

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Gloria Bornstein *Still Life* at the Seattle Art Museum”

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<http://www.gloriabornstein.com/exhibitions/concupi.html>



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Gloria Bornstein has lived in Seattle for 26 years, taught at Cornish, had an earlier career as a performance artist, and created several public art works, but the scope of her layered, witty and subtle intelligence as an artist is not nearly visible enough in this town. Seattle eagerly crowns youthful endeavors, as it did recently in the well organized and orchestrated LAVA exhibition at Noodleworks, an exhibition of the hustling under thirties artists working in Seattle. The theme of lava, energy surging from the earth, was a provocative starting point, and the exhibition was accompanied by a professional catalog which solicited solid art critical essays. But when it comes to its mature artists, Seattle is a little slower to give substantial catalogs and exhibitions. Gloria Bornstein fares somewhat better than some of those important artists: in 1994 she had an exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery. Three years ago she had a major retrospective at the Bellevue Art Museum. Currently (March 16 – October 20, 2002) she is featured at the Seattle Art Museum in the PONCHO series Northwest Documents in an installation that features a work acquired by the museum. I personally would like to see this intelligent work on permanent display.

Gloria Bornstein's two part installation “Still Life” has a dark side and a light side, a serious message and a humorous pun. The two parts of the installation are partnered by their emphasis on the idea of display in the museum itself. In other words, there is a self-

conscious awareness of the museum installation as installation, of its parameters and conventions, its distortions, and its delights, which is an integral part of the art. Instead of making art and putting it into the museum, Bornstein has allowed the museum to shape the work itself, even as she pokes fun at the museum as a conceptual container for art.

The title “Still Life” is itself art historical: it draws on the tradition of objects on a table that is a characteristic, if peculiar, subject for art. Dutch seventeenth century still lives, a product of a materialistic mercantile society not unlike our own, piled up lavish flowers and fruits that embodied the ephemeral nature of life.

Bornstein’s still life references also pile objects on a table, but the objects are layered with historical, biological and conceptual references. In the dark part of the installation, *Gauging* (1994) about thirty tins with charred rice, are an invocation of a child’s size box of burnt rice that the artist saw in the Museum in Nagasaki. The rice was charred in the firestorm that followed the dropping of the Atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Bornstein’s husband’s family is Japanese and this object signifies the ways in which great disasters strike down individuals in the midst of the most ordinary events. The tins full of charred rice are set in a dark room, but they are countered by a video of contemporary rice fields, shot from the window of a Japanese train. The video hypnotically draws us to its own rhythms of speed as it shifts perspectives. Through the window are several near and far vistas of lush rice fields and industrial towns, on the outside surface of the glass rain is dragged across it in dancing shapes, and on the inside of a steamed up window there is only a blur. These shifting views also have art historical resonance; they recall Claude Monet’s waterlily paintings, in which we can plunge visually under water, stay on the surface or see reflections from above.

Reflections and vistas in both cases are metaphors of shifting understanding, reflection in the midst of mystery. The thriving rice fields are a counterpoint to the burned rice, a positive expression.

Trains for Bornstein also reference the holocaust in Germany, as the means by which Jews were taken to the concentration camps, a connection she makes as the daughter of Polish Jews who left before World War II, but who lost many friends and family. But of course those trains bore no resemblance to this view of green fields, they were closed, crowded freight cars, and we inevitably feel the movement from closed and hopeless to open and positive in the video as we look at it, even as we also feel its ambiguity, the rain is like tears streaming across the surface.

The Seattle Art Museum acquired *Gauging* in 1999 for its permanent collection through a gift of Helen Gurvich in honor of Anne Gerber. Anne Gerber, who is currently 93 years old, established a fund at the museum to acquire art that engages with cultural, social and political issues.

The museum invited Bornstein to create a second piece, using the museum as a reference point, to accompany *Gauging* for the “Still Life” exhibition. Set again on a table, in this case a new maple table with a vitrine (glass cover), are a group of shapes rendered in porcelain. These odd shapes, in contradiction to their refined medium, seem to be

caricatures, or even pop objects. They are, in fact, hugely enlarged representations based on drawings of invertebrate sexual organs. They include DNA virus (these organs resemble the many breasted Artemis of Ephesus) earthworms, sea urchins, roundworms, rotifers, barnacles, flatworms, earthworms and annelids, ancient bisexual life forms. We are looking, then at a type of cartoon of bisexuality, along with their “sources” in old taxonomy textbooks.

The display is a parody of the seriousness with which museums show objects that together may constitute an entirely different reality in life than they do in art. But in another pun, the title *Concupiscence*, which means sexual lust, is also a reference to the desires of a museum, of a museum curator, of a museum collector, to own work, to pursue work as lovers pursue each other, caught in the grip of their desire. Bornstein actually read the letters of some of the early collectors for the Seattle Art Museum, and this desire, this pursuit was clearly part of the story.

The brightness of *Concupiscence* makes it appear to be the positive part of the installation, but, in fact, its dark underbelly of desire undercuts its positive character. Moreover, in today’s world as we short circuit the many interlocking ecosystems on the planet in the name of capitalism, these sexual organs may be the only remaining life forms in a few more years. The cycle from the deaths in war in Nagasaki and German camps to the current death of the entire planet as a result of concupiscence makes the installation as a whole an effort to stay positive in the face of the distortions of nature, science and art, and the perpetuation of those distortions in the context of museum displays.