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Barbara Bloom at The Jewish Museum

by Liz Moy
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“As it were ... So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue with Barbara Bloom” at the Jewish Museum is an exhibition which reflects the artist’s interest in the fallacies of language. The title speaks to the intricacies of communication—each phrase that was chosen intrinsically contains doubt. “As it were” is in the subjunctive tense and “So to speak” is a condensed version of the modifying phrase “in a manner of speaking.” These common expressions, which call little attention to themselves or their oddness, suggest that what you are about to hear or have just heard is not exactly what it appears to be. This fascination with the indelible nuances of language manifests in the array of objects Bloom culls from the museum’s permanent collection. Her curatorial choices in grouping the objects enhance their delicateness and curious nature. Vestiges of past lives, the objects are juxtaposed with selected texts from rabbinical debates and contemporary conversations, to point to the occurring misdirection and misplacement of value caused by semiotic subtleties. One portion of the show focuses on synesthesia, as possessed by popular figures such as Geoffrey Rush, Wassily Kandinsky, Marilyn Monroe, Duke Ellington, Nikola Tesla, and Mozart. Delicate silver spice containers embody this mingling of sensory information. Another section is solely devoted to t

the idea of gift giving, and the social, ethical, and political implications that come with participating in such customary exchanges. Focusing on Freud's analysis of a gift cycle, we see how the implied generosity of giving gifts can be problematic. One example is a silver cigar box that Freud received from his patient Anna. Inscribed on the top corner of the box is the word "Christmas," indicating the bestowal of a gift based on a word that is fundamentally English and Christian. The German "Weihnachten," Jewish "Chanukah," or the more neutral "Holidays" would have all been more culturally appropriate.



Adjacently shown is a signet ring, which Freud gave to his daughter. Despite joyously ushering her into his inner circle, the gifting of this ring also reinforced the pressure bestowed upon her to protect the famed psychoanalyst's legacy. The exhibition almost boasts its own intellectualism with a selection of texts, including Jonathan Spence's *Memory Palace of Mateo Ricci*, Daniel Dennet's *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*. But Bloom can be comical as well, as shown by the plaques of "Laws Regarding Charity" written by Moses in the twelfth century and Bloomberg recently in New York City. While the former pays attention to the important roles of will and guilt, the latter remains purely bureaucratic, discussing taxes, itemization, and fair market value. Bloom creates a dialogue across time and space, which tests the viewer's ability to infer a whole from all of the gathered information. This discourse is appropriately represented by the pairs of painted eyes highlighted in slots on the walls connecting each room. Their penetrative gazes assume an unspoken reciprocity that effectively sums up the main concerns of this show.

Images: "As it were...So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue with Barbara Bloom at The Jewish Museum," 2013. Exhibition view. Photos by David Heald.