Art in America

Private and public –
Barbara Bloom's latest installation of art

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By Susan Tallman

Barbara Bloom's newest installation, which opened in June at Leo Castelli and will travel, leaves behind her accustomed, genteel, museological elegance in what may seem an uncharacteristic fit of grandiosity and operatic overstatement. A vast floor of brilliant red (the hue popularly associated with Oriental lacquer) carries wave upon wave of small plaster heads - an ocean of identical couples, male and female faces repeating the same Asian features, stern expressions and sidelong glances. Arching above them, a great wooden bridge, 50 feet long, presents the only direct way across. At its apex stands a chinoiserie display case, glass-topped and inset with magnifying lenses, each of which reveals a single grain of rice, and on the grain of rice, a microscopic reproduction of a shunga woodcut - one of the infamous Japanese "images of spring" in which that fecund season is represented not by cherry blossoms and diagonal downpours but by acrobatic human rutting. Each grain of rice carries a scene gracefully composed from swirls of patterned fabrics, tangles of lithesome limbs, and impossibly large and elaborately detailed pudenda.

The immense and bombastic set is an extravagant lure to this tiny point, a grandiloquent lead-up to an infinitesimal punch line. As we lean down to look closer (betraying, as we do so, a curiosity that may quickly come to feel like prurience), we are watched by 600 cast-plaster eyes. Perched above the crowd, we are brought face-to-face with the private, engendering act. The arching bridge is a link between the enormous and the minuscule, and also between the anonymous and the particular, the social space of the multitude and the private space of the body.

Space and scale are the explicit subjects of Pictures from the floating World. The scattershot Asian references are intentionally eclectic, meant not as representations of real cultures but as triggers for cliches of both immensity and intimacy. As in her palindromic installation Never Odd or Even, presented at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1992, a fundamental visual tool for manipulating fundamental human responses is turned against itself.[1] The Never Odd or Even installation included, among Janus heads, Siamese twins and other strangely symmetrical elements, paired collections of dead butterflies and of photographs of Nazi architecture, splayed and pinned in display cases - a strange and evocative comparison between the beauty and the brutal authority implicit in symmetry, and one that depended greatly on the shrinking of the buildings' Ozymandian pretensions to the size of a Monarch.

In Pictures from the Floating World, Bloom plays at both extremes of scale, touching simultaneously upon Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian fantasies. There is a tendency to think of scale in contemporary art only in terms of largeness. Pollock, we are told repeatedly, dealt with scale," meaning vastness; and in general, largeness is perceived as an avatar of artistic importance and expresive power. Miniaturism, on the other hand, has come to be disdained as neurotic, or in any case dismissably twee (at least the Western variety-Islamic and Indian miniatures still carry considerable cachet in contemporary art circles). But the art of the miniature has flourished off and on throughout history and across many cultures-Asian, Indian, Islamic, European-and it has done so usually not as an alternative to more monumental art forms, but as a complement to them: the Taj Mahal emerged from the same culture and class that gave us masterpieces of miniature painting. Tsarist Russia gave us both the Winter Palace and Faberge's minuscule gold clockwork Trans-Siberian railway; China has given us both the Great Wall and the engraved rice grain.

Though the image on Bloom's grain of rice was made by photo-contacted microfiche, the Chinese have been engraving images on grains of rice, slivers of ivory and even strands of human hair for thousands of years, and the tradition persists to this day. In 1989 the Xinhua News Service reported on an artist who had engraved 18 Arhats (the "perfected ones" of Buddhism) frolicking among temples, pavilions, pine trees, tigers and flying dragons, all on a single grain of rice. It is easy to regard such feats as impressive only in a Ripley's-Believe-It-Or-Not sort of way. (In fact, Chinese micro-engraving has been featured in both Ripley museums and Ripley television programs.) But the function of miniaturization, especially the absurd-to-the-point-of-sublimity miniaturization of micro-engraving, is not to diminish the subject-or to make it cute-but to give it an unparalleled concentration, an intensity distilled beyond visibility. Micro-engraving is an art too minute to be done by eye-the engraver literally cannot see what he's doing, and must work by touch. In execution at least, it is a blind form of visual art, a poetic oxymoron that dovetails neatly with Bloom's ongoing fascination with the fringes of visibility. (It is worth noting that in the world of fairy tales-that great province of size-shifting-largeness and smallness are endowed with distinctly different forms of power: that of largeness is overt, belligerent and stupid; while that of smallness is covert and clever. Cleverness is more powerful than brute strength, in part because it is invisible.)

The traditional subjects of Chinese micro-engraving are landscapes and calligraphy. In replacing these with scenes of copulation (with their own dramatic distortions of scale), Bloom has drawn a link between that-which-you-cannot-see and that-which-you-may-not-see, and presented both in the form of objects that, perversely perhaps, have been made to be seen. Like all Bloom pieces, Pictures from the Floating World is available to the collector in different forms: the installation can be purchased in its entirety (though it is hard to imagine it finding a home anywhere but in a public collection), or one can purchase smaller fragments, such as the magnifying vitrine and grains of graphic rice independent of their setting. Bloom has also produced a four-panel fabric screen (used in the Castelli installation to separate the two rooms of the gallery) involving poignantly bowdlerized shunga images. Four images are printed on tea-stained cloth in such a way that initially all that is visible is an erratic pattern of scattered black dots and red stains.

Only when lit from behind does the screen manifest its four erotic scenes, revealing the black dots as spots of censorship over the points of genital contact, and the red stains as the blushing cheeks of the flushed participants. The black dots are, of course, disingenuous in their veiling much like the semi-concealing function of the screen itself.(2) This kind of flirtation between visibility and invisibility has been a frequent theme in Bloom's art, from the Esprit de l'Escalier installation that won her the Aperto prize at the 1988 Venice Biennale, to the "watermark" porcelain tea cups that accompanied The Reign of Narcissism in 1989. The cups contain hidden portraits of the artist that only become visible when the drinker tilts the empty cup up to the light. However, Pictures of the Floating World places this ambiguous polarity in an entirely new kind of setting.

Though Bloom has never adhered to any consistent, identifiable historical mode, her art has regularly conjured an aura of early 19th-century Europe-pedantic, assured, restrained. Even The Tip of the Iceberg (1991), which Bloom has described as a kind of "science fiction set," with its otherworldly shaft of light, cast-plaster medallion of space garbage, and table of dishware from the Titanic, has about it a certain Neo-Classical reticence. Pictures from the Floating World is different: despite the presence of the vitrines, the piece in no way invokes the museum, nor any other familiar societal trope. The stylistic references are not European, or even Western, but a jumble of Asian and pseudo-Asian allusions. The enormous bridge, for example, is built in a kind of Garden Center Oriental style, equal parts Japanese Tea Garden and Chippendale Chinoiserie. And while the plaster heads that cover the floor may, in their plenitude, suggest the famous army of terra-cotta soldiers entombed with the early Chinese emperor Qin Shihuangdi, they are actually replicas of plaster heads purchased on the Santa Monica pier. They have far more to say about the archeology of lower-middle class American home decoration at the cusp of the millennium than about China in the second century before Christ. Other elements of the installation, such as the shunga images, have a more valid art-historical pedigree, but even these have traveled far from their origins. Shunga was originally an erotic subgenre of the ukiyo-e woodblock tradition, which celebrated the evanescent, earthly pleasures of 18th- and 19th-century Japan. (Bloom's title is an English translation of the term ukiyo-e.) Never officially acceptable, shunga prints have been rigorously suppressed in postwar Japan, at the same time that they have been popularized in the West. Bloom takes these exiled Japanese images and sets them aboard a rice grain, in imitation of an ancient Chinese art form, through the use of late 20th-century microfiche technology.

But Pictures from the Floating World is not about China or Japan-or even about Western misconceptions about China or Japan-any more than Bloom's Reign of Narcissism was about Regency England or Biedermeier Mitteleuropa. In that installation, European stylistic allusions allowed Bloom to conjure both the inward-turning pathology of the boudoir and the pedantic adumbrations of the museum. The Asian ambiance of the current work serves a similar purpose, invoking (at least in the Western mind) cliches of both the vastness of China and the delicate particularity of Japan, the numberless hordes of blue-jacketed workers and the refined sensuality of the geisha, the drama of population on the one hand, and of procreation on the other.

The Asian allusion also implies a way of relating to objects that is entirely different from the public, didactic, pseudo-museological format Bloom has so often used. China and Japan have ancient traditions of art patronage and collecting, but they are primarily traditions of private connoisseurship rather than of public display. Joseph Alsop wrote that "no Chinese collector with the least pretensions to high culture is known to have used his really good pictures or pieces of calligraphy to decorate his interiors during a period now probably much longer than a millennium. Collections were for the collector's own delight, or to be shown to other connoisseurs, and they were carefully stored unless specially brought out."(3) Thus Bloom's bridge not only links the very large to the very small, it also links very public ways of looking to very private ones.

Bloom is adept at creating situations in which looking is made both enticing and difficult. An early installation, The Gaze (1985), was set up, as in certain exhibitions of light-sensitive drawings, so that viewers had to pull aside a curtain in order to view the images. The art had, in essence, to be disrobed.. In an equally suggestive manner, the book she produced to accompany Never Odd or Even was butterfly-bound inside-out so that, in order to view the pages, you had to slit them open at the binding. (Bloom once said that her greatest ambition was "to make a work of art that when you look at it would blush.") The gallery-goer's familiar stance of casual perusal from a distance, the half-attentive walk-past, is impossible in these situations. As in Pictures from the Floating World, physical action is necessary to see the work, and it forces us to acknowledge-publicly-our will to look.

There is, of course, a strong suggestion of voyeurism in all this-Bloom cannily exploits the thrill of getting inside something secret and sealed. In Pictures from the Floating World she employs, for the first time, an explicitly sexual iconography, and yet the piece is no more about sex than it is about China or Japan. Bloom's art has been compared to the old roue's quip that "a drink before, and a cigarette after, are the three best things in life", evoking the way in which she constructs her work as a kind of web of suggestion around an absent essence. Despite the theatricality and bawdiness of Pictures from the Floating World, this peculiarly elusive quality remains. The graphic sexuality, like the giddy explosion and contraction of scale, is a framework around a central subject that is unstated because it is unstatable. The fascination, and unexpected tenderness, of the installation emerge not from the experience of feeling insignificant and clumsily gigantic by turn, nor from voyeurism, nor exhibitionism, but from fleeting glimpses of the bridges that link these states, one to the next, in the archipelago of emotion and perception.

(1.) There were two earlier versions of this installation done in 1990: Regallager, presented at various locales in East and West Berlin, and Signate, Signa, Temere me Tangis et Angis, at the Kunstverein in Munich. As with Never Odd or Even, both titles are palindromes. (2.) There is a motif within the shunga prints of tiny figures peeping around corners of inadequately concealing screens to catch far larger figures in flagrante. (3.) Joseph Alsop, The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared, Princeton, Princeton University Press and New York, Harper & Row, 1982, pp. 422-23.

"Pictures from the Floating World" appeared at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York (May 31-June 30, 1995), and may currently be seen in "SITE Santa Fe," Santa Fe, N.M. (July 13-Oct. 8). Further stops include Shoshona Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica (November-December 1995); University Gallery, SUNY Buffalo; and venues in Europe as yet unconfirmed.

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