

## Barbara Weissberger: One-Woman Group Show

It's an overcast autumn morning in Pittsburgh and I'm standing in Barbara Weissberger's new studio overlooking the Polish Hill section of the city. The view from the expansive windows does not disappoint: rolling hills, a plume of smoke, church towers, a bridge. Power lines mark the sky with the precision of a fat black Sharpie pen. Immediately below, an auto repair shop with immaculate vernacular signage beckons with the promise of a tune-up and official inspection. As if on cue, the sun finds a sliver through the clouds. The valley lights up in an emerald green, and the blue and white paint job on the cinderblock service station suddenly appears hot and sticky. Things change, things stay the same, goes a chant-like rhythm in my head, like dialogue in a Samuel Beckett play.

I turn my attention back to the studio. We are looking at artwork Weissberger plans to include in her January 2019 solo exhibition at Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Kipp Gallery, entitled *Barbara Weissberger: One-Woman Group Show*. Weissberger enjoys puns, double-entendres and wordplay, all of which translates variously in her visual art. She's made it a practice to create ambiguity – in her artwork, and in the viewer's response to it. For *One-Woman Group Show*, Weissberger is presenting highly focused pieces representing her own varied approaches to her work.

On the floor of the studio there is a large plaster sculpture of a foot, deadpan. A group of black and white Polaroid photographs of studio props rest on the worktable. Weissberger will choose one Polaroid to include in the show. Strategically it will connect her studio tools to the other, finished works in the gallery space. The two-dimensional image reinforces her view of the mysteriousness inherent in objects – linking the artist's consistent themes and concerns.

The other end of the worktable is reserved for equipment and supplies: an iron, a sewing machine, spools of thread and fabric scraps. I ask about the sewing machine. Weissberger said she started sewing “after the election,” and our attention turns to a wall-size fabric collage that resembles a quilt, or a flag. The colorful piece, “Rend, Repair,” is printed with images from her photographs, some of which turn up in other artwork: plugs, outlets, adapters and light switches. The material is cut or torn into fragments and sewn together with a zigzag stitch. It is a process of Weissberger’s that I am familiar with, but not the equipment or material. Fabric and sewing, she said, felt right. Weissberger’s idea of repair here has been interpreted by some viewers as evoking the spirit of Japanese *boro*, apparel that is handmade from the “broken” work clothes of farmers and fisherman, using rags and other fabric scraps that are carefully patched and re-patched.

Across the room, a vintage Prestone Anti-Freeze sign in the shape of a thermometer leans against the wall, and I wonder how that is going to make its way into Weissberger’s work. Perhaps it already has made an appearance, within one of the *mise en scènes* she creates in the studio, then photographs as imagery for the fabrics or digital prints. One photographic print of strange pairings and perspective, entitled “Figure,” is resplendent. Flashes of orange material resemble a toxic spill; a hammer drops out of the picture plane and meticulously wraps around the frame.

Weissberger rejects the typical approach to printmaking, which is to create multiples or editions, opting for singular creations. While many objects are made in the studio, some find their way in – which does not preclude their inclusion in *One-Woman Group Show*. An assortment of rocks collected from distant lands and fired clay pieces that resemble torn cardboard stacked on top of each other will be installed in the gallery. In this way, the artist is thinking about sculpture as choice, again, blurring the line between studio tool and art object. Weissberger draws, and I suspect there is a simmering impulse to create one on the gallery

wall. Like drawing, wheat pasting – the favorite medium of revolutionaries, concert promoters and graffiti artists – involves direct action. Printed on newsprint, she'll paste up a single, inscrutable image of a mark of some kind (a smudge, or dirt or blood) on a wall. Recalling the European avant-garde she admires – especially photography and collage from the 1930s – is a discreet collage. An animalistic eye stares out from a donut hair bun suspended above a red carpet, a man's shoe at its crest and a woman's peeking out from below. The image is strange and witty, and also suggests high-concept and precise advertisements from the Mad Men era.

The collection of work Weissberger presents in *One-Woman Group Show* represents a shift that's taken place over the past six or seven years. Earlier images of meat and flowers as metaphors for what is strange and what is beautiful, testing ideas about attraction and repulsion, now give way to a different kind of imagery and a different kind of responsiveness. When asked, Weissberger says her concerns drift toward problems of resistance – specifically, what she sees as an irrelevant imperative to pick a media to work in, to conform, to pick a subject. If there is a theme of this one-woman group show, it's what happens when an artist uses what is at hand: what is the best material to express the idea? If, to paraphrase Beckett, the task of the artist is to find a form that accommodates the mess, the underpinnings of the *One-Woman Group Show* explore the search and the discovery. Another sculpture she has left for examination – a broom with a flag signaling an indiscernible heritage, leans in the corner. It's an aspirant piece conceived for a future installation, a gesture that responds to the world. Weissberger eyes it mischievously.

- Elizabeth Saperstein  
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