The prints, plates, and paperworks from Barbara Bloom’s _Esprit de l’escalier_ (Spirit of the staircase, 1988)—originally made for an installation at Hallwalls in Buffalo last spring and shown this summer at the Venice Biennale—found a perfect forum in this tiny storefront gallery. (The title of the installation is an idiomatic expression meaning “a witty remark which is thought of too late.” It refers to the inevitable staircase one is descending when the realization comes of exactly what one should have said.) Seen with copious sunshine streaming through the windows, the work reeked of a refined esthetic sensibility—photographic images aloof in lots of white space and simple but elegant frames, as well as texts from pedigreed thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, and Robert Musil. Two beautifully printed books accompanied the installation and served as irresistible souvenirs of a delectable experience. But Bloom ambitiously opened the objects to skeptical scrutiny, engaging viewers in an exceptionally active reading of the work.

Can a picture be read? In the “Works for the Blind” series, 1985, shown in the front room of the gallery, braille texts perforate small black and white offset photos, which are printed above minuscule blocks of written text. Though it is not immediately apparent, a window has been cut in the Plexiglas that frames each piece, enabling the viewer to trespass on preciousness and finger the text. For this differently abled viewer (i.e., unable to read braille), the punctured surface, in its triangulation of the otherwise locked relation between image and caption, suggested access to a level of meaning that my sensibilities/fingers were too coarse to apprehend. Bloom makes reading openly erotic, as if touch could circumvent the abstractions of both language and light. Her appropriated written language is used without irony, referring nonetheless to indirection: in one piece, the text reads “Always distrust the man who looks you straight in the eyes. He wants to prevent you from seeing something. Look for it.” In another, a sheet of gold leaf is placed above the phrase “Golden is a surface color” and perforated with braille. Bloom’s work registers again and again the elusiveness of meaning.

Using visual means to undermine the authority of vision—in particular, the tenacious idea that photographs provide evidence of truth—Bloom has chosen photodocumentation of psychic phenomena as both material and metaphor. _Seance Plates_, 1988, consists of six gold-rimmed china plates embedded with black and white photographs of séance circles. The plates, which are arranged on a circular table, reiterate the image of hands as sensitive receptors of ineffable information, and set the stage for Bloom’s exploitation of the multiple meanings of “medium” in both art and the occult. The work in the back room, _Watermark Papers_, 1988, consists of photographs of U.F.O. images that have been physically embedded into sheets of handmade paper as watermarks; they are illuminated from behind with lightboxes built into the frame. Irrefutable evidence? Each piece stands out a little from the wall, as if it didn’t need to be attached.

Bloom transposes questions of belief into secular terms, so that spirit in both its religious and its parapsychological senses becomes a metaphor for meaning. She does not seem afraid of meaning, though she is aware of the impossibility of exposing it. Access is continually interrupted in Bloom’s work by an erotic play of displacements, substitutions, and delays—compensatory pleasures of elliptical intellection that titillate the same pleasure centers as does news of the supernatural.

—Laurie Palmer

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