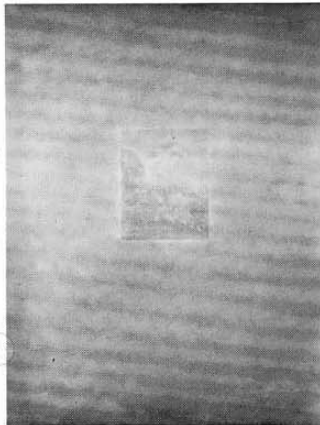


Prints and Editions

ESPRIT DE L'ESCALIER: PRINTS BY BARBARA BLOOM



Barbara Bloom, *Untitled*, 1988. Watermarked paper, 24 x 18". Photo courtesy of Barbara Bloom.

Esprit de l'Escalier: witty remark which is thought too late; good retort conceived after the event. Literally: spirit of the staircase. The inevitable staircase one is descending when the realization comes of exactly what should have been said.

Barbara Bloom provides this definition in the catalogue of her recent work. The shadowy phrase is the subject, or metaphor, for a number of dissimilar works, developed over the last few years, and recently incorporated into a single elaborate installation—*Esprit de l'Escalier*. In paper works, objects, sets and texts she evokes specters of visibility and invisibility, absence and presence. Among its other manifestations, the Spirit of the Staircase materializes in a remarkable suite of prints—blank sheets of hand-made paper in which the only visible image is the watermark impression.

Bloom is an artist difficult to classify in terms of media. For the last decade she has been producing work in a wide range of formats—film, performance, graphic design, objects, and installations—all of which revolve around questions of epistemology and vision. Her pieces have been presented in galleries, museums, and publications throughout Europe, where she has spent most of her adult life.

Bloom has made editions before, among them a set of shirts embroidered with phrases in place of monograms—one of them read "esprit de l'escalier." The UFO pieces are closer to the traditional conception of prints, but they are unorthodox in two fundamental respects: they were not conceived as an extension of drawing or painting but rather as objects in their own right, and, more importantly, it is rather peculiar to make prints in such a way that the image is only occasionally visible.

For those not familiar with the esoterica of paper, watermarks are those translucent logotypes found in good quality stationery and in art papers. They are an especially apt subject for an artist whose work engages the seen and the unseen, the politics of presentation and belief, as its basic material. The seven prints, which make up one room of *Esprit de l'Escalier*, give form and body to these immaterial notions.

The paper for Bloom's edition was hand-made by Dieu Donné Press and Paper in New York. The sheets, which measure 24 x 18

inches, are composed of matted cotton fiber, thinning to an irregular deckle edge all around. The appearance is of a thickish, somewhat blotter-like page, creamy white but interrupted by small ticks and pops of aberrant particles.

The texture and appearance of a paper is always important to the character of the art that employs it, but it is especially pertinent to these prints because, unless they are lit from behind, the flat paper surface is all that one can see.

"Print" is perhaps an awkward word in this circumstance—suggesting, as it does, traditional media like etching, lithography, and silkscreen. The method used here does not reproduce images on a sheet of paper, as is usual, or with a sheet of paper, as became popular in the paper-making resurgence of the Seventies, but casts the picture like a wraith within it.

Watermark images result from the depression left in a sheet of paper by a variation in the thickness of the papermaking screen. Traditionally they have been used to identify mills and manufacturers, and were made by weaving or soldering a wire emblem into the mesh against which the paper is made. Smooth on one side, the paper would be ever-so-slightly indented where it fell against the wire, and when held up to the light would reveal the outline of the mark.

To prepare the finely graded watermarks Bloom needed, she approached and worked closely with J.J. Plank Corporation, a manufacturer of commercial paper-making equipment which has pioneered a method of reproducing photographs in watermark form. Essentially, the light and dark areas of the original photograph are transformed into levels of high and low relief on an etched plate. The papermaking screen is then made to conform to this relief so that the paper will be thinnest in the areas where the photograph was lightest, and thickest where the original was dark. At this point hand-tooling is used to clarify and to accentuate points of light and dark. The watermark is then attached in place on the screen, and the paper is cast against it.

When Bloom's watermark prints are held up to the light, their physical composition is revealed further. The surface becomes a dim and blotchy luminous field, the petting out

of the pulp toward the deckle produces a corona, and throughout the page one begins to notice small irregularities. But there, hovering in the center of each page, defined only by the regulation of light as it passes through the varying thicknesses of paper, are fuzzy photographic images: a man and small boy pointing upward at three suspicious aerial blobs; a pair of landscapes, one above the other, accompanied by floating disks; side-by-side, two views of a Jetsons-type domed saucer drifting over the tree tops and telephone wires; a rocky outcropping beneath an armada of Saturn-shaped spaceships, and so on.

These pictures, like others used in Bloom's work, are borrowed from the popular press—sensationalist tabloids and proselytizing books eager to demonstrate irrefutable proof of extra-terrestrial invasion. Bloom, who grew up in Los Angeles and studied with John Baldessari at the California Institute of the Arts, uses movies, advertising, and newspaper pictures as source material, and as icons for systems of seeing and believing. She has been collecting photographs of UFOs for the last decade and she is captivated by the bizarre charm of parapsychological photography—the residual documentation of the supernatural, or the proof of the unreal.

Although the photograph has been intellectually debunked as an arbiter of truth, it still carries conviction. Instinctively we feel that something must have been there to produce that image, and we trust it far more than a drawing or verbal account. It is, on some level, a more believable record. Seeing may be a matter of will, but photography is a matter of physics. Parapsychological photography blurs these distinctions.

In Bloom's prints these photographs become so subtle one could almost mistake the saucers for aberrant clumps in the paper, small glitches in the glow. Even framed and backlit, as they are presented in the installation, the prints are not immediately legible.

In its usual role in life the watermark is both seen and unseen. It is typically visible only to those who are obsessive enough, or precious enough, or investigatory enough to care about such things. It can, as the J.J. Plank brochure points out, "distinguish specialty papers produced for governments, corporations, fraternal societies, and other organizations." It is the kind of thing one expects fictional upper-crust detectives to notice—an identifying sign

that demands attention and a rarified, encyclopedic knowledge.

It is the ambiguous evidence of the unseen that haunts the rooms of *Esprit de l'Escalier*. The installation, which was commissioned by and for Hallwalls in Buffalo, unfolds in four successive chambers. Each is inhabited by a different type of object, a different form of exhibit, a different subject, but all address the extent to which seeing is believing and wishing can be seeing.

The first room one enters is hung with *Works for the Blind*, a series from 1982 which combines photographs of parapsychological feats like levitation with a braille text on the experience of seeing. At the center of the room is physical testimony to sleight-of-eye—a saucer-like dish on a pedestal with a round aperture at the top through which one seems to see an orb floating in space (in reality the reflection of a pearl against the shiny surface of the bowl).

Another space is cordoned off and filled with starched cheesecloth hat-forms floating like an otherworldly millinery shop in an optically obscure space of periwinkle blue.

The two central rooms are the gallery of UFO-prints and a parlor for supernatural visitations. The latter is furnished with a round table covered by a ghostly white tablecloth that reaches to the floor (hiding its physical support). Six places, just far enough apart for people to touch hands, are set with china plates that reproduce photographs of séances in progress. Acts of will and of belief, intangible, invisible acts, are depicted by their material remains. That forms of invisibility can be portrayed is Bloom's working premise.

The expression, *Esprit de l'Escalier* is both a metaphor—a ghost of regret—and a description extended from one easily visualized occasion to all emotional occurrences of a similar type. The nature of its application to Bloom's art seems to hover between a parapsychological pun, an encapsulation of linguistic yearning, and a poetic revelation of dashed hopes and lost visions. In the blind trace of a watermark, Bloom shows us UFOs. She chose the UFO photos because "if you believe in these phenomena the photos prove their existence. If you don't, they are sure proof of fakery. They are perfect indicators of belief."

Susan Tallman