



PAUL W. ZUCCAIRE GALLERY • STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS • STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

LORNA BIEBER: TRACES





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Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
Stony Brook University
November 5 - December 18, 2016

Lorna Bieber in her studio with *Tapestry*

Inside and outside covers:
Tapestry (details), 2014-2015,
inkjet print on canvas, 129 x 273 in.





Photo © Tanya Kaiser Robinson

LORNA BIEBER: TRACES

KAREN LEVITOV, DIRECTOR AND CURATOR

Traces—marks left by something that has passed, such as lines drawn by hand or markings made by a recording instrument—take the viewer on a journey through indeterminate time and place in Lorna Bieber’s work.

Lorna Bieber creates hauntingly beautiful images out of found photographs that she then manipulates through an elaborate process of photocopying, enlarging, painting and collaging. The result is a series of grainy black and white pictures of trees, flowers, animals, houses and the occasional human figure, produced either as large single-image photographic murals or as wall-sized montages.

Lorna Bieber: Traces includes ten of the artist’s murals and four of her montages produced between 1999 and 2015. Bieber began using stock photographs as the basis of her art while working as a photo editor at a large-circulation magazine in New York in the late 1980s. Drawn to the seeming universality of these stock

images, she developed a technique of photocopying the pictures in black and white, enlarging them, painting and drawing on them, cutting and pasting them, and repeating the process until the images were transformed into something entirely unique, personal, mysterious and quietly dramatic.

Early on, Bieber decided to limit her palette to black and white and half-tone grays. Perhaps in response to the overwhelming amount of images she encountered daily in her photo editing job, eliminating color serves to reduce the variables of her visual surroundings while giving the images a timeless quality, almost as a counterpoint to historical hand-tinting of black and white photos. Her complex process of photocopying in black and white, enlarging, lightening, darkening, changing from positive to negative exposures, flipping images, collaging and adding her own painterly marks is alchemical—metamorphosing the ordinary pictures into a mystical world.

Bieber’s chosen imagery and the scenes she creates—winter trees, empty rooms, animals in nature, buildings amongst unforgiving landscapes, thickets of vegetation—are mostly unpeopled, enigmatic and vast. As a viewer, one feels vulnerable and a bit lonely in these imposing and forlorn environments. The settings are quiet yet tense with anticipation of what might happen next. There are suggestions of narrative, but the artist leaves them vague and open-ended. Figuratively stepping into a scene, the tendency is to get lost in one’s thoughts rather than to find a story.

Houses, from 2006-2007, is a nine-by-fifteen foot montage made up of ninety-six individual photographic prints, each separated by white borders. The houses pictured are a jumble of structures at various tilts, nestled among a mountainous countryside and rustic farmland. The images have been photocopied, cropped, drawn over with grease pencil and painted with white gouache, enlarged and copied again, and finally printed as gelatin silver prints onto photographic paper. There are no people among these rocky hills and no animals in these pastures. Like many of Bieber’s montages, the collaged scenes taken as a whole vacillate between a picturesque landscape and an eerie Kafka-esque setting. The fragmented vista provides glimpses into a scene of unknown time and unspecified place.

Bieber’s work is most closely associated with the Pictures Generation—a loose grouping of artists working in film and photography including Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine—whose work gained recognition in the late 1970s and early 1980s for its use of appropriated images. Film clips, B-movies, advertisements, other artists’ work and items from everyday life and popular culture became both medium and subject. Unlike many of the Pictures Generation artists, however, Bieber’s reproduction of existing imagery is neither parody nor pastiche. Instead, she is exceedingly serious about the pictures she carefully

selects and painstakingly transforms. Each house, each tree, each flower, insect or bird carries the weight of layers of collective memory and individual being.

Bieber imbues her scenes with mysticism that is religious as much in its method as its meaning. *Eden*, part of Bieber’s *Jesus Cycle*, is a dense work filled with birds, flowers and thorny bushes. The overall shape of the montage echoes a church altarpiece. Standing in for the figure of Christ in the center of the work is a growth of prickly foliage, evoking Jesus’s crown of thorns. The center foliage rises above the topmost edges, with branches and flowers reaching outwards towards the outermost edges where it resolves in a floral border. Hazy cloud formations, flying birds and scores of exquisite flowers form a sublime dreamscape. In Bieber’s work, Eden is a place that is familiar and longed for, that one knows yet has never seen.

Also in this series is *Judgement/Exile*, which has more explicit Biblical references. Fragments from historical paintings show a crucified Christ, figures in classical drapery and a lamb. Though not Christian, Bieber states that, “All of my work, not just the *Jesus Cycle*, is about the search for spirituality. That’s of primary importance to me. And to me, spirituality means trying to connect to the unseen forces that lie beneath the material world.”¹ With precedents in artists such as Max Liebermann, Marc Chagall and Mark Rothko, Bieber draws on her Jewish heritage in utilizing Christian imagery to convey universal spiritualism, compassion and the potential for renewal.²

Some of the most arresting works in the exhibition are the photographic murals: large pictures of birds, trees and dogs. Unlike the collaged complexity of the montages, the murals are powerful in their singularity and scale. At seventy-four inches tall, a bird’s chest at close view becomes monstrous, while the shadow behind a huge evergreen tree covered in snow takes on the appearance of a ghostly figure. The photographs



Eden, 2012-2013, inkjet on paper, 120 x 330 in.

appear very still, even with the sled dogs in mid-run and the birds in mid-head cock. There is something in the inky darkness of the shadows and vast whiteness of the snow that transfigures the animals into still lifes and momentarily takes your breath away.

The behemoth scale of the bird murals and the emptiness of the landscapes, along with the cinematic layout of the large-scale montages have an affinity with film noir. Panels of images separated by white borders suggest unwound black and white film strips that have been pieced back together into a grid. The narrative of the old film is lost, but its setting—winter trees in a landscape, houses and steeples among the hills, craggy rocks and streams with butterflies—provides an imagined scenario.

In both the fragmented montages and the single-image murals, the sense of time and space is distorted. One wonders, is this place somewhere I have been? Is it someplace I've seen in a picture or a film? The not-quite-familiarity of the settings may stem from the quotidian origins of Bieber's source material: books on flower arranging, avian identification guides, auction catalogues, forest guidebooks, training manuals and travel catalogs. Or it may be deeper, like a memory you didn't realize you had and can't quite recall.

Bieber's newest work is a montage of monumental scale entitled *Tapestry*. Her first work on fabric, *Tapestry* is the darkest and densest yet. Unlike the other montages that all have white borders around individual panels, *Tapestry's* sections abut one another seamlessly. Lush

arrays of flowers, birds and insects dominate with a few houses and animals interspersed. Taking the place of her usual grid of borders, Bieber has introduced photocopied sections of gilded picture frames that set off the birds and flowers like objects of natural history in a seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosity.

The photographic imagery takes on a different feeling printed on fabric, where it undulates with the air currents around it. The rectangular sections have a quilt-like appearance, yet the occasional leaf or flower petal reaches across sections, breaking out of the strict borders of Bieber's earlier work. As in her previous work, *Tapestry* is an imagined world created out of existing and invented images. The otherwise mundane flowers, butterflies, birds and insects take on stature and

significance when enlarged, repeated and overlaid in a grand labyrinthian tapestry.

Bieber's elegiac traces of ink, paint and silver gelatin on paper guide us unexpectedly through beautiful and moody landscapes of darkness and light, across mystical forests, mountains, houses, snow and sky. The journey is transformative.

1. Bieber quoted in "Lorna Bieber: Of Echoes and Grace," Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2013.
2. Amishai-Maisels, Ziva, "The Jewish Jesus," *Journal of Jewish Art* 9 (1982): 84-104.



Bush, 1999, gelatin silver print, 72 x 48 in.

Opposite page:

Large Tree Trunk, 2004-2005, gelatin silver print, 68 x 42 in.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist

Montages

Eden, 2012-2013
Inkjet on paper
120 x 330 in.

Houses, 2006-2007
Gelatin silver prints
102 x 181 in.

Judgement/Exile, 2010-2011
Electrostatic prints
136 x 154 in.

Tapestry, 2014-2015
Inkjet print on canvas
129 x 273 in.

Murals

Bird/Chest, 2000-2001
Gelatin silver print
71 x 50 in.

Bird Portrait, 2000-2001
Gelatin silver print
55 x 50 in.

Branches/Large Tree Trunks,
2005-2006
Gelatin silver print
75 x 48 in.

Bush, 1999
Gelatin silver print
72 x 49 in.

Feathered Branch, 2005-2006
Gelatin silver print
68 x 44 in.

Large Tree Trunk, 2004-2005
Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.

Path, 2004-2005
Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.

Sled, 1999
Gelatin silver print
54 x 50 in.

Three Birds/Front View, 2000-2001
Gelatin silver print
50 x 65 in.

Tree/Tree Trunks, 2005-2006
Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.





Three Birds/Front View, 2000-2001, gelatin silver print, 50 x 65 in.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Selected solo exhibitions include: George Eastman Museum, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Addison Gallery of American Art, Bronx Museum. Selected group exhibitions include: Smithsonian American Art Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; P.S. 1, Long Island City. Selected collections include: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; Bibliothèque nationale de France; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum; Norton Museum of Art. Selected honors include: Fellow, The Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Study & Conference Center, Italy; Fellow, The MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire; Fellow, Yaddo, New York; Fellow, Bogliasco Foundation, Italy.

OPENING RECEPTION:
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 7-9 PM

ARTIST TALK:
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2:30 PM

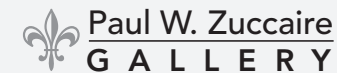
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to present the beautiful and engaging work of Lorna Bieber. This exhibition evolved over the course of many years of conversations and studio visits and it is truly gratifying to have it materialize at Stony Brook University. I thank Lorna for her thoughtful devotion to the planning of this exhibition and catalog and for her lively Artist Talk and time spent with students.

I would like to thank my wonderful colleagues at the Staller Center for the Arts, notably Alan Inkles, Director, and Samantha Clink, Gallery and Community Relations Assistant, as well as the student gallery assistants. I also thank the faculty, staff and students of Stony Brook's Art Department.

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Karen Levitov
Director and Curator



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Gallery Hours

Tuesday-Friday, 12-4 pm, Saturday, 7-9 pm. Free Admission.
Also open during intermission and one hour prior to most Staller Center season performances.

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