

ARTFORUM

Barbara Bloom The Jewish Museum

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This past spring, Barbara Bloom reimagined the installation of five galleries at the Jewish Museum in New York, crafting a suave, literary exhibition that set objects from the institution's holdings in a dialogue with her own words and site-specific assemblages. No stranger to working with museum collections, Bloom is well known for her permanent intervention at Vienna's Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK) from 1994, for which she placed the institution's display of Thonet bentwood chairs behind a translucent wall, illuminating the objects from behind so they are visible only as shadows. At the Jewish Museum, Bloom subtly echoed containers--ceremonial vessels from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries made for inhaling sweet spices--were similarly backlit, producing decorative shadows on scrims. As Bloom explained in one of several lengthy texts superimposed on book-like spreads in the show, each of these containers was intended as a surrogate for a notable figure, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Jimi Hendrix, all synesthetes.

In total, the exhibition featured 276 objects arranged by Bloom into thirteen sleek tableaux, many of which referred to the building's previous function as the residence of the prominent German-Jewish couple Felix and Frieda Warburg. In the gallery that once served as the Warburgs' dining room, for instance, Bloom set a table with twelve historical drinking glasses from different countries; these were intended as stand-ins for figures--some nameless--quoted in a wall text. Above the table hung a chandelier, a replica of a light fixture in a 1920 painting by Isidor Kaufmann, which was displayed nearby. Bloom also re-created a mirror from the painting and situated it across the room. The installation sparked a dialogue across time, one partly inspired by the Talmud, particularly the Mishnah and its commentary of rabbinical debates from various centuries, laid out on the page as if all the writers were speaking in the same room at the same time.

In an adjacent gallery, Bloom examined gift giving through the figure of Sigmund Freud. A chaise longue and an arm-chair-shaped vitrine held a silver cigar box given to Freud by a patient in 1903, a first-century intaglio Roman ring, and a clay model of a couch from 800-700 BC--a donation to the museum and a nod to Freud's vast museum-like collection of antiquities and totems. The texts accompanying these striking pieces were some of the most interesting in the show--quotes, portions of letters, images of Freud, and Bloom's whip-smart interpretive writings serving as an enlightening investigation into a single person and his own, knotty object relations.

Like Fred Wilson and, more recently Trisha Donnelly, Bloom knows how to draw complexity and critical ambiguity from a museum collection. Yet her strongest suit may be her own writing and research: When I asked the museum for a copy of all of the texts in the show, I was handed a fifty-page, single-spaced printout--quotes, transcriptions, captions, and, best of all, Bloom's exacting prose. It's a thrilling document that one hopes she'll publish, allowing this lyrical show to live on.