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Barbara Bloom- 'Pictures from the Floating World'

by Holland Cotter

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For this remarkable installation, a wooden Japanese-style bridge fills the front room of the dimly lighted gallery, arching over a wide patch of red-carpeted floor on which plaster casts of male and female heads seem to float. A vitrine at the center of the bridge holds grains of rice, each bearing a radically reduced image from an erotic wood block print.

The prints in question are ukiyo-e, or floating world pictures, first produced in Japan in the 17th century for a pleasure-seeking urban bourgeoisie. Ms. Bloom approaches their voyeuristic, demimonde elegance with cool wit: copulating figures enlarged and printed on a standing screen have their genitals both highlighted and obscured by black dots, and to see the rice grains magnified one must press his nose to the vitrine's glass.

Ms. Bloom notes that the term "floating world" is derived from medieval Buddhism and refers to the material world, which, because it is fleeting, is inevitably a source of suffering. With this reading, the heads drifting under the bridge make sense and Ms. Bloom's extravagant exercise in Japonisme becomes a beguiling metaphor for transiency and desire.