

Cornelia Lauf on Barbara Bloom

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View of “Barbara Bloom: *Il Tempo*,” 2024. Wall, from left: *The wind has its reasons.* (Murakami), 2015; *It had begun to snow again.* (Joyce), 2015; *It rained for four years, eleven months, and two days.* (Márquez), 2015. Floor: *There was a desert wind blowing that night.* (Chandler), 2015. Photo: Alwin Lay.

The broiling blue sea—in archival digital prints under gray to blue mat boards, cut with multiple windows and sealed under framed glass. Perched on easels or hanging on walls, seven composite seascapes decorated a flamboyant Neapolitan palazzo that once housed the family of Edgar Degas. Barbara Bloom staged these delicate vignettes, “The Sea, in Part,” 2024, as if for inspection, as if the room were an art academy, not the piano nobile of an aristocratic family. To see, or not to see, is their double question. Laid out on low, hidden plinths or hanging on the wall were hand-tufted carpets, their woolen color fields shaved down to reveal texts in braille. These cited literary passages on the hues of sea and sky from authors including Raymond Chandler, Gabriel García Márquez, André Gide, James Joyce, Daphne du Maurier, and Haruki Murakami, as well as a meteorological report dating to the day of Bloom’s birth.

Bloom’s exhibition “*Il Tempo*” was a complex construction merging past and new work, with the general subject of atmosphere evoked through images, objects, and writing. Presented side by side with an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Joe Bradley and Tobias Pils that occupied the other half of the gallery’s space, Bloom’s installation was a

quiet retort to the recrudescence of oil on canvas. Bloom's installation is as handmade as her neighbors' paintings, but with the dispassionate gesture of employing sourced material she omits individual expression, signature, or style. In her juxtaposition of sea reproductions, store-bought sculpture, and Indian textiles, Bloom stayed true to what has always been an essentially linguistic and conceptual practice. Her easels are readymades bearing only reproductions. The decision to work serially de-fetishizes the original in a well-known Duchampian tradition.

If weather was the ostensible subject of the exhibition, its Italian translation, *il tempo*, also evoked time. Bloom's is a philosophical, poetic, and personal vision of atmosphere, visible but not legible to the sighted, decipherable (only while kneeling) by the sight-impaired. The carpet featuring statistics of Bloom's birth seems like a key to the exhibition, yet we learn very little from them. Her works speak of reading and of teaching "how to see." Stormy seas and skies riven by lightning bolts, placid skies, and still water remind us of familiar images in the works of Manet, Homer, and Wyeth, but above all of Marcel Broodthaers, whose masterful 1974 book/film *A Voyage on the North Sea* elided differences between media and offered multiple levels of interpretation.

A recurring theme in Bloom's work is the balance between destruction and creation. A set of paper bookmarks offered as a free multiple at Zweigstelle Capitain contains more quotations on the subject of sea and atmosphere. Virginia Woolf's "The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling . . ." becomes ominous in light of her death by drowning. And then there's Raymond Chandler on desert winds and carving knives: "Anything can happen."

Pinpointing precise meaning is anathema to this artist's oeuvre, as she riffs on theory, literature, and object-making. In a swirling maelstrom of meanings, we are encouraged to see the frailty of the human subject as an anchor for meaning. Art, with its conventions, indexes, and forms, may proffer surface definitions but harbors a storm of interpretation. Untamable and unpredictable, weather, in the hands of Bloom, is a means to speak about art—and life itself.