

# Los Angeles Times

## Footbridge to a New Dimension

Barbara Bloom's installation 'Pictures From the Floating World' plies a seductive path.

by Kristine McKenna

December 10, 1995

Artist David Salle once described his colleague Barbara Bloom as "the perfect hostess." Surprisingly enough, Bloom concedes that Salle's characterization is on the money.

"Visual graciousness and trying to make people feel comfortable are central to the notion of femininity we were all raised with, and I use those things in my work," the New York-based artist says in a recent phone interview. "I've always believed that a beautiful surface seduces the viewer into involving himself with the disturbing things that may be less obvious but are also present in the pieces."

There's certainly nothing remotely coarse or vulgar on the surface of Bloom's art, which operates like a Venus fly-trap, and can be experienced in an installation that goes on view this weekend at the Shoshona Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica.

The piece, titled "Pictures From the Floating World," looks at a glance like an opera set but on examination proves to be much more. The floor in a dimly lit room has been colored Chinese red, and scattered about the floor are hundreds of small pairs of plaster castings of male and female Asian faces. Spanning the room is an Oriental bridge, at the apex of which is a glass-topped vitrine supporting six magnifying lenses trained on six grains of rice imprinted with photographic reproductions of Japanese erotica.

"I once did a piece called 'The Gaze' that dealt with voyeurism--you had to lift a curtain to see a series of images, and it was like lifting up a petticoat--but this is my first piece that deals directly with eroticism," the 44-year-old artist says. "Ultimately, however, 'The Floating World' is like all my work in that it's about different dimensions of looking. I'm fascinated by the subject, from the most abstracted theories about the nature of perception, to blindness, to whether or not visual information can prove the existence of something."

Looking is but one of the themes explored in the artist's works, which also deal with the perversity of exacting taste and the tyranny of perfection, the fetishism of collecting and the comforting constraint of symmetry.

"I tend to set things up symmetrically and have an incredible drive to create order," confesses Bloom, who fashions her installations largely from objects she has had fabricated.

For her 1989 work "The Reign of Narcissism" (acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art for its permanent collection), Bloom designed and oversaw the execution of chocolates, chairs, dishes, cameos, silhouetted portraits, mirrors, books, statuary and tombstones bearing her image. A work from 1988, "Esprit de l'Escalier" (which won that year's Aperto Prize at the Venice Biennale), involved a series of rooms with displays of materials relating to UFOs and paranormal experience as well as Braille text on the subject of seeing; the final room was a blue chamber, empty but for several hats that appeared to be levitating.

"I'm like a detective in my approach to narrative," says Bloom, who has also produced five books and a short film and worked in theater. "I'm interested in traces of things, and the work has always been about absence, about something or someone that's not there. This, too, has to do with the selectivity of vision, and the impossibility of seeing everything at once," she adds. "You have to choose where you look, and in making that choice you eliminate entire worlds."

Bloom, born and raised in West L.A., recalls that “my two sisters and I had a relatively cultured upbringing in that my parents’ friends collected art, and my family supported my decision to become an artist--which was a choice I made at a very young age.”

Upon graduating from high school in 1968, Bloom briefly attended Bennington College in Vermont before enrolling at CalArts the year it opened, in 1970.

“John Baldessari was important to me while I was there in that he was incredibly supportive,” says Bloom, who came of age during the heyday of Conceptualism but rejected the arid didacticism typical of the style. “It wasn’t until years later that I realized what a huge influence John had been on me in terms of my capacity to grant myself as much time as I needed to figure out what my work was to be.”

Bloom graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1972. She moved to Amsterdam the following year and remained there for 12 years.

“Staying away from New York until I’d sorted out what I wanted to do was crucial to my development as an artist,” says Bloom, who moved again in 1985, to Berlin, before settling in Manhattan in 1990. “When you’re 23, you don’t know what you’re doing, and I didn’t want to be pressured into having to know, so it was great to be in Amsterdam--not to mention the fact that you can get a grant there to do anything.

“During the years I was finding my voice as an artist, Robert Irwin was important for me, as were James Lee Byars, Marcel Broodthaers and Meret Oppenheim,” says Bloom, who began regularly exhibiting her work in the United States and abroad shortly after settling in Holland. “And like most artists of this century, I owe much to [Marcel] Duchamp. There’s no way I could’ve made ‘The Floating World’ had Duchamp not made ‘Etant Donne,’ which is an incredibly powerful work about voyeurism, eroticism and desire.”

(“Etant Donne,” a tableau of a nude woman sprawled in the grass and holding a lamp aloft, is only visible through a peephole in a wooden door.)

“Just as it took a while to discover what my sensibility was, I also work slowly and only do one large thing every few years,” says Bloom, whose previous subjects have included museology, twinning, the Titanic and space junk. “A piece begins with lots of research, then I start pulling elements together and trying things out. The most difficult part is deciding which of the many roads that open out from an idea I’m going to take--it takes me a long time to do that.”

At the moment, Bloom is developing a piece revolving around a traditional Japanese technique for repairing broken things--a methodology that also serves as an exquisite metaphor for an accident she recently suffered. In May she fell from the third-story window of her Manhattan studio, a fall that resulted in multiple broken bones, several surgeries and two months in the hospital.

“The accident made me much more patient than I ever imagined I could be--but then, I had no choice,” says Bloom, who still spends much of her time in physical therapy and must maintain a rigorous regime of daily exercises.

“I don’t think the accident happened for some divine purpose, but coincidentally or not, I’ve always been interested in broken objects and have always used breakable materials like glass and porcelain in my work,” she says. “When the Japanese mend broken objects they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold, because they believe that when something’s suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful. This idea is central to the piece I’ll do next.”

Beyond that, Bloom is still toying, as she has been for years, with the notion of creating an artwork that blushes.

“Blushing fascinates me because it reveals an awareness of being looked at and a desire to hide something--both of which are absolutely central to my work.”