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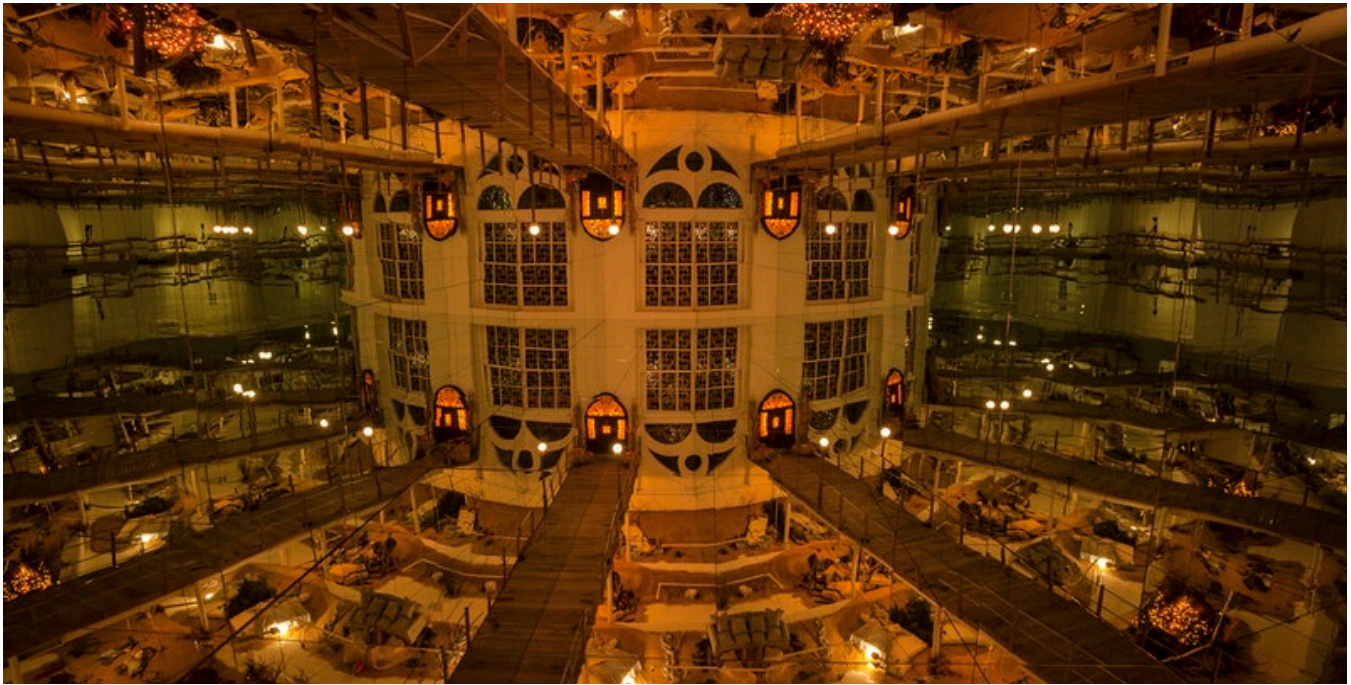
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BROOKLYN RAIL

Samara Golden: Upstairs at Steve's

By Elizabeth Buhe



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.

Like modern-day *Rückenfiguren* akin to Caspar David Friedrich's lone wanderer, we witness Samara Golden's single-room installation *Upstairs at Steve's* (2020) from a precipice, this one a wide ramp situated lengthwise in a single gallery at the Fabric Workshop and Museum. From here the view is perception-bending. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors line the lateral side walls and the floor below, while piles of household detritus—stained linens, holiday décor, empty jugs, discarded chairs—carefully fashioned by hand at half-scale, pile on the ceiling in clusters separated by sand dunes. All this stuff thus appears upside down when reflected in the floor's mirrors, while on the walls it proliferates, ever smaller, in a *mise en abyme*. Unlike those in which we find the *Rückenfigur*, that singular figure of the romantic sublime, Golden's vast landscape is not a verdant expanse

ON VIEW

The Fabric Workshop and
Museum
September 20, 2020 –
February 21, 2021
Philadelphia

unperturbed by human hands but something like its opposite: the apparent site of both personal and natural disaster. Yet evacuated of human presence, the narratives suggested here remain open to our imagination.



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.

Storytelling rests on believability, and *Upstairs at Steve's* succeeds in suspending disbelief despite obvious departures from reality in both scale and mirrored reflection. Visitors to the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where Golden's towering installation of a bisected high-rise provided views onto floors of grimy toilets and abandoned wheelchairs but also the luxuries of a penthouse apartment, will recognize the ease with which Golden's works create a sense of dissonance. That sentiment is manifested in *Upstairs at Steve's* via its spent, strewn objects, which seem to impart a melancholy feeling or even a jolt of the dystopic.

The relevance of autobiography seeps in only through exhibition didactics, which indicate that the Steve of Golden's title was her late brother-in-law, recently lost to ALS. Illusion shades into reality, but Golden also interrogates the supposed guarantee of that reality—our ability to rely on perception and the basic connection between body and mind upon which it depends. For Golden, “the [tricks] I do use are tools to make something that isn't really of this earth,” but that otherworldliness is found not in the realm of the transcendent but that of the mind.¹ Illusion, for Golden, need not be flawless, but just sufficient enough to engage the senses.



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.

Similar to other works that incorporate strategies of visual distortion—I am thinking of anamorphosis, like the torqued skull in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533), or trompe-l'oeil fancies, like Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts's perspective chamber for the Royal Danish Kunstkammer—*Upstairs at Steve's* presents a view resistant to the casual glance. Golden lodges the beholder's gaze somewhere between puzzling out what we actually see and entertaining personal associations that arise involuntarily: the striped couch that recalls the sitting room of a childhood friend, the neat row of blender buttons once glimpsed in a vintage advertisement, the lamp-lined boardwalk setting of a stroll on the Jersey shore. The upshot is that Golden's installation feels like a work of co-creation in which viewers' experiences are essential, not least because we are reflected in its mirrors or because the artist has asked us to contribute our own audio files to the gallery's soundscape. More straightforwardly, the installation is indeed a true collaboration between Golden and the Fabric Workshop and Museum staff, who executed the bulk of the project on Golden's recommendations from afar after she left Philadelphia to quarantine in Los Angeles. In this way, *Upstairs at Steve's* rebuffs the unitary subject posited by Renaissance perspective—a visual device of which the installation otherwise makes dramatic use. Though Golden funnels our gaze forward toward a stained-glass window which serves as the installation's point of focus, at every turn that gaze is refracted, distorted, distracted, redirected, and separated from the secure experience of embodiment. The artist nudges us to see, differently.

1. Samara Golden and Emily Spivack, "An Artist Fascinated by the Art of Magic," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/t-magazine/artist-samara-golden-genii-magazine.html>