At the entrance of “The Collections of Barbara Bloom,” a combined retrospective exhibition and mock “estate sale,” was a color chart. One of several works in a series titled “Naming: (Dedications),” its gridlike arrangement of mostly pastel hues was delicately didactic. Some of the associations were a take on the familiar: “blush” was a soft rose; “envy,” a pale green. But others inclined us to adjust our assumptions: “anon” was a neutral gray; “Lolita,” a cool violet. Associations uncoiled from these unexpected appellations; they bore echoes of experience and permeations of memory. “Naming” was a glossary for the senses.

Bloom’s palette appeared again in Sketch for the Presentation of a Fragrance Titled “a.k.a.,” 1998 (listed, as were all the works, with a lot number as in an estate sale), which consisted of twenty-two elegant perfume bottles arranged, with one exception, three to a shelf. Each was backed with a square of one of Bloom’s hues, this time unnamed but displaying tiny digitized prints of articles of clothing, a jeweled crown, a fingerprint, wild animals, or fruit. Although we were deprived of any aroma—twice sealed, each bottle was capped and encased in a vitrine—with this display we were reminded of the power of perfume to facilitate fantasy.

A sequence of works featuring what Bloom refers to as “Stand Ins”—artifacts that act as substitutes for particular personages—began with her 1987 Monument to Jean-Luc Godard: next to a photograph of the French film director a bare Thonet side chair was set on a scroll of photographer’s backdrop paper. In Stage Name Frances Rey (a.k.a. Mom), 1998, a mannequin stood draped in a bias-cut evening gown fastened with thirteen silk buttons bearing digitally printed images of Bloom’s mother, a former actress. Nearby was a stool weighed down by a tier of books so ponderous that no single volume seemed retrievable. Based on a photograph of architect Richard Meier’s residence that appeared in the New York Times’s seasonal Home Design magazine in October 1997, the assemblage bore the titillating title Richard Meier’s Really Tall and Impressive Stack of Picasso Books, followed by I Bet He Reads the Third One from the Bottom Pretty Often. The stool was a copy of Meier’s own design, the book covers were digitally reproduced copies, and the last line of the three-part title, RM & PP, fused the two luminaries into a post-modernist tableau.

Although these works charmed with their subtlety and humor, the artist was most adept when she invented settings one was enticed to enter. In The French Diplomat’s Office, 1997, inspired by Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel Jealousy, Bloom mounted a digitized copy of a Parisian floor plan and a small, gilt-framed architectural rendering of the kind that interior and stage designers produce, in which a sofa, chairs, occasional tables and a writing desk appeared. The walls of this spacious installation were painted in geometrical combinations of her plum-colored “Sobriquet” and Richter gray. The sobriquet, or nickname, of this domestic arena was Absence.

The installation resembled a partially reconstituted residence, as for an auction or an estate sale. But if the previous owners had departed, they were nevertheless evoked in the carpet covering the floor: its autumnal colors—angular divisions of beige, brown, and persimmon—were punctuated with two sets of black shoe prints, a man’s and a woman’s. Looking down as we traced the meandering footsteps, we felt the absence of the two protagonists acutely, all the more so since their interaction was inexplicable, with its stops and starts and sudden losses of continuity. We ceased to think of the marks as choreographic or as a directorial blocking chart, particularly when we reached a spot dense with shoe prints where a window should have been. We unwittingly became the actors, primed to improvise, suddenly aware of the subtlety with which we’d been induced to intuit others’ lives.