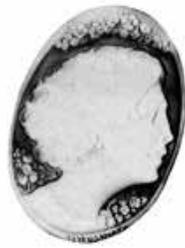


ARTFORUM

Barbara Bloom and Her Art of Entertainment

by David Rimanelli
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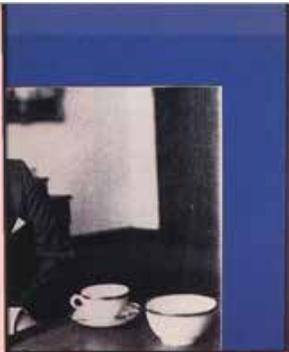
BARBARA BLOOM AND HER

Art of Entertaining

A scene in soft focus: Luncheon served on the lawn in late green spring. Barbara serves but more importantly presides over what will be deliberately and subtly transformed into an event. Sulkiness is not permitted. Bad puns are also excluded because they are tautological and because they allude to something other than the central purpose which can only be sensed if you pay attention. Luncheon becomes a pretext for focusing attention in a certain way. . . . At the luncheon itself, the care of attention focused on each object and its use far outweighs the importance of the objects as objects. Still, a soft focus to the overall scene; lights not too bright. We would not want to be boorishly alert, not too eager, given that some of our rarest perceptions come disguised as mere musings.

--David Salle, "The Big Sleep"





David Rimanelli

Maybe it's appropriate to begin with a picnic, a luncheon on the grass. Maybe we could go even further with the fantasy scenario sketched by David Salle in his early and very suggestive appraisal of Barbara Bloom, and picture Bloom and her privileged guests attired in pristine-white and pale-pastel linens, amid the precious crystal decanters, Biedermeier furnishings, and neoclassical bas-reliefs so familiar to us from Bloom's own installations, in which an aura of nostalgic reverie for a bygone era of high bourgeois indolence seems to prevail. Except it's not nostalgia. Rather, it's a clever masquerade.

In the last few years Bloom has executed a series of installations that are at once subdued and theatrical, lush and restrained, in their presentation of meticulously arranged home furnishings and accessories, from the diaphanous white curtains of *The Gaze*, 1985, to the immaculate glass vitrines of *Lost and Found*, 1986, to the richly upholstered George III armchairs poised serenely beneath framed paintings in her 1988 *The Seven Deadly Sins*. But by this point, perhaps, one grows impatient with all this perceptual *délicatesse*. Is all this prissy upper-class for real? Well, yes and no. Throughout history and cultures, decor has indexed social status and worldly power, and Bloom does not shirk these implications in her work. Yet she uses the site of the elegantly furnished room not simply to set a certain rarefied tone, but to explore the blind spot between datum and belief, between the truth *and* the lies of appearances, gradually rendering her placid surfaces unsettling, even uncomfortable. And in her most recent installation, *The Reign of Narcissism*, 1989, the glacial, mortuary neoclassicism of the environment becomes almost creepy.

At the same time, the genteel atmospherics of Bloom's installations serve to trip up our expectations and biases with respect to "concept art." For in an era when much art--particularly the super-slick and media-saturated "new" conceptualisms of the last several years -- seems utterly indebted to the strategies of rapid-fire technological communication, what could be more perverse than to surprise the eye, not with spectacle, but with

an assemblage of minute details so understatedly controlled? As Salle stresses, it isn't the objects themselves that are important, but the quality of attention bestowed on them.

Indeed, Bloom's manifest interest in decor derives from her background in conceptual art; from her interest in examining the rhetorics and ideologies of presentation as devices that structure meaning. Her expansive, elaborate installations are like conceptualist interior decoration. (For Bloom, shopping -- finding a great buy -- is an integral part of the creative process.) And when Barbara throws a party, she knows better than to do all the talking herself. Her art, while maintaining a qualified pedagogical edge, is never didactic. Rather, the artist provides all the materials for her viewers' -- her guests' -- own imaginative re-creations (which are pastimes, recreations). But by asking the viewer to link ideas and images, Bloom entices us into tangled nets of meaning that may not be immediately apparent from the physical characteristics of the works. Again, it's not the objects per se that matter.

In extending the metaphor of Bloom as "ideal hostess, Salle noted his initial feeling that the "work seemed obliquely to be about the problem of 'other people.' How to let other people in

This page, above left: Barbara Bloom, *The Waiting Room: Power People* (detail), 1975-89, eight matted and framed black and white photographs. Below: Barbara Bloom, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust*, 1988, mixed media construction, installation view. Opposite, top: Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism: Portrait Cameo; Bloom* (detail), 1989, mixed media. Bottom: Barbara Bloom, *The Gaze*, 1985, mixed media, installation view at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



on some kind of fantasy reality using structures of 'set out' terms. Set out like silverware."¹ What's interesting about Salle's account is the delicate conceptual vagaries reflected in its tone and syntax. His use of the oxymoronic phrase "fantasy reality," for example, uneasily aligns itself with our own initial reactions to Bloom's environments and the sort of spooky invitation they extended to "other people." For it is an implicit system of social relations that she delimits, between art and audience, host and guest. Can I come in? Am I sensitive enough to perceive the crucial details? Do I really want to? If, as hostess, Bloom freely plays with ideas about levels of access (as she's done in even earlier work, such as the 1975-89 *The Waiting Room: Power People*, in which eight black and white photographs from an article in British *Vogue* that were cropped by Bloom offer us only truncated glimpses of handsomely attired "power people" sharing the photographic space with equally handsome decor and appointments), a hint of repellent snobbery intrudes. And while one suspects it's a deliberate "effect," one can never be happily, carelessly sure. Invidious distinctions are the nasty concomitants of perfect good manners, and constitute Bloom's first veiled aggression on the viewer of her work: the first twist of this perfect hostess' altogether



unexpected knife. But by that time, it may be too late. We've already been seduced; by the time we've "come inside" we have to acknowledge our own complicity in accepting the invitation in the first place.

These carefully plotted schemas are the variable syntax of the visible, a kind of text in which we can read Bloom's intentions and our own. But they are also disguises under which other meanings, perhaps threatening, are surreptitiously introduced. The home is not always what it seems -- a bastion of comfort, familiarity, safety -- and its demure facades may not offer any clues as to what goes on inside. (Just as Bloom's 1979 series of "Fake Book Covers" offers tantalizing illustrations bearing at best a frustratingly ambiguous relationship to the books' presumed contents.)

In German the word *heimlich* connotes the home, the familiar, the native, but also that which remains hidden, whereas *unheimlich* means the unhomey or uncanny. But as Freud stresses, there is a relation of ambiguity between the two words, a sliding of one into the other, as *unheimlich* betokens the revelation of *heimlich* secrets.² Playing on the ambivalences of *heimlich/unheimlich* and host/guest, Bloom invokes a constellation of interrelated dualities -- native/alien, self/other, living/dead, etc. In the process, the hostess herself becomes rather uncanny as she takes on the role of backstage manipulator of the symbolically charged *mise en scène*. But rather than rigorously sifting through antitheses, Bloom encourages us to dwell on the uncertain, permeable membrane that divides such polarities, allowing them to intermingle and become confused.³

Bloom has an abiding interest in forms of perception -- one hesitates to say "knowledge" -- that are liminal yet excessive. In a relatively early and modest piece, *Homage to Jean Seberg*, 1981, for example, Bloom implies a parapsychology of repetition, which Freud describes as the most common domain of the uncanny. With the sparest of references to fashion and interior decoration -- a butterfly chair and a black-and-white pullover shirt like the one Seberg wore in Jean-Luc Godard's 1960 film *Breathless* -- Bloom conjures the time period of the late '50s and early '60s. In that film, Seberg plays an American girl who falls in love with a Parisian hood and is gradually drawn into his netherworld of crime. But by the end, the film has raised all kinds of questions about who is actually the corrupter and who the victim in this relationship. A few years later, Seberg, who had moderate left leanings, became the object of an FBI smear campaign because of her personal connections with members of the Black Panthers. Hounded and defamed, she eventually committed suicide. The newspaper that lies on the chair in Bloom's piece is a copy of the *International Herald Tribune* that reported Seberg's death, but Bloom has substituted for its photograph a still from *Breathless* in which the heroine,

Above: Barbara Bloom, *Lost and Found* (detail), 1986, mixed media, installation view showing "Absence/Presence" section. Opposite, top: Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism: Tombstone; Bloom* (detail), 1989, mixed media. Bottom: Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism*, 1989, mixed media, installation view in "A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May-August 1989.



attired in the same black-and-white shirt, hawks copies of the *International Herald Tribune* in the streets of Paris . . . Bloom creates a time warp, conflating reality and fiction as she melds the temporal universes of Godard's film and Seberg's unhappy life. Repetition closes the melancholy circle that begins with Godard's glamorous yet fated heroine, progresses through Seberg's own life, and finally returns to the realm of privileged fiction -- here, Bloom's elegiac monument.

Homage to Jean Seberg adumbrates the idea of the double, as it pairs knowledge of Seberg's life with the persistent illusion suggested by her celluloid ghost. Doublings of fiction and reality or life and death are familiar leitmotifs in Bloom's work as a whole; in *Lost and Found*, for example, Bloom filled two symmetrically organized rooms with apparently identical sets of furniture, objects, and photographs. Everything is so assiduously controlled that you might not even notice the key distinctions -- between real and fake, original and copy, literal and metaphoric, his and hers. Bloom even went so far as to have two sets of identical twins, one male and one female, serving drinks at the opening.

For admirers of the tempered indulgences of her *Lost and Found*, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and *Esprit de l'Escalier*, 1988 (which was, with its white-on-white lightboxes, elegantly framed photographs, séance table with plates, and mysteriously airborne hat forms, virtually a parody of *Architectural Digest*-style minimalist luxury), the calculated excesses of Bloom's recent *The Reign of Narcissism*, 1989, may come as a shock. For here doubling gives way to a multiplicative hypertrophy, as tokens of Bloom's image or identity appear throughout -- in silhouettes, cameos, photographs, and battered portrait busts; or abstractly, as signatures and horoscopes. The doubling and redoubling of Bloom's image -- even down to its appearance on every single gold wrapper on the chocolates in an ornate candy box -- mimics the primal state of narcissism, of absolute self-love, but soon the exhausting repetition takes on an unmistakably morbid character, like that of a memento mori, unmistakably acknowledged in Bloom's inclusion of three proleptic tombstones, one of which is engraved with the vaguely "artistic"

epitaph "She traveled the world to seek beauty." This kind of self-memorialization, both macabre and snide, is a direct assault on the kind of "delicate sensibility" or "sensitive nature" that Bloom ostensibly cultivated in much of her earlier work. Ultimately, viewing *The Reign of Narcissism* is rather like being frozen in a nauseatingly pastel Wedgwood tureen decorated with glum didactic scenes of vanitas.

The attack on a certain kind of sensitivity, one that appreciates the "finer things," the felicitous trappings of the leisured class insulated from the harsher realities of life, doubles back on Bloom's own works just as it undermines audience expectations: a twist of the knife that is also a self-inflicted wound, a possible critique of art audiences and artmakers alike -- and perhaps even a critique of a critique that posits her art in the terms of hostessing, with its problematic echoes of a certain kind of sex-role stereotyping (the hostess who twists the knife may well be fed up by her assignment to the kitchen). As a student at the California Institute of the Arts, Bloom was profoundly influenced by teachers such as Robert Irwin and Michael Asher, whose ideological deconstructions of architectural space hover in the background of her own work. So just as *The Reign of Narcissism* works to defeat certain easy assumptions and expectations with respect to Bloom's previous output, so too is it an attack on "canonization" and "museumification," the conscription of fluid artistic ideas and practices to a congealed "historical" role. It's no surprise that Bloom, ever sensitive to the ironies of context, chose *The Reign of Narcissism* as her contribution to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's "A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation," a show that implicitly purported to be a definitive history of conceptually derived art of the '80s.

The disparate fragments that comprise the whole of *The Reign*



of Narcissism all refer to a fiction of "Barbara Bloom" that may not be at all like Barbara Bloom. Like silhouettes, the evidence of these fragments gives only a very partial account of a likeness, let alone a history or biography. Throughout this and some other works, Bloom plays on the doubling of "Barbara Bloom"/Barbara Bloom. And perhaps, finally, that's the point; the "privileged space of the personal estate tells us everything we think we want to know, but it also makes us wonder about what it is precisely we want to know, and to what ends. An insidious oddness persists: the unseen artist plays so many conflicting roles (for her? for us?) that it becomes almost impossible to know her in the end. Once again, like the perfect (and uncanny) hostess, Bloom calls upon her guests to play the game *What's wrong with this picture?*, to piece together the telling fragments into a unified whole. But like the shattered portrait of "Barbara Bloom" in *The Reign of Narcissism*, the fragments will never finally cohere. □

David Rimaneli is a writer who lives in New York. He contributes regularly to *Artforum*.

1. David Salle, "The Big Sleep," *Stichting de Appel Bulletin*, September 1977.
2. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 1919, in *Studies in Parapsychology*, New York: Collier Books, 1963, p. 30.
3. For a detailed, cogent analysis of such "permeable membranes," see J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1985, pp. 217-53.

Above: **Barbara Bloom, *Homage to Jean Seberg*, 1981**, mixed media, 138 x 60 x 62". Left: **Barbara Bloom, *Modernist Confession*, 1987-89**, mixed media, installation view.

