



Barbara Bloom The Gaze

by Peter Nagy
August 31, 2000

These days, when art that resembles the World Wrestling Federation gets the lion's share of platitudes, Barbara Bloom's work may seem positively alien— or certainly from another, gentler era. Subtlety, elegance and patient intelligence have always been her hallmarks. Yet Bloom's combination of pathos and wit, cloaked in a killer sense of design, makes for an art of assured relevance that creeps up on you, if you allow it some time.

Southampton's Parrish Art Museum, the very lap of gentility, is a fitting setting for Bloom's installation titled *The Gaze*. Made in 1986, the piece has appeared in Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Toronto and San Francisco, but it couldn't possibly have looked better in any of those spots than it does here. Sheer, amply pleated white draperies hang along the front gallery's walls, with the artist's framed photographs shrouded behind. The luxurious yet simple meters of fabric emphasize the building's neoclassical architecture and its gracefully arched paned-glass ceiling.

Of course, we're supposed to peek behind these curtains and decipher the deconstruction of power, control, voyeurism and seduction in Bloom's images of museums, mirrors, Orientalia and odalisques. But I, for one, preferred to linger by purely sculptural (almost macho) steel rail that encloses the center of the gallery at shin level, and forces viewers to hug the drapery along the walls. The installation underscores the artist's intentions succinctly: Her work is about the margins of our culture, not its center stage.

A second gallery, sans curtains, has a suite of darkly lit photographs burdened by heavy black mattes. These are images of tubular passageways, nighttime windows and aquarium portholes, all lit from within to create silhouettes circled by halos. Together they present a strange doppelganger of the other gallery's pictures: Although unveiled, they yield their contents even more grudgingly.