

Barbara Bloom

A Collection

The work of Barbara Bloom is perhaps best summed up by a single object: a headstone that the artist rendered for herself. From a portrait oval done in enamel baked on porcelain, Bloom gazes out serenely above the incomplete dates for her life, and the inscription SHE TRAVELED THE WORLD TO SEEK BEAUTY. Both marker and sentiment are classically proportioned and perfectly pitched in sylph-like yearning for Romantic truth. But the manner of conveyance also suggests an ironic disposition towards the idea of beauty and a deep disquiet at the cost of searching it out. The piece, like all of Bloom's work, entices the viewer with its seductive charm, only to reveal a pointed critique of the nature of aesthetics and the exalted role that beauty and order play in culture as a whole.

Bloom's critique is embodied in elaborate installations comprising disparate elements whose interconnections are illuminated by her juxtapositions. Sometimes these elements are found or borrowed; most often, however, they are exquisitely fabricated, in order to put the viewer at ease while the more disturbing of Bloom's nuanced observations sink in. The allure of her installations depends heavily on her evocation of the nineteenth century as a primary frame of reference. Bloom's interest in that triumphant epoch stems from its ruthless conflation of the indifferent might of industrialization with an abiding faith in classical order, and thus she appropriates not only its artifacts but its organizational principles as well.

In this respect, Bloom follows in the wake of the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers. From his vantage point in the 1960's, Broodthaers could see the pull that the nineteenth century certitude still exerted over the West's collective imagination, notwithstanding the fact that Broodthaers' perspective came at the end of a period of wars and colonialization which that century spawned. For Bloom, twenty-five years later, the nineteenth century's certainty rings even more hollow. Yet it continues to hold sway over current culture, and Bloom deliberately exploits that influence to draw in the viewer. Like Broodthaers, she mimics the nineteenth-century's obsession with collecting and cataloging, which ultimately stemmed from a relentless application of the scientific method and an untroubled belief in the idea of progress. More importantly, Bloom is particularly aware of just how permeated is the cultural identity of the United States by these very same notions. So while her work possesses a certain old-world eloquence, it remains the product of a uniquely American point of view.

Thus when Bloom dissects the very contemporary problem of the culture of vanity in *The Reign of Narcissism*, she abjures current photographic practices and opts instead to celebrate herself in a series of Venetian cameos, chocolates stamped with her own silhouette, and portrait busts drenched in ruin value. In *The Tip of the Iceberg*, Bloom takes the Hasselblad cameras, work gloves, and high tech wrenches left in orbit by astronauts and casts them into an elegiac frieze halo above an underlit glass table groaning with exact replicas of dinnerware from the Titanic. In her *installation Never Odd or Even* for the Carnegie Museum of Art, Bloom juxtaposes specimen cases of butterflies with similarly pinned and shadowboxed photographs of, among other things, Albert Speer's architecture.

Each of these installations is the product of meticulous and prodigious research effort, and their themes overlap or echo from each exhibition to the next. The bridge between them is a series of books that Bloom has published in lieu of conventional catalogs that would simply document her work, revealing her very nineteenth century obsession with text and allowing her to elaborate the myriad references that, taken together, compose an overall conceptual frame work for her oeuvre. One such point of reference in Bloom's recent work has been butterfly collecting. As mentioned earlier, it crops up in *Never Odd or Even*, as well as in two other, European installations: *Signate, Signa, Temere Me Tangis et Angis* in Munich and *Regallier* at the state Natural History Museum in Berlin. Butterfly collecting is a natural metaphor for Bloom's concerns. The fragile symmetry and exultant coloration these creatures display when arrayed as a result of a process of asphyxiation and crucifixion – a love of beauty without a

consideration of its cruel cost. Likewise, the search for order and symmetry in a larger sense can lead to the suffocation of individual liberties and human lives.

For her portfolio in *Grand Street*, Bloom presents a special project that focuses on Vladimir Nabokov and his devotion to lepidopterology. Using excerpts from *The Gift*, and *Speak, Memory*, Bloom subtly comments on Nabokov's recollections of his father through her own reading of the texts and a series of photographs she took of Nabokov's own collection of butterflies, now in the archives of Cornell University. In an interview with *Playboy*, Nabokov remarked that his passion "stands outside the limits of a novelist's world, and I can prove this by the fact that whenever I allude to butterflies in my novels, no matter how diligently I rework the stuff, it remains pale and false and does not really express what I want to express." Bloom's exegesis of Nabokov, however, suggests otherwise.

- Howard Hallee, 1993