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HYPERALLERGIC



Samara Golden's Momento Mori Give Shape to Grief

By Olivia Jia

PHILADELPHIA — In this moment of national tragedy, *Samara Golden: Upstairs at Steve's* gives form to the emotional landscape of a grieving mind. Its title itself a tribute to the artist's late brother-in-law, this exhibition is the culmination of Golden's residency with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, during which she was invited to experiment with new materials and processes with support from a studio team led by senior project coordinator Abby Lutz.



Samara Golden, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Upstairs at Steve's* (installation detail), 2020. Mixed media. 80'7" x 17' 6" x 16'. Photo credit: Carlos Avendano.

Upstairs at Steve's is a contemporary memento mori. Rather than genre staples of dying flowers, skulls, and ticking clocks, Golden's tableau seems to embody ephemerality itself. Installed on the museum's eighth floor, the mirrored walls and floor transform a sliver of a gallery into a vast arena, viewable from a wooden deck. Simultaneously evoking a lighthouse and a chapel, a stained glass window is multiplied by reflection into a dazzling arcade. Sandy dunes are strewn with the remnants of a life — household objects, furniture, clothing — like the aftermath of a hurricane. Hallucinatory dream-logic complicates the otherwise unsubtle metaphor of natural disaster for personal tragedy.

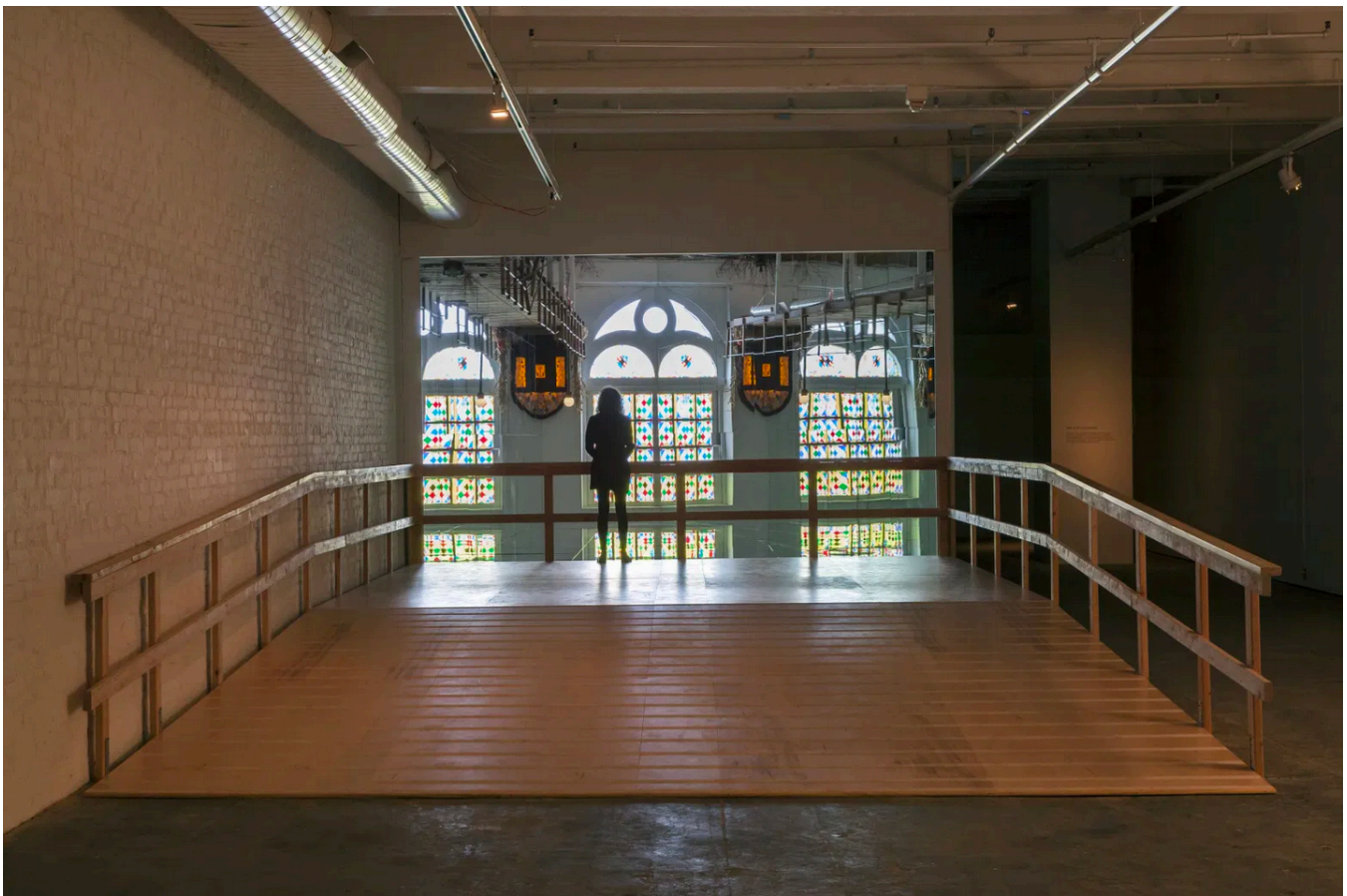


Samara Golden, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Upstairs at Steve's* (installation detail), 2020. Mixed media. 80'7" x 17' 6" x 16'. Photo credit: Carlos Avendano.

Reflection, and its attendant repetition, is a recurring formal device for Golden. Here it also recalls the nature of traumatic memories, displaced yet persistent. The objects, miniature sculptures adhered to the ceiling, are flipped and suspended by these mirrors, replicating forever. A looping soundtrack of piano and rock music is both fugue-like and ecstatic. It is easy to get lost in this impossible construction, wandering around in the artist's head, on the rickety wooden piers that are only made whole by reflection.

The visceral experience of *Upstairs at Steve's* is oddly mediated by heavy-handed wall texts, which include quotes from Golden like, "This place has the grief we have all felt over a lost friend, all the ways that we hurt the earth even when we don't want to." Viewers are encouraged to submit their own recordings for the accompanying soundscape. Altogether, these messages imply this work is meant to be an all-encompassing sanctuary of loss, and that it ought to be for me exactly what it is for Golden. Yet I cannot see anyone I have grieved

reflected in the old-fashioned American furniture or cottage aesthetic, the Christmas lights or the beachy setting — not to mention the obvious Christian connotations of the stained glass windows. The dissonance between the universalist aims of the curation and the installation's white-American trappings leaves me feeling like a plus one at a funeral, witnessing waterworks, but fundamentally unable to partake.



Samara Golden, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Upstairs at Steve's* (installation detail), 2020. Mixed media. 80'7" x 17' 6" x 16'. Photo credit: Carlos Avendano.

When experienced as a portrait of the artist's psyche alone, *Upstairs at Steve's* is a piercing representation of individual grief. Viewing it is nearly awkward; I feel as if I am poking around in a personal shrine to the deceased, who I will never know. Yet it is this discomfort, this position of spectatorship to grief, that makes this work feel incredibly timely: even as millions of Americans have lost a family member or friend, many more are struggling to contend with their roles as passive observers of national mourning. Our zeitgeist is the conflation of ambient grief and banality. Questions of the moment — how to extend empathy, how to avoid numbness, how to comfort a friend — hover in this tableau, somewhere between the reflections.

Samara Golden: Upstairs at Steve's continues through February 21, 2021 at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (1214 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107). The exhibition is curated by Karen Patterson.

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