

MOMIUS

The Atmospheric Pressure in “Reading” Barbara Bloom

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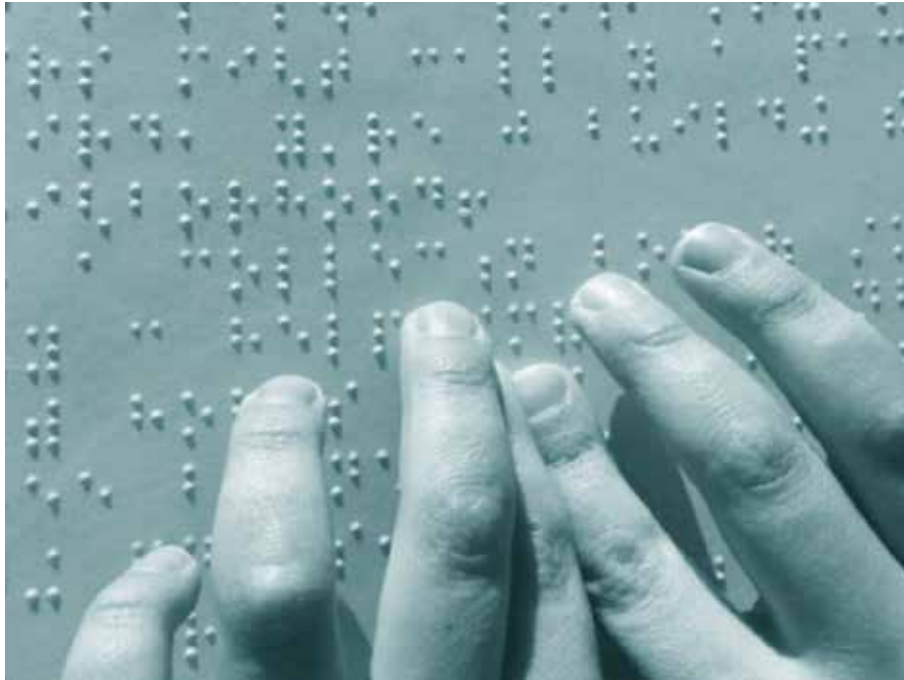


Image © the artist, courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne & Capitain Petzel, Berlin.

Is there a color more indexical of melancholy than blue-grey? It is the color of fog, the color of nature suffused with an intelligence; a desire to veil the world.

It's this environmental drama that Barbara Bloom's *The Weather* keys into – albeit in an eccentric way, less a gush than a subversive creep. The show centers on eight blue-grey carpets hovering just above the floor of Capitain Petzel, a stately gallery housed in a glass-walled East German edifice, with a taste for idiosyncratic artists. Each carpet is embossed with a literary passage in braille, wherein weather is spun into human life. So, while Gabriel Garcia Marquez's “sky crumbled into a set of destructive storms ...,” Andre Gide's “weather has been of crystalline clearness for the last two months, [filling] one with a kind of vague excitement.” Under Bloom's direction, these luminous extracts become subjects of vision and disappearance. And Bloom, recognizing the latent sentimentality of her topic, has made provisions against the saccharine.

With her 1990 book and exhibition *The Reign of Narcissism*, Bloom became a hybrid psychoanalyst and autobiographer – in other works, she has been a collector, mender, and arranger of objects. Here, while braille calls up the contingency of sight, the carpet also crosses the rectangular format of the written page with the fuzzy surfaces that literally underlie domestic life. This transposition emits a swarm of synapses. The carpet's coziness seems kin with the romantic warmth of the printed page. At the same time, a narrative seems to linger, in which language takes form in a child's mind as infant knees and fingers and dragged over scratching wool. Before disappearing into this hermeneutic tangle, it's worth pausing on a much simpler possibility: it could be that Bloom simply enjoys the absurd frisson created when vividness and blindness rendezvous, with the carpet becoming nothing more than a foil for this encounter.

To recall Bloom's show is to become absorbed in quizzical intricacies. When she weaves herself into the work, her exhibition is less self-reflexive than affably self-aware, in the way of a cinematic auteur given to cameo appearances. A single carpet features a cryptic record of Bloom's own birth, by way of the weather report from Los Angeles. And so it comes to pass that James Joyce's snow "falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end," is put on equal ground with "Temperature 66 F/Growing Degree Days 16 (Base 50)/Humidity 73%."

With this gesture towards autobiography, Bloom echoes an embarrassing conviction: each one of us, in the deep of our self-awareness, believes that we are secretly the center of things. At the same time, there is an air of self-protection to Bloom's dissolving individuality into meteorological data. Perhaps it's the sordid relishing of one's auto-biographical details being fended-off. Perhaps this is Bloom's way of reflecting the conflicted human subject in the midst of neoliberalism, where nothing is needed more urgently than selflessness, but where nothing is reproduced more constantly than self-interest.

In the face of this paradox, Bloom's approach is not to moralize against narcissism, but to stage puzzling and irreconcilable encounters between individuals and atmosphere, and between subjective decisions and categorizing schemes. One stygian-blue carpet, for instance, stands out from the otherwise pale hues, and is punctuated by a lonely red dot. Entitled *There was no moon, (Du Maurier)* (2016), the braille in this carpet comes from Daphne Du Maurier, who writes, "there was no moon. The Sky above our heads was inky black. But the sky on the horizon was not dark at all. It was shot with crimson, like a splash of blood. And the ashes blew towards us with the salt wind from the sea." The red dot becomes an analogue for that "shot" of "crimson, like a splash of blood." In being an analogue, the dot also becomes a humble parable for how language always, and only, informs through abstraction.

This reduction of the individual to scientific datum, in combination with Bloom's relishing of sublime atmospherics, has me nagged by a question: in what context might such a cool, tempered rumination on perception and literature seem relevant? Three days ago, I awoke to a 3-D video in my Facebook feed, in which a man wandered the rubble of Aleppo. As in Bloom's show, everything in this hell of ruins was grey and blue. Here, too, the weather itself seemed to have disappeared – the psychological calm necessary to mediate upon it replaced by a crushing lacunae of spirit.

It isn't Bloom's job to reconcile this chasm between rarefied cultural experience and horror. But there is a way in which her work structurally depends on the influx of reverberations from the outside world. Towards this point, Davey Hickey has written that, for critics, "the task of inferring just what the experience of Barbara Bloom's art might be like resides in our ability to tease out similitudes from other sources – about its resonance with other acts than hers." Hickey's description is precise, although the reflection I've just described is likely not what he had in mind. This, though, is the difficult thing about resonances – you can't control the location of their appearance.

Upstairs from Bloom's carpets, a suite of visual impossibilities are presented in small, black-and-white photographs. We see, amongst other things, a hazy UFO, and an egg hovering between a woman's splayed fingers. Over each image, again in braille, ruminations on seeing have been reproduced from Roland Barthes, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, and Dorothy L. Sayers. And each passage is repeated below the image in regular type. These works thread the viewer's attention through philosophies of vision, quotidian fascinations, and, by alluding to blindness, the material contingencies of vision. To what end, I'm not exactly sure. When an artist keeps you moving through multiple gestures of translation and abstraction, in this way, the effect can be of a perpetual sleight-of-hand that masks an emptiness of meaning.

But there is a difference between a vacuum and a plenum. And Bloom's exhibition, conjuring a cloak-and-dagger atmosphere by way of coded language and misty color, is decisively the latter. One of these paper works shows a suited man covering the eyes of another, who points blindly at a newspaper. Grainy and deeply shadowed, the image reads: "Always distrust a man who looks you in the eye. He wants to prevent you from seeing something. Look for it." It is a counter-intuitive thought. And Bloom's is a counter-intuitive show. In the dreamiest way, it captures a climate reigned over by suspicion.