989 exhibition “The Reign of Narcissism” at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, which she says are “hideously about me”: postage stamps depicting the hospital where she was born, chocolates molded with her profile, and chairs upholstered with fabric showing her horoscope and X-rays of her teeth. From her 2001 show “Broken” comes a collection of cracked Japanese pottery fused together with gold, which Bloom collected and wrote about before her accident and returned to afterward as a way of meditating on brokenness and mending. And under the rubric “Blushing” is a room of hung works obscured with a sheer white curtain – though Bloom stresses that these aren’t works that would make the viewer blush, but rather would themselves blush if viewed, as if “your act of looking has an effect on what you’re looking at, which is of course true.”

Bloom will be signing copies of the book from 6 to 7:30 this Friday, March 28, at the International Center for Photography. The retrospective runs through May 4. ARTINFO recently spoke with the artist about the book, the show, and the stuff that tells her life story.



Barbara, did the 11 subjects in your show present themselves, or did you impose them upon the work?

Well, some objects could easily have been in several collections. Certain objects are in one collection in the book and in another collection in the show. It’s arbitrary to a certain extent.

How do the book and exhibition differ?

The exhibition has far fewer works than the book does, because of space.

Do you think you were more involved in curating, organizing, and installing the show than an artist generally would be for a retrospective?

Absolutely. It’s basically one big installation of mine, so it was a real one-person job. Of course I talked with the curator here, Brian Wallis, and he had some pretty good ideas about some stuff, but he pretty much took it like an installation of my work. Though I don’t know if you can curate your own work. I don’t know quite what curating is.

Well, if it's selecting and arranging works so they speak to one another...

Then what I always do is curate, but I'm not a curator. I'm never interested in singular objects in my work. It's usually something in relationship with something else in relationship with something else and the way those meanings start to ricochet off of one another.

Has installing the show allowed you to understand some of the works differently than you did before?

Probably. In retrospect one always understands aspects of work that one didn't have at the beginning. In a sense the show is an attempt not to pin down but to clarify or verbalize or present subject matters that are of interest to me. So for instance, the first room is called Stand-ins, and stand-ins are carriers of meaning. They stand in for a particular person or body. They're not really portraits; they're the object that is the person when the person's not there.

Like an avatar?

Perhaps. I like the phrase "stand in" because it reminds me of how when Harrison Ford's off the set, there's a person who stands there for him. For example, the dress [see image at left] is an homage to my mother, who was an actress, and the different roles she played are on the buttons. I think of it as an Academy Awards dress.

Was it really her dress?

No, but it's sort of that style of gown.

How do these works come about? Can you tell me about your working process?

You mean what do I do everyday? Different things. It depends. Today I did my taxes for the last three years. I work in my house, and it's kind of a seamless transition in and out of where I live and what I'm writing and what I'm reading and what I'm working on and what I'm cooking for dinner.

I think I have a practice that, although I don't sit and write every day, is like a writer's. In the way that I mull things over for a long time and do a lot of reading and research which is not specifically related but somehow is.

Can you tell me about creating the color chart?

This [see book cover at left] is from a series called "Naming." Naming is about the relationship between an image and a name. This is a color chart like one that famous designers like Ralph Lauren or Martha Stewart might have. I love the names that are given to colors, because they're so abstract and odd and beautiful and poetic. My husband is a writer, and he helped me with some of them. Each one sort of throws the subject matter of "naming" into a different place. So "Same" and "Envy" are almost the same color. "Richter" is Richter. "Orange" is orange. "Dear Diary" is something which opens something up in a particular way. "19th Century" is so 19th Century. And then "Blush" is blush, but "November 2nd, 1997, 2:15 pm, elevator: 10013" is clearly something so very personal and specific that no one else would possibly know what it means, except maybe me and who knows who.

Does it actually refer to something?

Yes.