



PHYLLIS BRAMSON

In Praise of Folly

A Retrospective, 1985–2015

RAM
ROCKFORDARTMUSEUM

IN PRAISE OF FOLLY

OCT 9, 2015-JAN 31, 2016

ROCKFORD ART MUSEUM

Essays: Danny Orendorff *Anything Goes: Freedom, Fetish, and Phyllis Bramson*

Lynne Warren *Welcome to the Pleasure Dome*

Anything Goes: Freedom, Fetish, and Phyllis Bramson.

While I can't confirm it, the Internet tells me that the favorite website of cult classic filmmaker John Waters, consummate artist of all things sex and kitsch, is LuridDigs.com. X-rated and hilarious, *Lurid Digs* is a website dedicated to dissecting the most perplexing of bedroom interiors as seen in the wanton self-portraiture of men seeking sex online. Make no mistake, the questionably furnished spaces of *Lurid Digs* are odd enough to begin with, but it's the overt sexual charge of the primary subjects depicted that heighten any given room's contents to a whole other level of tragic novelty.

Organized into such categories as "Dens from Hell," "Living Room Wreckage," "Marvelous Mancaves," and, my personal favorite, "Hot Anyway," the amateur at-home photography on *Lurid Digs* is coupled with wicked criticism of the subject's unforgivable decor calamities. Part of the brilliance of *Lurid Digs* is its total collapse of the private and the public, the strange and the ordinary, the pornographic and the pathetic, and the domestic with the virtual. While sexuality is a nebulous, ever-evolving quality particular to us all, the stuff we surround ourselves with and the desires populating our search-engines are infinitely more easy to trace. How, and inevitably when, the three elements of sexuality, space, and stuff collide determines the harmony, or horror, of our most intimate experiences.

I venture to guess that Phyllis Bramson understands technologies of amorous over-sharing all too well. Her keen awareness of the latent libido beneath the surface of just about *everything* is implicit throughout her prolific portfolio of painted, collaged, and sculptural artworks from the 1980s to today. Offering erotic and humorous, if somewhat disturbing, depictions of (other-)worldly accoutrements in a number of compromising positions and suggestive arrangements, each of Bramson's many compositions greets viewers like a riddle disguised as a love-letter. Rarely overt, Bramson's strangely romantic artwork taunts us with subtlety, and brims with literary subtext. Paradoxes abound and nothing is ever quite as it seems. This is the beguiling work of an artist who once wisely told me that flirtation is nothing but sexuality abstracted.

Flirting with the psychosexual subconscious of Americana objects, winking at conventions of 'good taste,' and pinching at the backside of our public facades of normalcy: Bramson's aesthetic is that of the *bawdy banal*. It is sentimental, and it is smart. It is rooted in the stuff of 1950s American (sub-)urbanity, but appears timeless due to Bramson's clever usage of appropriation and pastiche. Through iconography and innuendo, Bramson searches for, and somehow depicts, complex worlds of desire, emotion, and curiosity that industry, excess, cultural fantasy, and kitsch-commodity (or, in other words: post-modernity) have conspired to make possible.

In his short essay "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism," written in 1925 during the height of the Surrealist art movement, German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin positions the totemic and icon-heavy artwork of Surrealism as being enabled by kitsch;

What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the

human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior.¹

Benjamin goes on to argue that “a new man,” a new subject, is the byproduct of the advent of the industrially and mass-produced phenomena we call kitsch. This subject, Benjamin concludes, is *the furnished man*: a subject who is “furnished” with dreams, desires, wants, and needs by the constant rush of such exterior forces as art, mass-mediated imagery, commercialism, and capital.² Icons and symbols, having been assimilated into our psyches, come pre-loaded with signification and particular emotional attachments. The work of the Surrealists, Benjamin seems to suggest, is predicated and dependent upon this quality of Modern subjectivity. Kitsch becomes a method for disrupting ordinary consciousness and reorienting our dreams.

While Bramson’s artwork certainly follows in the wake of Surrealism, her compositional choices indicate that she is more interested in gender and object relations than the automatism and perspectival weirdnesses of such predecessors. The strangeness and disorientation of Bramson’s artwork is derived from the stuff of popular culture made carnal and gone awry. Much like the playful scrutiny of the interiors found on the aforementioned *Lurid Digs* website, Bramson toys with the iconography of lowbrow Americana by animating old taboos and merging stereotypical depictions of foreign landscapes with the common oddities of domesticity.

A 2014 painting of Bramson’s, *The Collector’s Collection*, seems to retroactively set the stage for her artistic oeuvre. Appearing like the contents of little Omri’s cupboard before his great-grandmother’s magic key animates everything inside, the painting depicts four rows of figurines, florals, and miniature knock-off paintings that re-appear - in some way, shape, form, or another - throughout Bramson’s wide variety of artwork.³ While organized horizontally, *The Collector’s Collection* offers no other indication of this being a rational space. It is, instead, a virtual arsenal of near-generic icons available to Bramson for later reconfiguration and folly. Painted in her signature palette, in which cool pastels meet brash fluorescents, Bramson simultaneously levels the commodity playing field by lending chintzy Orientalist statues the same, if not more, psychological charge than the stuff of official art history.

Bramson’s genre-bending brand of irrationality and irreverence is there in the cherubic face of an illustrated clown in love with the unobtainable geisha figurine across the room, in the lustful glances of teacup aristocrats towards the Eskimos trapped in an offensive 1950s snow-globe, and in the unknown erotic possibilities existent within a distant painted pagoda or pleasure garden. Many of these things relate to visual lexicons of leisure-travel, as well as to the corresponding efforts of tourist industries to commodify our often artificial experiences of nature, paradise, times-past, and promise-lands into collectible little fetishes called souvenirs. Whether we’ve ac-

¹ Benjamin, Walter. “Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 238.

² Ibid. P. 238.

³ This sentence contains reference to the 1980 children’s novel *The Indian in the Cupboard* by British author Lynne Reid Banks.

tually been to such places, or simply visited the Epcot Center version thereof, is besides the point. What matters is that souvenirs, trinkets, postcards, magnets, and all our other tchotchkes represent desires and memories assigned, abstracted, re-packaged, and made available to us as easily purchasable icons.

Such objects become design elements within Bramson's dimensional collection of mixed-media works from 2015 incorporating shelving, knick-knacks, and painted scrolls. Draping her scrolls from custom shelves featuring careful arrangements of prized household curios, Bramson literally elevates such decorative household wares as a metal cherry-blossom branch and a pair of porcelain swans beyond their physical object-ness and into the realm of artistic composition. For the piece *Stories Before Bedtime: Tales of Love* (2015), Bramson has combined a floral wreath depicting two coquettish Victorians at its center with a pair of Peeping Tom garden gnomes and a long, painted scroll that concludes its cascade with a scene of some good, old-fashioned toe sucking. Appearing something like a makeshift altar, the painted-scroll element of the work seems to gesture towards animation of the actual objects at its top. Yet, Bramson resists linear storytelling in favor of spacious insinuation. The surprising juxtapositions she produces are as charming as they are disarming, pointing towards abstract dirty jokes, harmless fun, and fantastical unpredictability.

Take Bramson's painting from 2012, *It's an Old Story... But a New Day*. In its top half, a miniature Russian jester clings desperately onto the backs of two Japanese woodcut figures that appear either mid-coitus or deep in sleep. Around them are collaged elements from various watercolor landscape paintings Bramson found at resale stores and cut-up for re-use in her own artwork, as well as a windy trellis of Celtic florals. In the bottom half are two petite depictions of utopian Eastern non-places (a woman under a cliffside *matsu* tree, a floating Imperial palace) framing the inexplicably suggestive grouping of a hobo-clown, snowman, and geisha. Composed with the orgiastic anarchy of your local thrift store's bauble shelf, *It's an Old Story... But a New Day*, like much of Bramson's artwork, bewilders with whimsy. While the painting refuses narrative coherency and, therefore, may frustrate rational desires for clarity and happy endings, its openness to interpretation overwhelms the work with possibility.

There's an optimism in the ability to render these delightfully nonsensical worlds from cheap things at Bramson's immediate disposal, and a radical sense of generosity in realizing that she does not shut down myriad interpretations of the phenomena depicted. Bramson's figures and landscapes are poised to evoke and disturb many feelings in many people. In making this all manifest, the artist seems intent on letting a viewer know: *anything goes*.

The aptly titled *Perpetual Offerings* (2002) gives vision to Bramson's enduring spirit of freedom and frivolity when it comes to the wide world of things and their potential for providing fascination. A saturated, bold-hued mix of painting and collage, the work features a bare-breasted crimson fairy and an extra-limbed figurine with a lightbulb for a brain collecting various flora and fauna in a clamshell. A collage of petals, berries, and bulbs oozes like lava from curvy red barnacles at the top of the canvas. A thought-bubble appears above the robot-figure's lightbulb-brain, filled with yet another collage of glittery, pearlescent flowers and other matter that appears nearly celestial. At the very center, another thought bubble disrupts the rich purple landscape. It con-

tains a single hand that holds a golden goblet towards the sky, perhaps hoping to collect some of the abundant gorgeousness cascading all around.

Influential feminist art critic Lucy Lippard, writing in 1977 about the challenges faced by female artists employing hobby-craft materials and sentimental tropes within their artwork to critically compete in the world of fine art, argued that “the ‘over-decoration’ of the home and the fondness for bric-a-brac often attributed to female fussiness or just plain Bad Taste can just as well be attributed to creative restlessness.”⁴ Indeed, with over 40 years worth of thematically consistent artwork already produced and a present-day studio flush with collected novelties and dime-store decor ready to be deconstructed and re-imagined, Bramson shows no sign of resting. As the motifs of abundance and collection in *Perpetual Offerings* might suggest, Bramson knows that her inspiration is endless; fertilized by the ever-flowing rush of things us ordinary individuals purchase and discard in our constant attempt to decorate our lives with beauty and intrigue.

⁴ Lippard, Lucy. “Making Something from Nothing (Towards a Definition of Women’s “Hobby Art”)” in *The Craft Reader*. Ed. Glenn Adamson. Oxford, Berg, 2010. P. 486.