

HYPERALLERGIC

The Art Object as Institutional Critique

The artists in *Décor* urge viewers to question the creator's role in the management and presentation of art.

by Michael Valinsky
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Installation view of *Décor*: Barbara Bloom, Andrea Fraser, Louise Lawler, April 28–July 15, 2018 at MOCA Pacific Design Center (all images courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photos by Zak Kelley)

LOS ANGELES – With *Décor* at the MOCA Pacific Design Center, curator Rebecca Matalon brings together three artists who have been central to the development of institutional critique, Barbara Bloom, Andrea Fraser, and Louise Lawler. Beginning in the 1980s, these artists have spent their careers examining the role of the art institution in the relationship between artworks and viewers.

Centered on Bloom's installation, *The Reign of Narcissism* (1988–89) – an ersatz neoclassical interior dedicated to a fictional version of the artist – the exhibition considers the intersection of interior decorating and museum displays. Assuming administrator-like roles, the artists urge viewers to question the creator's role in the management and presentation of art.

Contributing three videos to the exhibition, Andrea Fraser re-poses a question that shook up the art world in the 1980s: what type of viewer does the museum produce? In her 1989 video series *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, Fraser takes on the invented persona of Jane Castleton, a docent of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Touring through the museum's collection, Fraser provides descriptions of the exhibited artworks that are often absurd or completely unrelated to the object she stands before. She lavishes exaggerated praise on items she encounters, demonstrating the disjunctions between speech and image.

Fraser's script draws from diverse sources and addresses the museum's establishment and biographical information about donors and integrating various quotes from scholars across all humanities disciplines. For example, she reads a quote from *The Museum Fund, A Living Museum: Philadelphia's Opportunity for Leadership in the Field of Art*, stating that the Municipal Art Gallery:

[...] gives an opportunity for enjoying the highest privileges of wealth and leisure to all those people who have cultivated tastes but not the means of gratifying them.

Fraser endows her character with authority and credence by adopting the language of art historians and administrators. In appropriating this language, she transmits inspirational messages about the museum.

No longer a contemporary study of the structures of language within the art administration community, *Museum Highlights* has become a historical document that captures a moment in art history before the internet became an integral force in the democratization of art discourse (despite the rising cost of art and widening gap between art stars and working artists). Fraser's work was received by a coterie of intellectual thinkers and artists who recognized the urgency of the questions she posed.

Fraser's videos are juxtaposed with Louise Lawler's photographs of artworks in situ, which were seminal to 1980s appropriation art. The photographs included in the show home in on the details of an object's installation in the institution. In "Them" (1986-1987), two ancient sculptures rest in the corner of a blue room. Stripped of context that establishes them as untouchable and timeless masterpieces – apparently gathering dust in a corner – they come across as valueless pieces of discarded stone. In another work, "Pleasure More" (1997), the artist photographs a recreation of Andy Warhol's installation of floating silver balloons, *Silver Clouds* (1966), in a New York gallery. Without reading the placard, viewers only see balloons, not the value attached to a work by an iconic 20th century artist.

Lawler's photographs comment on the way that context informs our understanding of an artwork's value. In *Museum Highlights*, Fraser's erroneous and misguided tour suggests that value is also established by the individuals who develop the language of art administration. In another video, *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001), the artist reacts to an audio guide at the Guggenheim Bilbao by expressing sexual desire for the architecture. The video captures her cheekily rubbing herself onto the surface of a wall, lifting her dress, and listening with a delighted smile to the recording. In this case, the museum itself gains value through the ways in which the visitor responds to the official narrative of its context and genesis; the value, however, is questionable, as Fraser herself defines the terms of this valuation through deep sarcasm and critique.

Barbara Bloom similarly tackles the question of how cultural systems shape our perception of art, and our role as viewers, with *The Reign of Narcissism*. The octagonal room on the gallery's upper level features crown moldings of the artist's profile, 30 leather-bound books marked *BB's Collected Works*, three potential tombstone designs, and personalized upholstery. Bloom interrogates the art world's emphasis on authorship and identity by creating a microcosm in which she is both the author and the subject. "My fascination is with the relationships between objects and images – and the meaning implicit in their placement and combination," she has said. With *The Reign of Narcissism*, value transfers from objects to identities – specifically the created identity "Barbara Bloom," which acquires meaning and value by association with neoclassical furnishings and their preservation in an art institution.



In conversation with one another, Bloom, Fraser, and Lawler offer new and illuminating ways of conceiving the creation of meaning and value. *Décor* is a superb exploration of the relationship between objects and the meaning and value we assign to them on a daily basis. More specifically, it's an invitation to consider the role of art professionals – including administrators, professors, curators, designers, architects, and artists – in providing a language to discuss art in context. Ultimately, the artists aim to denaturalize this language, calling into question art-world conventions and providing us with alternative lenses for viewing and experiencing art.

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