

ARTFORUM

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Barbara Bloom

TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD.

Tracy Williams operates one of the few New York gallery spaces that could still be described as charming. Visitors must duck into a diminutive, below-ground-level doorway before being escorted into the first of two rambling floors of a Greenwich Village brownstone. To remark that the space still bears a tangible whiff of domesticity simply by virtue of its rooms' scale and design would be an understatement. Yet this willful lack of neutrality does more than spark nostalgia for a less uniform New York art world. Williams has crafted a program of exhibitions by artists whose practices are well framed by the stubborn clamor of the lived-in, with its sloping floorboards and exposed heating pipes, to say nothing of its constant evocation of the body.

Take Barbara Bloom, who, for her first solo show at the gallery, presented "Takes One to Know One," a collections of works that took over Williams's space as only real squatters could, elbowing into the nooks, crannies, and corner. Crowded into the small garden-level gallery, a simple theatrical *mise-en-scène* cast the shadows of eight everyday objects as seen through a semiopaque screen. The profiles of a music stand, a stool, and a photographer's umbrella, among others, were at once simplified and anthropomorphized. Titled *Absence-Presence*, 2006, the work also includes eight photographs, these suggesting a certain "life" for each of the aforementioned objects; and a suite of blank, evocative monochromatic rectangles painted directly on the walls – at once patches of decorative color and placeholders for things that might have once been hung there.



Since the mid-'80s, Bloom has been acknowledged for her very particular brand of institutional critique: drawing attention to paradigms of viewing as they operate in museums and galleries but also foregrounding her (and our) own desire and vanity in the production, viewing, and consumption of objects. Her work is, then, palpably ambivalent, dense with both desire *and* disavowal. In her show at Williams, as in many past shows, there are several pairs of things, but instead of producing a feeling of

satisfied coupling, each object highlights the other's alienation, like mirrors held up to one another. This is literally the case in some of the work on show here, including the strangely moving (and funny) eponymous work, which endlessly reflects two images of a chicken gazing into a mirror (as well as capturing viewers as they themselves look at the piece). In other works, such as *Hand in Glove*, 2007, Bloom presents implicitly gendered narratives culled from culture: here two very different instances of wedding ceremonies in which the ritual of union is performed at both a literal and a symbolic remove.

Speaking of her process some twenty years ago, Bloom likened herself to a detective whose interest resides in "reading meanings in details," rather than in piecing them together into any definitive whole – a description that strongly recalls aspects of Naomi Schor's theory of a "feminist archaeology." And, taking in Bloom's current constellation of works, which carry over long-standing concerns from her career while remaining strikingly fresh, viewers become detectives too, speculating on where to place themselves in relation to works like *Arno Light*, 2007, (in which a chandelier is represented as itself, in a photograph, and as reflected in a mirror). Standing beneath the "real" chandelier, one imagines oneself for a minute to be at the center of things. Yet, as Bloom would have it, and as suddenly becomes clear, there's no stable or singular center to such experience: It's all in the details. Which is to say, everywhere and nowhere at once.

- Johanna Burton