

ARTFORUM

Barbara Bloom
David Lewis

by Rachel Churner
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Barbara Bloom, *Vanity*, 2017, vanity mirror and lighting, mirrored vanity table, photo-etched vanity mirror, digital ink-jet print, movie scripts. Installation view. Photo: Max Yawney.

A few days after seeing Barbara Bloom's exhibition "A Picture, a Thousand Words"—a collection of seven sculptures that tenderly activate her familiar techniques of framing and doubling, of looking and being looked at—I unexpectedly found myself in a sunbaked, middle-of-nowhere town for the burial of my grandmother. It just so happened, of course, that the cool gray of her coffin was the same as that of Bloom's walls. And it just so happened that I had spent much of the night before staring at old photos, fantasizing about why she had been seated on that porch, on his knee, in those heels, and searching as much for traces of the woman I loved as for traces of myself in her image.

I mention this personal experience because it gets to the crux of Bloom's show, which was about memory and

memorialization, and the ways in which reflection, be it narcissistic or fictitious, determines how we remember. Each of the works (all 2017) stemmed from a photograph—an image of Joan Crawford in her dressing room, of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton at a bar, of Véra Nabokov seated at a typewriter, of James Joyce reading with a magnifying glass. In the sculptures, Bloom artfully arranges details plucked from the photos (the patterned wallpaper of Mrs. and Mr. V. N. or the stacked movie scripts in *Vanity*, for example) or distills the interpersonal dynamics at play (as with the flashlights that extend the gaze of the subjects in *Beacons* [Dick and Liz]), allowing the viewer be fascinated twice over, as Barthes would say, once by the image and again by its surroundings. But despite the artist's claim that she is by nature suspicious of autobiographical references, the multiple mirrors and nested reflections of these pieces insist upon precisely that: an insertion of the self into the work. Standing before the mirrored table of *Vanity* or the framed mirrors of *Sisters in Crime, I*—the viewer—am forever interrupting the scene, marring it with my figure, my distractions, my anxieties.

Reflections themselves often structure the photographs Bloom chose to begin with; Vladimir Nabokov is seen looking at his wife from a mirror hung against that pattered wallpaper, and Sophia Loren dances in a hotel room with a partner (Anthony Perkins) who is visible only in the mirror beside her. In Eve Arnold's 1959 image of Crawford reading at her vanity, the camera approaches the star obliquely, almost from behind, so that her face appears in the mirror before her. Crawford's right hand, which rests gently against her forehead, is magnified in the cosmetic mirror on the table. Bloom sets off a tumble of further correlations by placing the photo on a mirror-top table before a lighted wall mirror, and adding a round magnifying mirror with a detail of Crawford's hand etched into the glass.

The devices and materials at work in this exhibition, Bloom's first in New York since a 2013 show at the Jewish Museum, are a well-honed part of her repertoire. The compassion and discernment of these new sculptures, however, transcend the subjects being pictured. With delicate rigor, Bloom compellingly set the scene for a remembrance of much more.