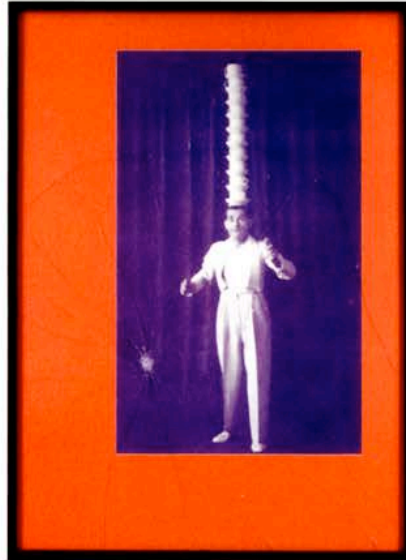


MAY 2008

**BACK: Review, *The Collections of Barbara Bloom*, International Center of Photography, New York, USA**

Barbara Bloom  
*Balance (Purple Headstack)*  
 2000  
 Inkjet print  
 81×66 cm



*International Center of Photography,  
 New York, USA*

It's no coincidence that BB, the moniker by which Barbara Bloom is referred to in the catalogue and wall texts for 'The Collections of Barbara Bloom', was also a popular nickname for Brigitte Bardot around the time that she starred in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (Contempt, 1963). The kittenish star's faded celebrity suggests yet another shadowy corridor in this delicately labyrinthine show, which simulates a posthumous exhibition. Bloom is also an admirer of Godard's films, as well as of the writing of Vladimir Nabokov, who often made imaginative use of his own initials. But why did she choose to reprise her career as though it were already over? Wary that a retrospective might yield a superficially entertaining parade of Conceptual gestures (she has a knack for polished seduction and feather-light humour, so this is a plausible scenario), she was inspired by an auction of jewellery and other possessions of the late Jackie Kennedy Onassis to create instead what is, in essence, a new work - one unified by the presumed absence of the ghostly creator.

The one disappointment is that the show - although its mirrorings, ricocheting resonances and celebrations of the fugitive and small-scale give it a sea-monkey-in-water quality - isn't larger; surely this *faux* estate sale could have filled both floors of the ICP (the downstairs level was reserved for the exhibition 'Archive Fever'). The exhaustive, wittily allusive catalogue includes so much more material than the show that it is an essential read for those less familiar with Bloom's remarkable career. Lot numbers and descriptive blurbs by Susan Tallman, all mentioning 'BB' in the past tense and some incorporating philosophical musings, accompany the reproductions. As though they contained sets of costume jewellery, curios or Sèvres porcelain, the 'collections' have been assigned names - 'Innuendo', 'Naming', 'Blushing', 'Doubles', 'Charms', 'Framing', 'Belief', 'Broken', 'Stand Ins', 'Reading In' and

'Songs' - with a disregard for parallelism that faintly echoes Jorge Luis Borges' animal taxonomy from 'a certain Chinese encyclopaedia' which inspired Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966).

Within these groups odd facts, images and obsessions crystallize into such epiphanies as universe-party hats and games, a colour chart with names like 'Richter' and 'Monopoly', and sheets of music featuring images instead of notes. Chronology, disregarded, is unmissed. A pair of plaster portrait busts in Bloom's image, a Louis XVI-style chair printed with her dental X-rays and other artefacts from her *tour-de-force* installation *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989) are scattered across multiple categories - making the original installation seem even more inseparable from the time in which it was first exhibited. Largely filmic and literary, Bloom's influences include Nabokov's novels and those of one of the few contemporaries whose work he admired, Alain Robbe-Grillet. Appropriately, given Nabokov's love of lepidoptery and fascination with artifice and deceit, many of her tributes to his art surface in works dealing with symmetry and doubling, which are arranged symmetrically along one wall, with duplicate wall labels reflecting one another.

The double can, of course, be a harbinger of misfortune, but it's not the only trope evoking bodily harm. Included in the 'Broken' category are vessels whose cracks have been laboriously mended with gold in an ancient lacquer technique Bloom first encountered in Japan decades ago. 'In this act', she wrote at the time, 'history is accepted and glorified. Value, as we know it, is reversed.' When for a show in 2001 she employed the technique - matching the repaired ceramics with their X-rays and encasing them in ornate paper boxes sealed with paper printed with an image of her own vertebrae - it was partially in response to her devastating fall from a third-floor window in 1995, after which she herself was patched together with the aid of bits of metal. Imperfection has been cherished, death magically averted.

One might say that mortality has been an ever-present theme: back in the late 1980s Bloom even commissioned marble tombstones for herself incised with assorted epitaphs. She has also meditated on the sinking of the *Titanic*, memorialized the tragic gamine Jean Seberg in a doctored copy of *The International Herald Tribune*, documented paper Chinese funerary items and custom-made Ghanaian coffins mimicking such objects as a car, a shoe and a uterus, and created works that grapple with absence and presence in various troubling ways. In 'That in Aleppo Once ...' (1943), one of Nabokov's most beautifully crafted stories, a heart-broken, artfully dissembling, perhaps murderous narrator, writing about his vanished wife to a fellow *émigré* addressed only as 'V', describes death as a 'vast silent explosion'. More often than not, Bloom's objects, installations and photographs, which are lent an elegiac quality even by their pristine design, suggest an acute awareness of that inevitable, soundless apocalypse. Thankfully, she is still here somewhere, smiling behind her mirrored fan.

Kristin M. Jones

# Barbara Bloom