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New exhibitions at MoMA worth visiting

by Tony Schwab

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Two small new exhibits opened at the Museum of Modern Arts this past week, both compelling enough to justify a trip uptown. One of them, "Framing Wall" by the conceptual artist Barbara Bloom, takes up only one wall. The other is Ernie Gehr's "Carnival of Shadows," which is a multiscreen video installation.

"Framing Wall" uses one wall, on which are thirteen pictures that are unrelated at first glance. Several are prints of ancient Greek art, while others include Richard Nixon meeting Chairman Mao Zedong, a shot from Jean Luc Godard's "Contempt," a close up of many different parts of a Vermeer painting and several photos of families.

Bloom forces viewers to become detectives when trying to make sense of her grouping choices. At first only a few similarities exist between the photos. Some have the same subject, such as the ones of Greek art, while others are shot from the same angle or in the same environment. Each similarity between works exists to make a statement. As the works are analyzed for longer, more and more connections become clear, as do certain overall themes.

The photos of greek art produce different effects because of the context. One shows only a statue itself, making the subject's beauty clear. Another shows a man casually looking at a statue in a museum, emphasizing the ability of art to serve as relaxing entertainment. A third shows a woman in anguish surrounded by giant Greek pillars. Here the overall theme is tragedy.

The clash between old and new cultures becomes another undertone in the collection. One photo shows a family watching deers in the wild while the one next to it shows a similar family staring at fish in an enclosed aquarium. Nixon's meeting with Mao is juxtaposed with an ancient Chinese drawing.

Bloom's work can be challenging at first, but this is part of what makes it absorbing. As you search for themes, your mind becomes more and more aware of the works' details.

Also on view is Ernie Gehr's "Carnival of Shadows." Gehr, a filmmaker, deals with silhouettes. Silhouettes are a type of art popular before film, in which paper cut outs were run through a screen to create the illusion of moving figures. Gehr has taken five originals from France, digitized them and enlarged them.

This is somewhat interesting, but unfortunately Gehr's work is outdone by the very impressive and original silhouettes that are also included in the exhibit. The silhouettes are reminiscent of Tim Burton in the way that a dark aesthetic is made somewhat comic. The cartoonish aspect is further emphasized in Gehr's animation, "Cinderella." This work was inspired by Walt Disney's "Cinderella," from 1922. In Gehr's reproduction, he recalls the aspects of old-fashioned animation that made cartoons jumpy and fun. Gehr should be praised for bringing to light an art form that seems to have all but died out.