



## The Presence of Presents Derzeit vs Barbara Bloom

by Rachel Blatt  
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Barbara Bloom is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She was born in Los Angeles in 1951 and studied under John Baldessari at the California Institute of the Arts - becoming (beside Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine et al.) one of the most compelling conceptual operators of the pictures generation. For many years, she also lived and worked in Amsterdam and Berlin. DERZEIT met Bloom at her studio, which is also her apartment, to talk about absences, counterfeits, Marilyn Monroe, and her most recent show, *Present*, which travels in the fall to the Luttgenmeijer Gallery in Berlin and the Galerie Gise.

*DERZEIT: Let's talk about your show Present, which just came down at the Tracy Williams gallery in New York. The show is all about presents, real and imagined. Why are you interested in gifts?*

I love gifts. I love gift-wrapping. I love boxes. I love paper. I love gift wrap paper. The paper is sort of the skin of the gift. There are also, of course, cultural histories of gift-giving and gift-wrapping. In Japan, for instance, you can give the same gift to someone, but its value is dependent upon how it gets wrapped. You can go to one shop and have a very complicated wrapping for the same box of candy or you can go to a train station and buy the same thing in an ordinary box—you are paying for the wrapping.

*So are you interested in how gifts are presented and exchanged?*

No. I am much more interested in the relationship between the act of giving a gift to someone and the act of making an art object. When I first started on this project, I didn't quite know what I wanted to do. But it became clear to me that it wasn't so much about the commodity exchange or the gift exchange, but much more that when people write about it, they don't really write about this complicated place—the object as an ambassador. There was no attention paid to the similarities and the differences between the act of giving a gift and the act of art making.

*How do you compare the two?*

There is a spectrum of understanding between the giver and the recipient and I'm interested in the complexities of that spectrum. On one end, you know someone really, really well. All of the references, all of the subtleties - it's a very intimate way of making or giving an object to someone. That object is the carrier of our shared knowledge or experience. On the other end of the spectrum is the making of an art object. You don't know the audience and you can't count on them knowing anything about your intentions. And because I can't count on their receptivity, everything has to be contained. All of the references, all of the triggers need to be contained in the object itself. I can't count on anything on the outside.

*How does your work in Present demonstrate this spectrum?*

I wanted to make an exhibition in which it ran the gamut, starting with a very personal object, for instance, a gift to my daughter that we don't even get to see. We just see the box. It's very intimate and very much about a gift to someone close to me. On the other end, there are these offerings to some dead person, so anonymous. Then there is an object given from a famous person to another famous person, and an object from me given to an artist who I can count on everyone knowing. In the spectrum, the viewers find themselves in different relationships to the person who has given the object and the recipient of the object. How much do I know and how much does the other person know, all that kind of reciprocal information?





*I was wondering if there had been a you're welcome.*

Oh, no! That would be nice. »Think nothin' of it Barbara.« It's shown on a rough cast of my own hand. I hope that one day he'll see this and maybe he'll appreciate it. I don't know him. I've met him once.

*The rough cast, why is that significant?*

It's a little bit rough, kind of Bruesque. I don't know. People assume that I'm very very particular about what materials are used and in fact, I am and I'm not. For instance, there's a table in the show, it's just an IKEA table. I was going to have it made and then I went to IKEA looking around and thought, »That table is just as good as any one that we're going to build. I'm going to get it and we're going to trick it out.« I really enjoy the tricking out of ordinary things. If I could get everything from IKEA, I probably would. I find it very funny. If it's anonymous enough that you wouldn't know what it was, then it works for me. The couch from the Freud couch piece is also IKEA, but it doesn't matter, it's been completely changed. It's not a real couch anyway. Nobody is ever going to lay on it.

*What else do you trick out?*

I taught my daughter that you don't have to buy Paul Frank. You know those Paul Frank Julius T-shirts? You don't buy those, because they cost \$40. I'd say, knockoffs! She was four years old and we'd go online and she'd find the image that she wanted. We'd re-size it and put it on a transfer and iron it onto the shirt. And you can't tell the difference. I told her it won't last as long as the real one, but then you can just make another one.

*What other projects, big or small, of yours can we look forward to?*

You know, I like being a neophyte and not knowing what I'm doing. For instance, designing my book, I didn't know how to do it, I just said that I did. »Oh I can use Quark! Sure.« I had to learn how to do it in order to do it. I love that. So I'd like to play some more with narrative. Maybe a Pinter play. I've done it before, but I would like to work on some theater sets, opera sets. Stuff where the objects have a life in time, where they don't just sit still. I'll have to take a deep breath, get an inkling of what I want to do, and then sort of »aaaaaaargh« and will myself into a new arena.

*In the introduction to your book, The Collections of Barbara Bloom, Dave Hickey writes that after having looked at your work, one can't help but look through it to the world beyond, to recapture one's own Barbara-Bloom-Moment. Since you are probably the authority on these, what is a Barbara-Bloom-Moment? Have you had one recently?*

First of all, that's like one of the nicest things anyone could ever say about you or your work. That if you have the experience of it you start to see things in a different way. My husband sent me a really beautiful photograph the other day. He was in City Hall Park and first he sent me a text saying »I'm in City Hall Park and there's a blind man with a sign that says ›Is anyone wearing blue hats?‹« Then he took a picture and sent it to me. There was the blind guy on the bench, with the sign. But the way he took the photograph you couldn't actually see what was on the sign. I guess that's like a Barbara Bloom moment, but it's not really mine. You would hope that people wouldn't label it a »Barbara Bloom moment,« but that they would just label it »something interesting.« You would hope that they've enveloped a way of looking that's no longer mine, it's theirs. And that's the gift, I guess.