

## Artist Barbara Bloom and Writer Ben Lerner Invent a New Kind of Book

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Barbara Bloom, *Kroller Muller-Song*, 2022 *Courtesy David Lewis Gallery*

The relationship between writers and artists tends to be a one-way street. Artists make, writers critique. But in *Gold Custody*, a new book by artist [Barbara Bloom](#) and poet/novelist [Ben Lerner](#), response and creation is a simultaneous, collaborative process.

*Gold Custody* is slight; it's no gargantuan coffee table book, but it's no slim novel either. It is composed of a series of 13 prose-poems by Lerner, which are framed and partially inspired by Bloom's photographs, which in turn were pulled out and regathered in response to Lerner's texts. Bloom's photographs from the book were exhibited at David Lewis Gallery's East Hampton post earlier in July.

This isn't the first time Lerner has collaborated with an artist in a similar mode of call and response. In *The Polish Rider* (2018) which he made with artist Anna Ostoya, Lerner wrote a short piece of fiction about Ostoya and a night that she lost two of her paintings. The short story is interspersed with the series of paintings that had initially inspired Lerner's fiction and, to crown the whole thing, Ostoya made a new painting that responded to the project itself.

In *Gold Custody*, collaboration seems to be more than response, but co-creation.

In an interview with Barbara Bloom and Ben Lerner, the pair discuss the subtleties of their collaboration, the themes that inspire them, and the stories that brought *Gold Custody* to life.

**ARTnews: How did this collaboration begin?**

**Barbara Bloom:** Incrementally. Ben and I had an appreciation for each other's work and have friends in common and that mutual appreciation had been communicated. We emailed each other a little bit. I was asked to do a rather large, collaborative project and I asked Ben if he would work with me. Like many of the things that were planned pre-pandemic, the project just dissipated, it didn't actually happen. So we found ourselves in the middle of thinking about a project and it was Ben who suggested that we could just continue working, but in book form.

**Ben Lerner:** The move from real space to the weird kind of virtual space of a book felt like a good opportunity, not just to keep working in the pandemic, but that in and of itself this was a moment of reframing which is a shared concern of both of ours and like an abiding point of contact. I think that process is actually quite germane with the substance of the work and Barbara's work more specifically.

**Bloom:** I think we share an interest in the depiction of time and the impossible depictions of time, where it stretches and where it gets forgotten and where you can step through

When I first read Ben's work I realized "Oh my god, here's this person who also has a stretchiness in time without it being a science fiction, or without it being magic realism."

**ARTnews: It seems that writers always have a lot to say about artists and art, that is, there's a kind of one-way street kind of relationship between writers and artists. I was wondering for you, Barbara, what can artists kind of gain from responding to writing and writers?**

**Bloom:** I'm very jealous of writers and I think Ben might be jealous of artists. I'm very jealous of writers who don't need the concrete world, who can let things build and slip in time. I always kind of jokingly say that I think I'm actually a writer, but stood in the wrong line and got signed up to be an artist.

Working with Ben, I was a student of writing in some way, a student of the difference between working the way that I work in the visual world and in the writing world. But my goal in this project was not to illustrate Ben's text. My goal was to try to formally understand what Ben was doing in these texts, and to give some kind of visual equivalent, which is different than illustrating them.

Ben would throw me these texts that were somehow loosely or less loosely related to my works and then I would throw back images that go with them and that sometimes I would send stuff to Ben and he would be like "You're off, you've concentrated on some aspect of this that is probably less important than something else."

## **ARTnews: What was the process?**

**Lerner:** There were all kinds of starting places for me. Barbara had a work which is made up of these details from Vermeer, and I wondered what would it mean to make a poem that was made up from details, but from a catalog. The Pearl became a response to the language from art catalogs. It's all these different descriptions of women in artworks and that's where I got almost all the language which I then altered a little bit of it. This is also in relation to Barbara's work, which is found and altered so that the border between the found and the original is blurred. So that's an example of a formal procedure, sometimes [the connection between the text and the art work] was that direct.

But then sometimes we would be having a conversation about her dad or we'd be talking about a phone call and I'd connect that to abstract concerns like the concern about abstraction itself. Our process wasn't mere procedure, it was informed by the contingencies of conversation which were then caught up in the more abstract machinery of the poems.

**Bloom:** There is a point in which the work itself kind of takes over, there are certain subject matters that you're not really aware of, but become central. Ben and I would joke with each other about the fact that he's become so Jewish. And we're very secular, he's from Kansas and I'm from California and my family has no relationship to the Holocaust. But all of a sudden there's all this text and conversation about fathers and to Jewish traditions.

**Lerner:** One of the themes is reframing, what happens when an intergenerational story turns out to be revealed as false, and suddenly this thing you were living as fact turns out to be a fiction and your life is kind of reorganized by this revelation?

**Bloom:** I want to describe what a Talmudic text is. It's a rectangle of text. And then around that text is the written response to the text, from a year or a few years after, or hundreds of years afterwards. And those responses are the frames for the text, actually typeset on the page framing the text. It's visually one of the most remarkable typographic things you've ever seen. It's a literal framing of ideas. When someone first described it to me, I thought, "Oh my god, this is exactly what a book or what a text or what an artwork should be." Wouldn't it be wonderful if you made an artwork in 1999 and then later on you framed it with another artwork that you made?

**Lerner:** The Talmudic text is a kind of example of collaboration as a visual object and textual object that unfolds across time. It's somewhat comical, in some way, that authority over time is kind of emptying out and refilling.

Speaking of reframing: One of those prose poems is about a woman who is learning that all of these sayings that her father had, that she thought were like Jewish Ukrainian folk scenes, turned out to be just shit he had made up. Should we talk about Caspar Rappaport?

**Bloom:** So the book is dedicated to Caspar Rappoport. This story came up in one of our conversations about fathers and false authority. I told Ben about this story that my dad would tell my sisters and I out of nowhere. He'd say, "If I don't come home from work, you're going to hear stories about me and it's going to be an illusion. At the Santa Monica Pier, and there's going to be red herrings. It's gonna look like I jumped off the pier, but actually I have a car waiting and I've driven all night and all day, all day and all night, to Tucumcari, New Mexico. I've changed my name to Casper Rappaport. I sell life insurance." We didn't know what he was talking about, that that was his out from being a dad in the '50s with three kids. It wasn't the least bit frightening or disconcerting or anything about it. He was just telling us this funny story about an alternate reality in which he lived in Tucumcari, New Mexico and changed his name to Casper Rapoport.

**Lerner:** Wasn't there more, didn't you learn more about where he got the story from later?

**Bloom:** No ... actually, yes. We were in Egypt in a hotel and my sisters and I were in my parents room where they were getting ready to go for dinner. The black and white TV is on and the Billy Wilder movie *The Apartment* is on, and every line from that movie is my dad's whole shtick. I asked him about it and he was like, "What, you didn't know?"

**ARTnews:** **Were there any textual predecessors that inspired *Gold Custody*? Anything that helped guide the format?**

**Lerner:** We wanted it to not be giant and weigh 1,000 pounds. Its form had to be at the cusp of reading and looking, both things had to be possible, but also so that it would unfold in time because a lot of art books don't really feel like they're unfolding in time in the same way because they're so monumental. I think we've invented something.

**Bloom:** We don't even remember what we're stealing.