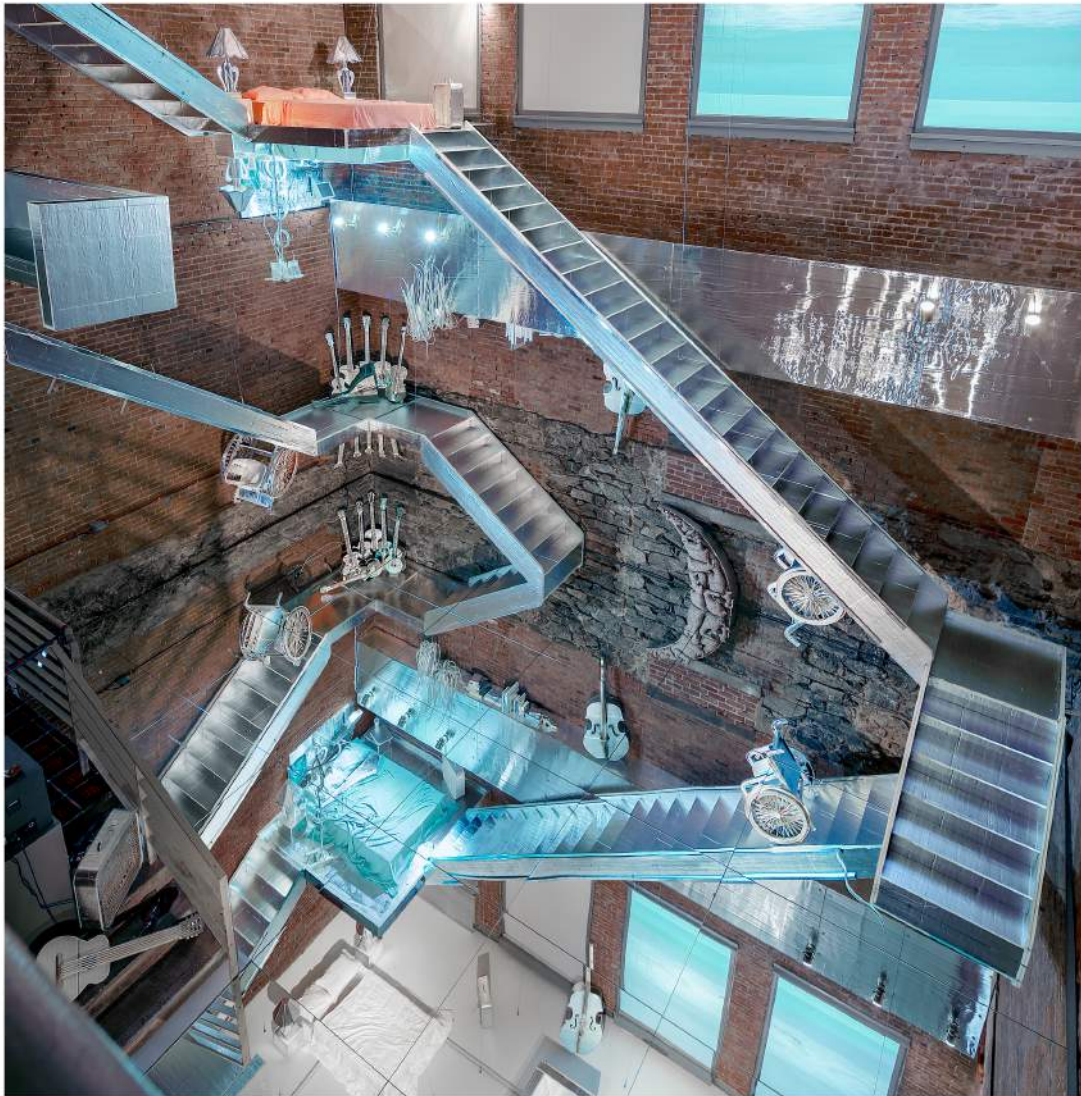


# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



OPENINGS

# Samara Golden

CAT KRON

**MANY ARTISTS** have used mirrors to reinforce the presence of viewers and spaces alike, creating a specular affirmation of site and bodily self. Fewer have grappled with the mirror's converse aspect, in which reflection, à la Lacan, jarringly severs the self's imago from its outward reality. And fewer still have engaged both facets as effectively as Samara Golden, whose work titillates and unnerves in equal, unflinching measure. Golden's reflections place the physicality of both installation and spectator in limbo, in spaces that are at once surreal and personal, dense with uncanny imagery conveyed via matter-of-fact constructions. Her installations subtly frustrate the desire for a resolved image, producing instead a fractured experience—sometimes quite literally, as in the *Rape of the Mirror*, 2011, where shattered glass covers the bedspread, and a video of the artist weeping plays on a loop.

Golden's Escheresque chambers conjure dizzying narratives, the stuff of anxious dreams. The LA-based artist's investigations into alternate realities—she has talked about a sixth dimension that might collapse our linear experiences of time and space into a single, psychologically dense plane—are abetted by the material obfuscations of the mirror, its conjuring of imaginative dissociation. Golden's use of reflective surfaces can also be interpreted as a harnessing of repetition to unearth submerged memories, as if the works themselves were demonstrating the proverbial distress of Freud's shell-shocked soldier, perpetually forced to revisit a nightmare whose trauma derives from the sleeper's belief that he missed—or failed to visually comprehend—the threat when it first appeared.

Golden's recent tour-de-force installation at MOMA PS1 in New York, curated by Mia Locks, showed such a fraught dreamspace. Installed in the museum's two-story Duplex Gallery and occupying its full height, with three levels open to view, *The Flat Side of the Knife*, 2014, was the artist's largest work to date. Most readily apparent at eye level from the atrium's balcony was a 1970s-style peach-hued bedroom with the floor dropped out. On closer inspection, the installation revealed an inverted teal frame adhered to the peach bed's underside. The upright and inverted beds were mounted to the museum's exposed-brick wall but seemed to hover above the recessed gallery, due in part to the silver Rmax insulation boards that were used to fabricate their armatures, platforms, and accompanying furniture. The aquamarine mise-en-scène surrounding the inverted bed (meant to evoke a hospital room, complete with handcrafted IV drips, per the artist's

description) was visible if one looked down from the balcony, where it appeared as another bedroom within the reflected mirrored plates the artist used to tile the atrium's floor. Another room was positioned to appear "beneath" this green room in the reflection—a critical feat achieved by virtue of a bed mounted to the atrium's ceiling (and thus at the highest elevation of the three). This hidden setup created a third level that appeared deepest set within the mirrored floor. When viewed from above, the white room seemed to encompass the bottom floor of a sexily cascading split-level apartment. The vacant SoCal seaside realm (by way of a shoreline projected on MOMA PS1's uppermost wall, visible within the lowest reflection through a sliding glass door) appeared as a respite from the sterile yet foreboding second level. But the spilled glass of red wine on a nearby table left the trace of histrionics.

The emotional states suggested within these different levels were as disorienting as their refracted constructions of space: a narrative that slid between meditative calm, frenetic anxiety, and depressive detachment. (Or was it the detachment of the dead?) Each level within the mirror was equally visible and inaccessible, as if the artist meant to demonstrate our ability to grasp the logic behind the visual phenomenon that produces looking-glass worlds, while hammering home





Samara Golden, *Rape of the Mirror*, 2011, mixed media. Installation view, Night Gallery, Los Angeles.



Samara Golden, *Mass Murder*, 2014, mixed media. Installation view, Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

the alt-space's unavailability to viewers limited to three dimensions. Or, perhaps, to remind us of the barriers separating our own conscious experience from its repressed emotional underpinnings.

The mechanics of this particular illusion were made apparent as the eye traveled up the atrium's brick walls via strategically installed upside-down silver-foam staircases; within the reflection, these descended seamlessly to the levels below. The metallic stairwells were strewn with a glinting lace-up granny boot, silver-jacketed books, silver cellos and guitars, and silvery potted plants. A curious accumulation of mottled cat-form pillows, nestled in a talon-shaped metal encasement and resting on the mirrored gallery floor, demarcated the border between real and reflected space. Unlike the trappings surrounding them, these cats were not silver but, according to the artist, were upholstered to resemble the scintillating auratic patterning associated with migraines. They might also have been recognizable to viewers familiar with the animal motifs from *Mass Murder*, Golden's 2014 two-room installation at Night Gallery in Los Angeles, where the pillows were piled atop an Rmax kitchen counter. The forms were derived from hallucinatory creatures that Golden saw while critically ill with pneumonia; they also operated as tokens of comfort and familiarity (which cats bestow on us when they're so inclined). Viewed with their reflection, the pointillist cats merged into gray television-monitor static to compose a silver moon both

whimsical and ominous, straddling the interstice. Meanwhile, silver wheelchairs, clinging to the stairs in midfall, recalled the perilously plunging baby carriage of *Battleship Potemkin*.

Yet while the artist's practice is frequently read as a sly commentary on cinematic melodrama and illusion—the Buster Keaton Tinseltown facade that, exposing its studs on toppling, neatly collapses both “building” and the suspension of disbelief we ask films to construct—Golden's works, personally resonant spaces fashioned from low-tech materials and using DIY illusion techniques, reside in a nebulous zone, neither winkingly outside her narratives nor seamlessly immersive. The foam bed frames, cabinetry, and chaise longues that fill her unoccupied habitats are neatly crafted but retain indications of their homemade provenance—grooves where the artist has sutured the Rmax sheets, slight dents in the silver skins. Much of the furniture is modeled on the '70s decor of Golden's Midwestern childhood—a significant portion of furniture and ephemera from *Mass Murder's* rooms were replicas of items owned by Golden's grandparents. This physical, nostalgic aspect of her practice works to ground its vertiginous, never fully identified implications of hallucinations, migraines, discord, and paranoia. The resulting installation, however, presented viewers with a disorienting, dimly lit domestic set with a video projection of a sunset at the beach on a far wall, in which mirrored surfaces abounded but one's own reflection could be seen only sidelong. Missing from the tableau were the characters who might activate it. Amid shadowy fellow gallerygoers, each visitor was left to parse a story from the artist's reference points and personal associations.

Whether another spectator visible in one's periphery, one's own self caught in reflection, or the often conspicuously absent subject of the installation space, bodies always feel compromised in Golden's works. As a result, the installations are upending, nonhierarchical—privileging the vantage points of the sites' dedicatee (Golden has cited society's outliers as inspirations for many of the works) and their patrons in equal measure. While sitting on the couch helpfully

Golden's chambers conjure dizzying narratives, the stuff of anxious dreams.



Left: Samara Golden, *The Flat Side of the Knife*, 2014, mixed media. Installation view, MOMA PS1, New York.

Below: Samara Golden, *Always smile at the mask of hate for it covers a sad face*, 2015, mixed media. Installation view, Frieze Art Fair, New York.

positioned at the edge of *Always smile at the mask of hate for it covers a sad face*, 2015, the abjectly squat infinity chamber Golden had jammed below the raised floorboards of the Frieze Art Fair tent in New York this past spring, I found myself gesturing in an unsuccessful attempt to locate my arm within the reflection. Here, oversize cloth dolls fabricated from various Americana textiles were suspended upside down from the floorboards. The dolls were reflected in mirrors that had been laid on the sodden grass. An additional mirror flanked the far wall of the arrangement. Within the reflective floor, tightly packed bodies displayed handpainted faces with black eye sockets staring blankly, while the rear mirror reflected glow-paint skeletons on the figures' backs.

While lacking the high drama of *The Flat Side of the Knife*, the eerie installation struck a more historically potent chord, its configuration unnervingly reminiscent of diagrams of eighteenth-century slave-ship holds. The arrangement was inspired by a Ron Cobb cartoon that had fascinated Golden as a child—a geologically stratified view in which a family sits down to Thanksgiving dinner above the piled corpses of massacred Native Americans buried beneath their house. The piece was conceived as both a reconceptualization of her 2012 Frieze commission *Bad Brains*—an homage to lost souls, particularly those of the potter's fields on Randall's and Wards Islands—and an alternative to the aseptic art-fair excess overhead. I didn't experience it, but I was told that during the span of the expo, the couch was rained on several times and developed something of a funk. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the moldy nook gained a reputation as a reasonably secure place to smoke pot, and subsequently became a gathering spot for those (largely young) nonbuying visitors, there by fortune or happenstance, to whom the blue-chip offerings twenty feet up did not call out quite as loudly.

This month, the artist is set to open her first solo show at CANADA gallery in New York, an installation primed to match the technical ambition of *The Flat Side of the Knife* while hewing to Golden's modest, straightforward choice of materials. The exhibition will feature an installation of four individual mirror scenes to be viewed via a raised, gallery-spanning walkway. Structures affixed to each wall will reveal separate rooms within the reflection below, depending on one's vantage point. Golden envisions the installation as a rendering of a room in which each internal plane may be privileged as ground, allowing the hypothetical occupant to toggle among hotel lobby, company boardroom, living room, and the like. It may be the most complete manifestation yet of Golden's

search for a sixth dimension. The show is poised to expand her stylistic vocabulary, opening her inset mirrors and optical tricks to new playful possibilities—walking on walls! But we should not expect a mere romp from an artist whose work of the past decade has consistently demonstrated the subtle psychic weight of dissociation. It seems more likely that Golden's guileless ingenuity will once again infuse her prism of obfuscating mirrors, providing a rejoinder to the high-budget, low-stakes immersivity of glowing suns and rain showers. Golden's atmospheric conditions hail from another, more modest dimension, equally enthralling but pointedly disconcerting. □

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