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ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Glimpse Through the Walls of Privacy

By LINDA YABLONSKY

FOR most New Yorkers, May 20, 1995 was probably just a sunny Saturday in the spring. For Barbara Bloom, a wryly provocative installation artist of international stature who was soon to open an exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in SoHo, the afternoon seemed made for a favorite avocation -- window gardening. At least that is what she had in mind when she stepped onto the deeply recessed sill of a window of her TriBeCa loft, intent on training a few vines to climb around a trellis just outside.

Suddenly a flower box steadying her feet fell away, plunging her to the pavement three stories below. The fall broke her hips, her pelvis and an elbow. A vertebra was crushed on impact. And that was only the major damage.

Needless to say, Ms. Bloom missed her opening at Castelli. "Yeah, that was a bummer," she recalled recently in the loft where she has lived and worked on and off for the last 15 years. She willed herself to be present for the show's debut six months later in her home town, Los Angeles, one of several cities in this country and abroad where it has since traveled.

Ms. Bloom has also come a long way, weathering multiple surgeries and years of rehabilitative therapies. Today, at 49, she stands tall with almost regal bearing, her movements betraying little evidence of her injuries. "I was very lucky," she says quietly, her large brown eyes growing even wider under expressive brows. "I had good surgeons. I could have been completely paralyzed. I could have died."

She still has to cope with residual nerve and bone damage, but three years ago she was married for the first time, to Chris Mann, a composer and writer who has another loft across the street, where they live with Mr. Mann's teenage son, Oskar. She has also continued to develop new projects, two of the more fascinating of which made elegant literary allusions to the novelists Vladimir Nabokov and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Her latest work, however -- a deliberately loopy installation of ceramics, photographs and videos aptly titled "Broken" -- takes a completely different and very personal direction at Gorney Bravin & Lee in Chelsea, where it is on view through May 25.

The show is an effusive demonstration of Ms. Bloom's more intimate understanding of misfortune as a blessing in disguise. Thus, a tiny X-ray of the steel armature that now holds her vertebrae together functions as a kind of connective tissue in the exhibition; she has imbedded a photograph of the X-ray in waxed seals that she will later apply to the score of extravagantly wrapped and intricately patterned gift boxes on open display in the gallery. Each contains a celadon porcelain vessel that the artist has cracked and then, following a traditional Japanese technique called *urushi*, soldered with liquid gold. "These things are so gorgeous," she says, her eyes falling on one peonylike wrapping. "There's something sort of cruel about having to open them." Consequently, every box comes with an X-ray and a color photograph of its contents.

For the last 20 years, Ms. Bloom has avoided such pointed autobiographical references in favor of larger social issues. Even "The Reign of Narcissism," a room-size installation from 1989 in which her face appeared on every available surface of the furniture, crockery, busts and candies within its Regency-style confines, was not about Barbara Bloom. That work, which reappeared in "The Museum as Muse" exhibition in 1999 at the Museum of Modern Art, dealt explicitly and amusingly with our culture's obsession with brand names and signature designer wares.

Ms. Bloom herself is not just a maker of high-end objects but an inveterate collector of them, though she will either make her finds the basis of new installations or pass them on to others. She traces such habits to her Los Angeles teenage years, when she was introduced to contemporary art through a family friend who collected it. After graduating from the California Institute of the Arts, she left for a vacation in Amsterdam and ended up staying 10 years -- long enough to meet the residency requirements for several government-sponsored grants, for which she is still grateful. They gave her time and space to mature as an artist, she says. In 1985, another grant took her to Berlin and a romance with both the city and a man who lived there. She then shuttled back and forth to New York until 1992, when she made Manhattan her permanent home.

More than these few personal details, Ms. Bloom would rather not provide. She speaks much more enthusiastically of Ikea, the home furnishings chain, which has supplied both her living space and her art installations with more than a few of their appointments. "I even once taught a class in Modernism at Ikea!" she says.

Still, she is much more comfortable talking about her work and the depth of the research that goes into it. In the studio she reflects long and hard on ways that age or damage can distort value. "I constantly think about how we give value to objects," Ms. Bloom says. "Is something large more valuable than something small? Is something visible more valuable than something invisible? Is something unbroken more valuable than something broken?" The rest of her life remains out of bounds -- except for the accident. "If I didn't tell people I'd had it and recuperated from it," she explains, "a large piece of the puzzle as to what this work is about would be missing."

But her interest in *urushi* predated the accident. It began with a visit to Japan in 1985, when she was served tea from a bowl whose cracks had been repaired with gold lacquer. The image often came to mind during her convalescence. "It was helpful, consoling, to think that an object which has been damaged and repaired is more beautiful and precious than it was when it was

unbroken," she recalls. "If you X-ray me, you see metal in me. If you X-ray these objects, you see metal in them. This is my way of connecting myself to these objects."

There are quite a few. Aside from the gilded celadon vases and pitchers, she has mounted on pastel mats computer-manipulated found photographs of jugglers and other circus balancing acts. They are framed, off center, under broken glass and hang on the gallery walls against huge, painted blocs of "insanely bright" color. In the gallery's front window, she has built a precarious pyramid of a few hundred (unbroken) champagne glasses. In addition, she has videotaped women of all ages turning in circles until they get woozy. The tapes, unsynchronized, are recessed in the walls behind radiant origami frames. It's a dizzying array of objects, all right. Festive, too.

"I'm no Pollyanna," she says with a nod. "But I know if I had not had this accident I would not be as nice a person as I am now. I don't think I valued life as much as I do now. But I think that's true of anyone who has gone through any difficult or harrowing experience. And if I want to make a work that celebrates the beauty of things which are imperfect, it makes me proud and happy to do that." She stops, self-conscious again. "I'm serious," she says. "It does."

Linda Yablonsky is the author of "The Story of Junk," a novel, and often writes about art.