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Little Boxes: Samara Golden at Yerba Buena

by Nicole Kaack

Samara Golden: *A Trap in Soft Division* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

March 11 to May 29, 2016

701 Mission Street (at 3rd Street)

San Francisco, 415 978 2787



Installation view of "Samara Golden: *A Trap in Soft Division*," 2016, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery. Photography by TK.

In her recent exhibition at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Samara Golden captures the eerie feeling of glancing into your neighbor's apartment to realize that its floor plan is identical to your own but in reverse. For "A Trap in Soft Division," Golden has appropriated the Center's natural skylights, iterating the same set of furnishings across the 18 lit alcoves, making three groupings of six installations. Each furniture set is mounted upside down in a skylight, visible in a large, tiled mirror placed below the entire installation. Structured identically throughout — with a couch bookended by table lamps facing a low-coffee table and, behind, floor-to-ceiling windows — divisions between the three sets are denoted by minor transformations of light and ornamentation.



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Although illuminated by the natural light from the real windows in each room, the character of each space is dramatically altered by the shift from that existing warmth to the cool tones introduced by the additional artificial light. The decorations surrounding the windows further the divide, defining each room's style and classing it atmospherically and temporally. The array of rooms may be read either as a single space across a span of time or as six different chambers occupied in different ways. Strewn-about ornaments confer the semblance of life on these spaces, which are at once alien and uncannily familiar.

The unexceptional essentials of life are concentrated into these cubicles of space — disparate tasks brought into an unusual proximity. The arrangement of the accessories hazards a casual tone, one set by a computer, in one variation, which is open and ever so slightly askew, or by a blanket tossed nonchalantly across the stiff back of the sofa in another. Details like an abandoned plate of pasta, still slathered with cooling food, create a space that has just been absented, caught in physical and temporal states of suspension. However much these small gestures are intended to open these spaces to us, their rigidity and uniformity rebuff entry. We are warmly invited into a space that we cannot occupy, in a literal sense, because of its inverted orientation, but also because it is not plastic enough to accommodate the multiplicity of our forms.



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The resultant rooms seem to speak in the aesthetics of urban living, of existing carefully on the surface of a space without putting down roots. But they also engage in the wider phenomenon of standardized form: you sit, alone, in an architecture shared by hundreds of others in the tens of blocks surrounding your own. You start at the noise of your alarm, only to relax apprehensively with the realization that the sound has emanated through your floor from the apartment below. The objects that occupy these in-between spaces are as signs that become representative of their makers, expressions of identity as subtle (or as blatant) as laptop-stickers. These are the materialized inscriptions that allow us to lay claim to mass-produced forms. The discomfort of Golden's show is in the recognition of how uneasily

and superficially these assertions of individuality lie.

"A Trap in Soft Division" speaks to cultural standardization that begins in tract housing and apartment blocks and proceeds into the minutiae of our lives, from our electronics to the shirts that we wear. Peering over the barrier into the magic mirror, we are bestowed with an omniscient understanding of the ubiquitous forms that rule our world; the computer built into this upside-down installation could very well be the tiny laptop into which I am now typing these very words. The exhibition's title speaks to this sense of complacent, comfortable limitation. It's a trap because we are not truly given a choice, yet it is not so restrictive as to force a change.

Golden sees her own work as a solution to the problem that it proposes, which "effectively breaks through the solitude it is meant to depict, fleetingly carving out a space that brings visitors together through a joint experience." While persuaded by the alienation that the artist has captured so thoroughly in her representation of contemporary existence, I remain unconvinced by the community that I am meant to have joined; rather than inspiring a lonely companionship, "A Trap In Soft Division" heightens my sense of distance from those strangers whose curious eyes I avoid in the cold surface of the mirror.



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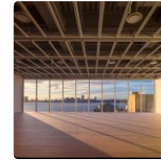
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