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Possessed: Softly Treading Between Taste and Art

by David Colman
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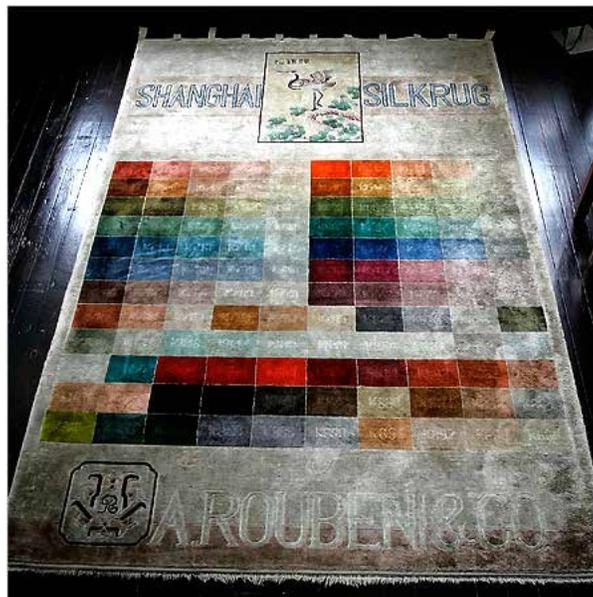
Sensational single-owner auctions, in which the contents of Princess Diana's closet, Bill Blass's apartment or Ellen Barkin's jewelry cases are put on the block, inspire no end of covetousness.

Some people, though, just like to browse, to soak up the little inferences all that stuff suggests. For them, the object of desire is the sumptuously produced catalog, with glossy pages of relics coyly hinting at how this life was lived.

"The objects tell the story," Barbara Bloom said last week, sitting in her sunny TriBeCa loft. Ms. Bloom, the installation artist who has long tinkered with the visual and social aesthetic we call taste, recalled being fascinated by the lavish catalog for the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis auction at Sotheby's in 1996.

So fascinated, in fact, that she wanted to create a show just to have a catalog coyly hinting that the show might be, in fact, a posthumous auction of her effects. So she did, at the International Center of Photography. "The Collections of Barbara Bloom" is an assemblage of her artwork and her shopping fixations.

But if the show is a bit hard to read (which is which?), the lavish catalog is a pleasure. With texts for each plate slyly sending up our fascination with personality and personalia, it is as engrossing as any new fiction.



FLOOR SHOW, Barbara Bloom, installation artist, was drawn to a color-sample rug.
Credit Ruby Washington/The New York Times

"I know I shouldn't be more interested in the book, but I am," she said cheerily. "Show, schmo."

What makes the book, "The Collections of Barbara Bloom" (ICP/Steidl), entertaining is not just its clever, opulent auction-house look and tone, but also the sense it conveys of Ms. Bloom's passion for plurality.

That is, if Ms. Bloom were a compulsive shopper, her favorite question might be, "How many colors does it come in?" Even the book's cover is a tasteful collection of color squares, which she renamed according to her whims (Sobriquet, G Minor, Nietzsche, Monopoly).

And if one is never enough, it is the rare single object that Ms. Bloom can wax poetic over. But she does have one, just underfoot: a rug manufactured as a kind of carpet color chart. In the 1980s, when she was living in Berlin, she spotted the carpet in a pile at the department store KaDeWe and bought it for next to nothing.

"I knew if I didn't get it, I would think about it forever," she said. "I basically told them that, look, no one else is ever going to buy this."

Photo

Barbara Bloom Credit Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Made in Hong Kong, the carpet bears a resemblance to her own works, which walk a tightrope between tasteful décor and conceptual pique.

"I like that it's useful, that you can walk on it, which is not the usual behavior you have toward art," Ms. Bloom said. It has even inspired her to make carpets herself. "I like the cheeky way that it flips the idea of craft over. And I like that it turns my dealers into carpet dealers."

Though the carpet is plush underfoot, one hesitates to step onto it, a dichotomy Ms. Bloom lives for. "It's complicated," she said. "If you're cursed with good taste, then you're not capable of making the ugly thing. But I am capable of making the beautiful thing that folds in on itself, or undermines itself. For me, the knob for 'difficult' goes together with the knob for 'beauty' – if one goes up, so does the other."

The line between taste and art is one many artists are uncomfortable walking, preferring less (or perhaps more) charged topics. But for Ms. Bloom, they are interwoven. She does not even have a studio, working just a few feet from her living room (and carpet).

"I don't know how to separate that out," she said. "I don't differentiate working from buying a present for someone – the same kind of intelligence goes into it."

Who said shopping isn't an art?