

THE NEW YORKER

Barbara Bloom

June 1, 2017

Each of the literary-minded conceptualist's distilled, sculptural vignettes incorporates a photograph—or, rather, begins with one. Inspired by the meandering, speculative structure of Roberto Bolaño's story "Labyrinth" (published, posthumously, in 2012), in which the author imagined the relationships of a group of French intellectuals—based on a vintage snapshot of them together in a café—Bloom likewise extrapolates from fragmentary evidence. But she does so spatially, with cool precision, in a series of chic, set-like arrangements. She embeds a picture of Vera Nabokov typing as her husband watches, another of Joan Crawford reading at a cluttered vanity, and portraits of Christine and Léa Papin, French sisters who worked together as maids and murdered their employer's wife and daughter, in 1933. Using mirrors, furniture, architectural details, and a gray-scale palette that echo the black-and-white photographs, Bloom "frames" her sources. The effect is ominously serene, part flight of fancy and part forensics.