

# Afterall

## 'The Collections of Barbara Bloom' at the Martin Gropius Bau Museum

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For Barbara Bloom, the mere idea of a retrospective is reprehensible. Her installations have always been time- and site-specific, and she refuses to have her work showcased in any manner suggestive of coherence or chronology.

As what, then, should her recent exhibition, 'The Collections of Barbara Bloom' (2008), be regarded? Not as a retrospective, that is understood, but neither was it a collection of strange, or not so strange, artefacts connected by logical, overriding interest.

Instead, the artist attributes to the objects a life of their own – beyond their physical qualities and functionality. The mysterious, disquieting or aesthetic agency of things and the question of how we relate to them inspired a recent show on the top floor of the Martin Gropius Bau museum in Berlin.

This show has a story.

When Barbara Bloom saw the auction catalogue for the estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, she was fascinated. The meticulous depiction of the objects, their separate existence continuing beyond the death of their owner, their elegant appearance and their stories inspired Bloom to create an artist's book on objects and images that were similarly of interest to her. The project was begun ten years ago, and the book has now found its spatial form: initially at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York and recently, enhanced and in larger format, in Berlin.

Bloom staged her own death in several of the show's installations, which might be understood as a reference to the Jackie O. auction catalogue. The mixed-media installation *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989), for example, included a tombstone with a portrait of the artist and the epitaph: 'She traveled the world to seek beauty'.

The inscription summarises her work perfectly. Her exhibition dealt with the beauty, fragility and transience of objects. Bloom calls this the re-combination of 'residual memories'. She has collected this residue on her many travels, has fabricated objects herself and has combined them anew, putting together all the little pictures, containers, chairs, images on music sheets, knick-knacks and books with incredible precision to form richly associative installations, collages and complex combinations of images and text.

The objects that Barbara Bloom has used are not inanimate. They developed a life of their own and tell stories; they relate to one another and take part in actions. The exhibition functioned as a commentary on what could be called a 'culture of material things'. It played games with aesthetic principles and the order of things, and thus also with the power of things. The spaces were divided up into the categories 'Doubles', 'Broken', 'Songs', 'Charms', 'Naming', 'Blushing', 'Belief', 'Reading In', 'Stand Ins', 'Framing' and 'Innuendo', and referred to certain aspects of the objects' character as material things, the effects that things have and, most importantly, the question of how we make sense of the things around us.

The 'Doubles' or 'Twins' section, for example, explored the mysteries of mimicry and the unexpected pairing of objects through their spatial arrangement. Glass cases presented folded, unfolded and, like an insect specimen, pinned-down digital photographs whose symmetrical halves seemed like the two wings of a butterfly. Two very different busts were juxtaposed in order to present them as a pair.

In 'Blushing', Bloom raised the disquieting issue of whether objects might be ashamed before our gaze, assuming their self-consciousness. She hung a veil in front of nude photographs and portraits, forcing the viewer to literally lift the veil, to consciously take a decision to look and to be aware of his or her gaze. This was typical of the exhibition, which forced its viewers to take action in order to see what was being shown. One of the most interesting artefacts

was a tiny Japanese nude drawn on a grain of rice that was visible only under a magnifying glass. Bloom developed a specific apparatus of things, of relations of observation and of presentation techniques that also involved the viewer. As much as she cares for the material nature of her objects, Bloom was interested in their arrangement, in the understanding we have of them and of the devices we use to perceive them. She created situations in which the viewer and the objects viewed must establish the relationship they have to one another.



Barbara Bloom, *Nabokov's Commemorative Stamps*, 1999

This also means that visitors of the exhibition engage with the countless references and allusions that Barbara Bloom creates for her objects, and with them. Vladimir Nabokov is honoured in nearly every room. A glass cabinet in the room 'Doubles' with images of blue butterflies pinned to the back points us to the writer, who was a passionate butterfly collector. Two nearby glass cabinets – one showing small images of the cover of Nabokov's *Lolita* from 1955, and a second containing only pins and no objects – playfully take the visitor into a world of continuing chains of reference and sign systems that entangle the viewer in an associative mesh of ideas.

'Innuendo' is dedicated to these indications and representations, this imbrication of the present with the absent. The objects all allow something that is absent to be experienced. Footprints on a carpet, lipstick on a champagne glass, scaled-down photocopies of images, shimmering watermarks in paper – the physical objects almost seem to be hiding behind their function as signs. Bloom works with extreme precision and care where the materials of her objects are concerned: fragile porcelain, transparent glass and diaphanous fabrics place the objects somewhere between having a presence and being absent, being signified and themselves signifying.

By presenting her collection in this way, Bloom demonstrates what Nietzsche described in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) as the 'readjustment' of things. Giving a thing a name, a function and a position within the system of order readjusts the object and generates a series of interpretations and allocations of meaning. Thus, if a charcoal-coloured field in a colour scheme is given the name 'Richter', the delimiting power of language creates the illusion that we have grasped the abstract phenomenon, that we can give it a purpose and make it a part of a narrative.

The fact that this will remain a construct, a readjustment – even while a mysterious, rebellious or aesthetic sense may be inherent to the objects – is illustrated in the 'Naming' section by a black globe on which the image of the world has been outlined in white chalk, constantly at risk of being smudged or blown off.

Most likely, it is no coincidence that Bloom has also produced the book-cover designs for works by nouveau roman writers such as Claude Simon and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Their novels – like her installations – move away from the large narratives centring on subjects towards a literary form in which small, everyday objects are given an excessive meaning and are the true drivers of the plot. In a similar way, by subtly dissolving the supposed hierarchy between acting, conscious subjects and passive, inanimate things in her works, Barbara Bloom opens the possibility for new and different meanings and stories.