



ArtSeen

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SAMARA GOLDEN *The Flat Side of the Knife*

by Kate Liebman

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Samara Golden's art is nearly impossible to talk about. Just as looking into *The Flat Side of the Knife* at MoMA PS1 induces vertigo, so too a description of the installation slips by, down, away. Understanding flits in and out. Golden has created a complex world of suspension, reflection, and duplication through opposition and duality. Her strange, entrancing piece enacts a paradox of dreaming or hallucination: of being physically present in a single location, but mentally in many. The body is split from the mind, and an emotional response of displacement follows.

Even the title, *The Flat Side of the Knife*, suggests how crucial duality is to Golden's project. What makes the knife the knife is the blade: the ability to cut, to incise. The sharp edge is the essence of the tool, the knife-iest. The other component of the knife is what Golden terms the "flat side," smooth, non-violent. Not quite opposite the blade, these two sides slope down to meet. At their juncture, the edge. By calling attention to the safe part of the knife, Golden offers a poetic title that inverts our expectation and exposes the dualism of her tool.

And Golden has had plenty of time to ponder the knife. She has cut all of the objects in the installation from Thermax, an inexpensive insulation board coated in metallic silver foil. Fragile couches, Escher-like stairs, non-functioning musical instruments, lamps without light, false books, fake plants, and unusable wheelchairs: these are things made for the body, but impossible for a real body to occupy. They simultaneously suggest and deny our bodies. Suggest: these are things made for our bodies—to sit, to step, to play, to see. Deny: suspended from the ceiling and so fragile, they cannot be used.

Despite the number of things in PS1's Duplex Gallery, Golden has arranged them so that the installation feels surprisingly clean, almost sterile. The messiness of her earlier work has dissipated, yet there is still so much to see and decipher. There are five planes: five distinct, flat levels of Golden's handmade furniture. Three physical planes and two reflected. Golden has suspended three bedrooms from the ceiling, which reproduce themselves almost identically in layout: a fan at the foot

of each bed; two bedside tables with lamps adjacent to the bed; and two pillows and a blanket on the bed.

By putting a grid of mirrors on the floor, Golden has created an illusion of distance, so that these three bedrooms expand well beyond the double-story gallery. She has made a vertical loop of depth and height, of material sculpture and immaterial image that endlessly converge and separate. The mirror is not unrelated to the knife. By action, the knife cuts one into two; by reflection, the mirror makes two of one. Suddenly a physical thing exists both as itself and as the inverse of itself, as an image. Dizzying to see and dizzying to articulate.

Golden has also included functional furniture in her installation. This furniture does more than suggest the body; it offers evidence of sustained use. In a room off of the basement, Golden recreated what seems to be a small living room or a dingy waiting room. Here: a '90s-era TV, a used plaid couch, and some stuffed animals sewn by Golden. The fraying, comfortable sofa opposes the slick Thermax ones. Just as the used couch counters the constructed ones, the TV counters the mirrors installed on the floor. Both provide images of the piece. Whereas the mirrors reflect the bedrooms suspended above, the TV plays a live video feed of the installation. The physical things and the images derived from them repeatedly confront us so that we are enmeshed in the world Golden has created.

Golden's emphasis on the bedroom, our private space, marks this installation as intimate. It is a place of—and for—dreaming. The only bedroom that appears just in its physical manifestation is suspended from the ceiling, at eye-level with the viewer from the “ideal” vantage point in the lobby. We could conceivably sleep in this bed; this plane feels as warm and welcoming as a floating bedroom in a public space could feel. The peach cotton sheets and the gently glowing gemstone lamp mark this as the plane for the living. Our bodies and our minds are united.

Reflected in the mirrored floor are two of the physical bedrooms. Hung upside down, they appear right side up. These two bedrooms have two manifestations: as physical object (upside down) and duplicated as reflected room (right side up). Their reflections stack in the mirrored floor, creating an illusion that the white bedroom hung on the ceiling is the one furthest from us. In the middle bedroom, plastic-y teal sheets cling to the bed. Next to it, faux wires wrap around an IV pole. The potted fern and the collection of books suggest a long stay in the hospital. Perhaps placing these items there amounts to a futile attempt to make the necessary enduring. Indeed, Golden's inspiration for this piece was a near fatal bout of pneumonia she survived nearly a decade ago. This is the intermediary plane, for the suffering and the saved; it is limbo.

But the whole installation exists for the plane that seems furthest from us: the room reflected in the Duplex Gallery's mirrored floor. The white room's layout approximates a clean, tasteful studio apartment. Though it is the largest, it has the least furniture. The sparest of the rooms, it's the eeriest. The creature comforts in the peach room and the life-saving devices in the middle room are gone. A perfectly made bed. A glass of wine spilled on a table near the couch. Two large “windows”

made from projections of gentle waves endlessly coming ashore. Stairs leading to a threshold filled with light, but empty. This is the deepest plane, for the bodiless. It is unreachable; we can enter only once we leave our somas behind.

Golden must have intended for us to understand this final plane's impossibility. Of the four wheelchairs (two physical, each reflected), none slides down the staircase leading to this final plane. To the other rooms, these chairs glide down as if their descent is inevitable. Furthermore, it is surprisingly difficult to catch the reflection of yourself or of another viewer in the mirrored floor, which means that the trompe l'oeil is rarely broken. Even our reflected physical presence is barred from the room. The bottom world seems real, though it is reflected. It exists below us, though its physical twin hangs above. Through the mirror's duplicity, Golden merges the reflected and the real.

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