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She Makes Objects Speak, and They Won't Stop Arguing

by Karen Rosenberg
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Entering Barbara Bloom's show at the Jewish Museum you must pass between pairs of painted eyes that peer out from masklike apertures in the wall. As you stand before these veiled portraits you will also hear argumentative voices: recordings from "Annie Hall," "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and other television and movie sources.

They may traffic in some cultural stereotypes (or what Ms. Bloom has called "the argumentative nature of Judaism"), but these face-offs and disputes also gird you for the spirited back and forth of "As it were ... So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue With Barbara Bloom," at the Jewish Museum.

Ms. Bloom, invited to organize a show from elements of the museum's collection, has turned to the Talmud for inspiration. Her exhibition is modeled on its heavily annotated pages, which surround ancient texts with rabbinical commentaries added over centuries.

Weaving together real and fictional narratives, historical and literary sources, Ms. Bloom creates new and often ambiguous contexts for ceremonial and decorative objects like Torah pointers, Kiddush cups and spice containers. Somehow she manages to quote Nietzsche, Freud, Leonard Cohen, Joan Didion, the Bible and various Wikipedia entries, all without losing her own probing, skeptical voice.

"The objects are placeholders for thoughts, and when they are situated in proximity to one another, meanings can reverberate and ricochet off of each other," Ms. Bloom writes in a preamble to the show. To some extent she is talking about things that happen naturally in all exhibitions (or at least, all good shows). But she is especially attuned to these vibrations between objects, drawing them out and spinning them into debates that are as least as fascinating as the objects themselves.

They would be even more fascinating if Ms. Bloom had not done this sort of thing with other collections (including her own, in a 2008 exhibition at the International Center of Photography). By now she is an accomplished rescuer of forgotten objects, known for reviving old paintings, vintage photographs and the odd flea-market find with clever and critical installations.

But even if her methods are old hat to the art world, they're sure to have an impact on a wider audience. And they are certainly a departure for the Jewish Museum, which is just starting to rethink its permanent-collection strategy under its director, Claudia Gould. (Ms. Bloom's show sets the stage for a reinstallation of "Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey," the long-term exhibition on the third and fourth floors.)

Although it's not a solo show in the usual sense, "As it Were ..." may also remind you of unconventional museum exhibitions by some of Ms. Bloom's peers: Sherrie Levine, in an edited quasi-retrospective at the Whitney, and Rosemarie Trockel, in her inclusive wunderkammer at the New Museum. The idea, in all of these shows, is that the artist should be free to operate behind the scenes, to shirk the limelight and slip into the role of collector or curator or exhibition designer. You might even say that Ms. Bloom anticipated the trend in her best-known work, a 1989 installation called "The Reign of Narcissism" that seemed to parody egomaniacal artists.



A piano with Torah pointers in place of strings is used to recall the unlikely friendship between Gershwin and Schoenberg.
Credit: Christine McMonagle

In this case she worked closely with Susan L. Braunstein, a curator at the Jewish Museum, and Ken Saylor, of the design firm Saylor & Sirola. The show unfolds as a series of streamlined mini-installations, with objects grouped in mint-green display cases that are shaped like pianos, chaises, cupboards and other furnishings and fixtures. They are meant to evoke the residential history of these rooms, which were once home to the Warburg family.

In a gallery formerly known as the Warburgs' music room, for instance, more than 100 Torah pointers make up the strings on a piano. They are accompanied by sheet music – scores by Gershwin and Schoenberg – and by a riveting account of a tennis match between the two composers (written by a third, Albert Sendrey). There is a lot going on here: a friendly rivalry, a link between music and sports, a quasi-Surrealist displacement of the piano strings for the pointers, and ultimately a kind of touch-based synergy that holds everything together.

Sometimes the texts are so powerful (or just so bizarre) that they distract you from the objects, like when Ms. Bloom imagines a card game among Nefertiti, Emile Zola, Amy Winehouse and Jesus, writing dialogue to accompany a display of game tokens and related paraphernalia that's mesmerizing in its own right. (It includes a playing card made from a desecrated Torah scroll and a game board based on the Dreyfus affair.)

From a visual standpoint her installations sometimes edge close to set design or merchandising: in a ring of amulets, for instance, or a neat patchwork quilt of marriage and divorce documents. But sometimes, just when you think you've sized up one of Ms. Bloom's displays, it suddenly opens up on you.

A library-inspired niche that's seemingly twee and predictable, with Borges references and miniature Bibles nestled in hollow books, abruptly detours into contemporary search-engine science: Chris Mann and Sepand Ansari's 010011.net, an interactive Web-based project described by Mr. Mann as "an anti Google" and "a celebration of the question you are trying to learn how to ask."

These Talmudic connections between different time periods and intellectual circles also elevate a group of small desk accessories once owned by Freud and given as gifts to friends and patients by him or his daughter, Anna, and later regifted to the museum. Tucked into nooks in a couch these items and related letters and photographs make up what Ms. Bloom calls "an analysis of a gift cycle," one that pits Freud's theories against the post-Freudian discourse so popular with Ms. Bloom's generation of artists.

What Ms. Bloom does so well here, and has done elsewhere, is to expand and extrapolate even as she winnows down the collection. She leaves us with a museum that's bigger, in a sense, than the one she started with.

"As it were... So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue With Barbara Bloom" continues through Aug. 4 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street; (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.