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by Rachel Blatt



Captain in Cologne.

The Presence of Presents

derzeit vs barbara bloom

Barbara Bloom is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She was born in Los Angeles in 1951 and studied under John Baldessari at the California Institute of the Arts – becoming (beside Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine et al.) one of the most compelling conceptual operators of the pictures generation. For many years, she also lived and worked in Amsterdam and Berlin. DERZEIT met Bloom at her studio, which is also her apartment, to talk about absences, counterfeits, Marilyn Monroe, and her most recent show, *Present*, which travels in the fall to the Luttgenmeijer Gallery in Berlin and the Galerie Gisela

DERZEIT: *Let's talk about your show Present, which just came down at the Tracy Williams gallery in New York. The show is all about presents, real and imagined. Why are you interested in gifts?*

I love gifts. I love gift-wrapping. I love boxes. I love paper. I love gift wrap paper. The paper is sort of the skin of the gift. There are also, of course, cultural histories of gift-giving and gift-wrapping. In Japan, for instance, you can give the same gift to someone, but its value is dependent upon how it gets wrapped. You can go to one shop and have a very complicated wrapping for the same box of candy or you can go to a train station and buy the same thing in an ordinary box—you are paying for the wrapping.

So are you interested in how gifts are presented and exchanged?

No. I am much more interested in the relationship between the act of giving a gift to someone and the act of making an art object. When I first started on this project, I didn't quite know what I wanted to do. But it became clear to me that it wasn't so much about the commodity exchange or the gift exchange, but much more that when people write about it, they don't really write about this complicated place—the object as an ambassador. There was no attention paid to the similarities and the differences between the act of giving a gift and the act of art making.

How do you compare the two?

There is a spectrum of understanding between the giver and the recipient and I'm interested in the complexities of that spectrum. On one end, you know someone really, really well. All of the references, all of the subtleties – it's a very intimate way of making or giving an object to someone. That object is the carrier of our shared knowledge or experience. On the other end of the spectrum is the making of an art object. You don't know the audience and you can't count on them knowing anything about your intentions. And because I can't count on their receptivity, everything has to be contained. All of the references, all of the triggers need to be contained in the object itself. I can't count on anything on the outside.

How does your work in Present demonstrate this spectrum?

I wanted to make an exhibition in which it ran the gamut, starting with a very personal object, for instance, a gift to my daughter that we don't even get to see. We just see the box. It's very intimate and very much about a gift to someone close to me. On the other end, there are these offerings to some dead person, so anonymous. Then there is an object given from a famous person to another famous person, and an object from me given to an artist who I can count on everyone knowing. In the spectrum, the viewers find themselves in different relationships to the person who has given the object and the recipient of the object. How much do I know and how much does the other person know, all that kind of reciprocal information?

Then there's the piece Receptacle.

With that object, it's unclear who it's for. It's not a Pandora's Box. It's a secret. I've asked the people at the gallery to tell different things to different people. It becomes a receptacle for gossip, rumor and the kinds of things that go on about art objects anyway. Like who knows what about what and who did I tell what about it?

It's about power?

Yes, about who gets the privilege of knowing.

Does anyone, aside from you, know who it's for?

No. Well. I could tell you I didn't tell anyone, but maybe I actually did. And some people know who it's for but most don't.

So much of your work is about these intrinsic absences, about these hints or traces.

Being interested in the subtleties of communication or the subtleties of making something and viewing something, one of the things I'm interested in has always been innuendo, or the things that you leave out or the things that are not there, that somehow are alluded to.

Might Present, then, also have another meaning?

I think you nailed it. Maybe I'll say it again. For thirty years, I've made a lot of work that has to do with absence, with things that are not there, but that we are able to know are there, because the things I am making refer to this absent thing. It's easy for me to do, the path is there, the grooves in the record have been made. But now I have a nine-year old child who is very present! And the life that I lead now is filled with 'present': with her presence and with presents. So I think it would be kind of false to continue on in that vein when my daily life is just pres-ent! So this new work was a celebration of that too. To see if I can tackle some other subject: can I shift and look at something in this other way?

Still, not all of the pieces in the show are so in-your-face present.

There's a gift from Marilyn Monroe to Arthur Miller and that started with this photograph that I had seen of Marilyn Monroe reading. I've collected a lot of pictures of her reading because she is just so

completely enigmatic, endlessly beautiful and sad. In an older work I used a photograph of her reading the last pages of *Ulysses*, which is this incredible photograph by Eve Arnold. Then there's the series from *Life* magazine by Alfred Eisenstaedt, from later in her short life. She's sitting, reading on a couch and if you look, all of the titles of the books behind her are out of focus. For the show, I thought I would make a work which was that library, with the shelf behind her. We made dummies of all the books and all of the spines are out of focus. I just thought of it as so emblematic of this person who, no matter what attention we give to her, remains out of focus. I sort of imagine her trying to give these to Arthur Miller, in this sad, frustrated marriage in which she was constantly trying to prove her intelligence to him. And she's giving him books that are out of focus! Oh god, it's really so sad!

What about your gift for Bruce Nauman?

I just always sort of assume that Bruce Nauman is everybody's favorite artist. I'm not alone in saying if I had to choose one artist who's been awe-inspiring it would be Bruce Nauman. I cannot even fathom all that he has done and continues to do. It just seems he has a direct, uninterrupted line to his subconscious that people only get if they sell their soul to the devil, but he clearly didn't. He is amazing. One after another. Kind of a brilliance, a radicality—is that a word?—just a total inspiration. The piece is called Thank You *bbbbbrrruuuuuuccccceeee*. I wanted to make something for him.

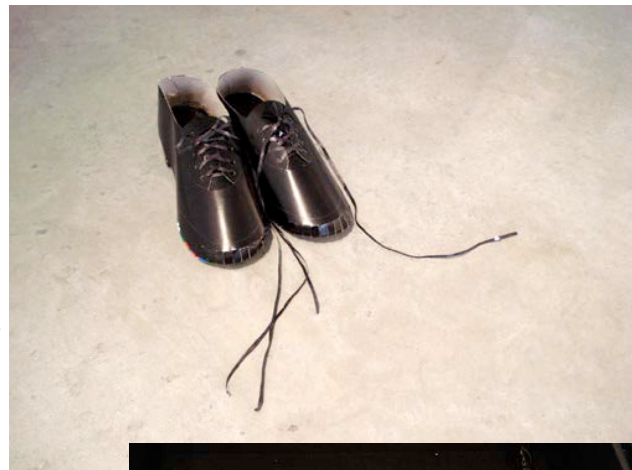
But why a charm bracelet?

Because charm bracelets are just so girly and so insignificant, so stupid and so upper-class. They are a totally obnoxious object. It's just like, you should not do that, ever. And particularly in relation to Bruce Nauman, whose work is just so large in every way, it's expansive. To make something diminutive and insignificant. I had been thinking about charm bracelets and wanting to make one with all the works of art and books that had been really significant to me and I realized so many of them were by Bruce Nauman. I just thought, okay, I will make it for him. And there it is on the bracelet, his name, as though it were written on the moon.



I was wondering if there had been a you're welcome.

Oh, no! That would be nice. »Think nothin' of it Barbara.« It's shown on a rough cast of my own hand. I hope that one day he'll see this and maybe he'll appreciate it. I don't know him. I've met him once.



The rough cast, why is that significant?

It's a little bit rough, kind of Brucesque. I don't know. People assume that I'm very very particular about what materials are used and in fact, I am and I'm not. For instance, there's a table in the show, it's just an IKEA table. I was going to have it made and then I went to IKEA looking around and thought, »That table is just as good as any one that we're going to build. I'm going to get it and we're going to trick it out.« I really enjoy the tricking out of ordinary



