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A Profusion of Enlightenment

Light and Dark at MoMA, the Morgan, the Armory and Beyond

by Ken Johnson

REFLECTED LIGHT, SILVERY AND ENIGMATIC There are many different kinds of enlightenment. Consider "The Flat Side of the Knife," an installation by Samara Golden at MoMA PS 1. Standing at a railing where you look into the museum's two-story-tall Duplex Gallery, you behold a confoundingly complicated interior architecture with furniture, stairways, musical instruments, wheelchairs and many other domestic items rendered in silvery, foil-clad foam board. Light bounces every which way, creating a kind of crystalline, 3-D Cubism. Far below — farther than seems really possible — you see an arrangement of chairs, a sofa and a colorful rug. Then, looking up, you see the same objects attached upside down to the ceiling. It turns out that the gallery's floor is covered by a grid of large mirrors; what you see when you look down isn't real but a reflection of what's above. Everything is doubled, and what you think is up may really be down, and what you take to be real may be a virtual reflection of the real.

The installation includes two videos projected on wall-mounted screens, both showing ocean waves rhythmically lapping a sandy beach. The sound of the waves fills the gallery. The screens are like windows to the outdoors, and they also suggest something metaphysical beyond the constructed interior. Maybe this is what Ms. Golden means by her thoughts quoted in the exhibition's introductory text panel: "I hope my work can be like a door that opens to other times or moods. Maybe we can see that this kind of door is possible, but we don't yet know how to cross its threshold."

("The Flat Side of the Knife" runs through Aug. 30 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; 718-784-2084, momaps1.org.)