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Bloom's 'Floating World' of Fluid, Intrusive Detail

by Susan Kandel
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The theatrical nature of Barbara Bloom's work makes it a love-it-or-hate-it proposition. You can't possibly be neutral, for example, about a dramatically underlit installation that features a solid red floor the color of Chinese lacquer, upon which are placed hundreds of masks of Asian faces and over which is positioned an "Orientalesque" bridge that itself holds a wooden vitrine containing six grains of rice, each of which has an erotic Japanese miniature reproduced on it.

"Pictures From the Floating World," at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, is at once carelessly extravagant and fetishistic about the tiniest detail, weirdly offensive in its cultural politics and so vague as to evade a position entirely. It is perverse in a beguiling way, and admirable if only for its bravado.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Bloom's new work recalls her 1989 installation, "The Reign of Narcissism," a 19th century-style parlor stuffed full of upholstered chairs, columns, busts, moldings and mirrors, all featuring the artist's silhouette, likeness or signature. Beyond the period setting, "Narcissism's" self-conscious evocation of the artist-as-maestro sets us up for this installation's visually sumptuous, highly particularized exploration of vanity.

Indeed, the title of the piece has several meanings. In medieval Japan, the "Floating World" was a Buddhist expression referring to transitory life; later, it referred to the pleasure quarters of Edo, the courtesan's realm, where theatricality was an everyday affair.

Bloom herself characterizes this installation as being about scale: "the very large and the very small; the vast population and the intimate act; the bombastic lead-up to a fleeting punch line." And certainly ego, over-inflated or diminished by experience, has everything to do with scale.

This becomes clear in two fabric screens silk-screened with erotic imagery taken from ukiyo-e prints. In one, Bloom prints the images so faintly that you have to peer closely--humiliatingly so--to make out what is happening. In the other, the miniature figure of the artist intrudes upon the action, a spy in the house of love.

This is the effect of Bloom's work as a whole. The artist is always there, watching, making sure that you are doing the same.