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Art in Review: Barbara Bloom 'Broken'

by Ken Johnson
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Six years ago Barbara Bloom, an installation artist of exquisite intelligence and taste, fell out of a third-story window, breaking many major bones in her body. With this exhibition she offers a wry yet touching meditation on fragility, risk and healing in art and life.

There is nothing explicitly autobiographical about the show. It consists of a series of similar mini-installations, each revolving around a piece of fine Japanese pottery once broken and now repaired by a traditional method using gold lacquer as glue. The golden scar is traditionally viewed as adding to the beauty and character of a treasured vessel; here, read metaphorically, it suggests that the broken heart or wounded soul mended with love and care may have a beauty and character greater than if it had never been hurt.

Ms. Bloom has surrounded each of the restored ceramics with emblematic objects and pictures, including a lovely, intricately constructed and patterned traditional paper container for each (a symbol of protection); a photograph and an X-ray of each; and, on the wall under broken glass, a poster-size reproduction of an old photograph of an acrobat juggling crockery (the risk of being fully alive).

These adroitly designed tableaux slyly parody stylish store displays, recalling Ms. Bloom's early participation in the commodity critique movement of the 1980's. It is hard to say what the effect would be if we did not know the autobiographical background. As it is, the transformation of personal trauma into art is deeply moving.