

# The New York Times

## A Portrait of the Artist, in Bits and Pieces

by Ken Johnson  
February 8, 2008



Back in 1989, when SoHo was still a booming contemporary-art center, Barbara Bloom produced a memorably trenchant installation called “The Reign of Narcissism” at Jay Gorney Modern Art on Greene Street. It was in the form of a neo-Classical period room in an imaginary museum dedicated to one Barbara Bloom. There were faux-antique marble busts portraying Ms. Bloom; fine teacups watermarked with her image; a 38-volume set of “The Complete Works of Barbara Bloom”; a tombstone with a carved epitaph that said, “She traveled the world to seek beauty” and many more artifacts testifying to the transcendent qualities of a great artist.

Coming at a time when monsters of ambition like Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer and Jeff Koons roamed the artscape, Ms. Bloom’s construction nicely skewered the cult of genius, the triumph of moneyed taste and the vanity of the excessively privileged.

It’s too bad the International Center of Photography did not recreate “The Reign of Narcissism” for its disappointing survey of Ms. Bloom’s career. It would have been wonderfully apposite for today’s Chelsea-centered art world.

Instead of the walk-in theatrical installations for which Ms. Bloom is best known, “The Collections of Barbara Bloom” displays pieces from different phases of her career as discrete works of sculpture, assemblage, collage, photography and design. Despite its ironic, overarching concept of the artist as an eccentric, narcissistic collector and curator of her own history, the show is confusingly fragmentary. It feels like a selection of outtakes for the big show that would have done full justice to Ms. Bloom’s mercurial talent.

Not that the exhibition is devoid of resonant objects. A headless mannequin in a slinky white dress with buttons down one side bearing photographs of this artist’s mother, a Hollywood actress in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s, is a marvel of autobiographical condensation. The framed photograph of a chicken viewing itself in a mirror placed in a corner next to an actual mirror is funny and philosophically provocative. The sheets of fake postage stamps bearing

reproductions of artworks by Ed Ruscha, Allan McCollum and Harold Edgerton suggest that Ms. Bloom has the soul of a great art director.

Many pieces, however, are not so interesting on their own. Butterfly cases with small, found printed items pinned inside like specimens reveal too little about Ms. Bloom's interest in the novelist and lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov. Some items are irritatingly clever – a Braille edition of Playboy magazine as a found object, for example. A set of unremarkable photographs hanging behind sheer curtains that you have to draw aside to see is a dull play on photography and voyeurism.

One set of works from 2001, called "Broken," would have been more effective sequestered in its own more intimate space. Each work is composed of a piece of Japanese ceramic ware that was repaired with gold lacquer, an X-ray of that object, a found photograph of a performing acrobat in a frame with shattered glazing, and a beautiful Japanese-style paper container for the ceramic piece. What the wall label does not explain is that Ms. Bloom created the series after falling out of a window and breaking many bones. In the overly busy context of the show, that poignant, personal dimension is lost.

What is also likely to escape viewers is the exhibition's overall concept. According to the catalog essay by Dave Hickey, Ms. Bloom's vision for the show was inspired by the auction catalog for the estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. So a semi-fictional, subtly mocking overlay projects the artist as an exquisitely tasteful and erudite collector. Sections with enigmatic titles like "Innuendo," "Blushing," "Charms" and "Stand Ins" add to the idea, but in ways more often mystifying than revealing.

The show's catalog, which mimics an auction catalog, realizes the concept more clearly. Along with numbered images of everything in the exhibition, it includes pictures of many objects not in the show – eye-test charts from around the world that Ms. Bloom has collected, for example. It is annotated by the art historian Susan Tallman in an entertaining, novelistic style that subtly ridicules the idea of the great lady artist-aesthete and satirizes the commodification of art and artists.

As installed in the center's insufficiently luxurious and architecturally amorphous galleries, however, the idea of the high-end estate sale and the implied socio-cultural critique lose all traction. Still, there is the prevailing effect of an intriguing, divided sensibility, one that combines effete, ultra-refined romanticism and tart, gimlet-eyed skepticism.

Ms. Bloom, who was born in 1951, belongs to a generation of artists, including Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who shared a mission to expose the subliminal ideologies of modern visual culture. They were ambivalent about both high and low art, but they produced works of impressive visual glamour. That Ms. Bloom, unlike those artists, did not forge a singular, brandable style, may be to her credit. But when her oeuvre is displayed in the scattershot way it is here, the core purpose underlying her insouciant diversity is regrettably obscured. Sometimes you wish an artist could have a do-over.