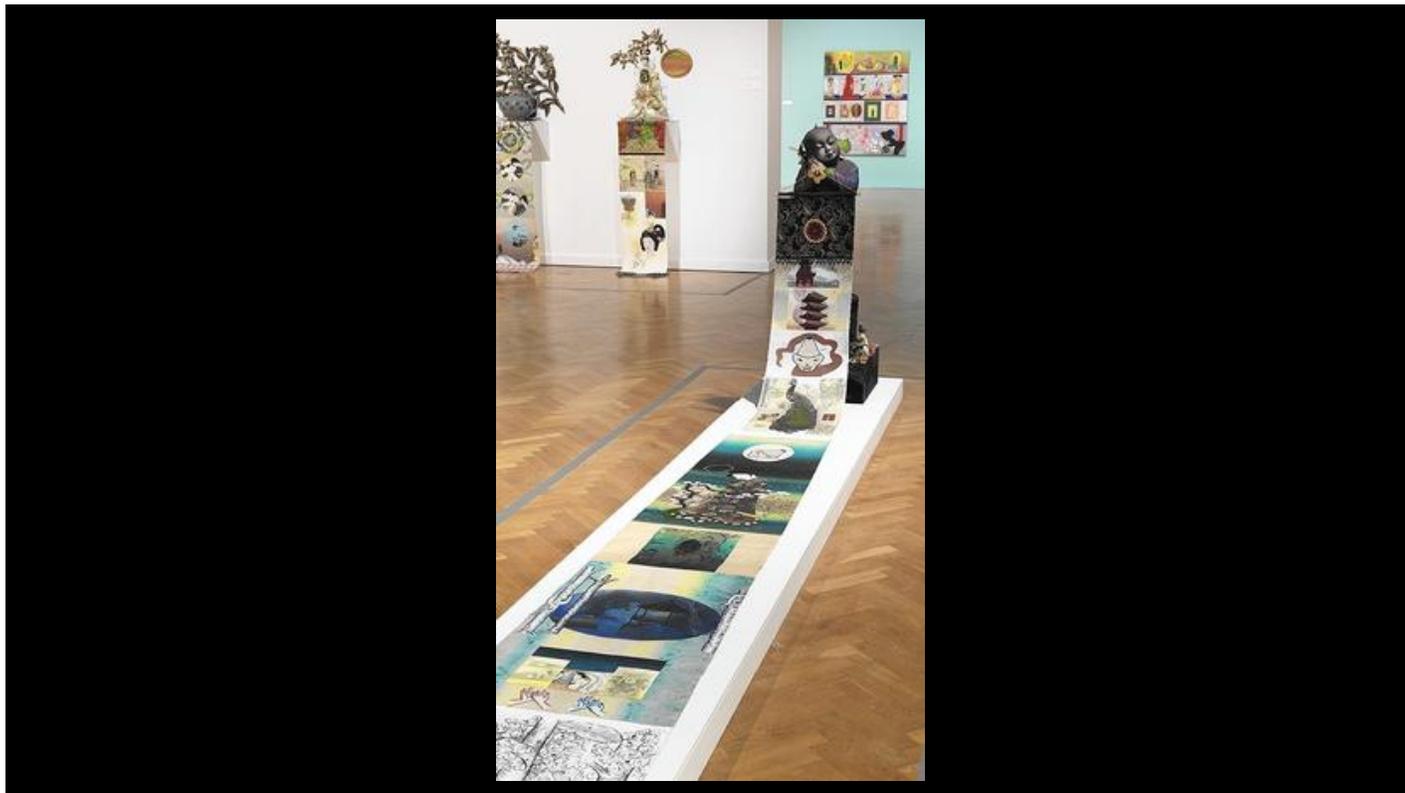


Say yes: Phyllis Bramson abounds at the Cultural Center



"Under the Pleasure Dome" is a career retrospective of artist and educator Phyllis Bramson at the Chicago Cultural Center. (Tom van Eynde photo)



By **Lori Waxman**

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Longtime Chicagoan and veteran art professor Phyllis Bramson has a career retrospective up this summer at the Cultural Center. "Under the Pleasure Dome" is a glorious whirlwind of excess, kitsch and desire in the form of three decades' worth of paintings and assemblages.

It's also filled with the artworks I think I would make if instead of being an art critic I were an artist. That's leaving out such significant factors as talent, luck and longevity, not to mention training, influence and ambition, but all the same, my personal affinity for Bramson's extravagant productions runs uncannily deep.

What do they look like? "The Perfumed Garden (Loss of Happiness)" has a bit of everything, like a smorgasbord. A pair of 4-foot-tall stone bodhisattvas face each other, dressed up with red lipstick and magenta spray paint, lightly dusted with glitter, small figurines of hummingbirds and naked babies and big-eyed deer perched on their shoulders and at their feet. Between them runs a scroll of fringed paisley brocade, Chinese pagodas, mute cartoon heads, lush peacocks, a geisha speaking a blank word bubble amid blossoming cherry branches, the Japanese master printmaker Hiroshige's famous view of Mt. Fuji, diagrams of Buddha hand positions and Chinese courtesans flirting in a forest. Some of it is cut from mass-produced art, some found in thrift shops, some painted or drawn from scratch, some all of the above.

Purists, minimalists and prudes beware. Bramson is a maximalist of materials and cultures, from the rococo paintings of Fragonard to the happy buddhas of Chinese restaurants and the plaster gnomes of tacky gardens. Via techniques of bricolage, she escorts these interracial, high-low, anachronistic members into delicately comedic menages that seem to have as their main principle the act of saying yes. Yes to clown mouths and frilly collars, yes to dangly plastic beads, yes to paint-by-numbers, yes to needle-point, yes to pearl necklaces and bubbles and grapes, yes to bare bottoms, yes to oval and square and hexagonal and circular frames, yes to metal branches with fake flowers. Yes, that's all one painting. It's called "Little Goody Two Shoes" and Bramson pieced it together in 1996.

Saying yes is different than not saying no. An artist who collages such a vast diversity of elements into a single whole has left just as many on the studio floor. There's evidence, too, that Bramson took some time to find her way to her current position of the-more-the-merrier. The earliest work in the show, a great big jazzy painting from 1987 of a threesome clinging to sinking masts amid a tumultuous sea, is relatively straightforward: single scene, oil on canvas, no frame. (The erotic narrative is plain to see, too.)

Somewhere in between this painterly start and the elegant riot of Bramson's more recent three-dimensional altars — wall-mounted versions of the two-bodhisattva installation — are a handful of paintings from the 2000s that seem unsure of just how much they can handle. "What Is One's Real Life?" centers on a couple, balanced between three poles, Chinese lanterns floating above, a teapot and tea cup suggestively balanced on their heads, with little blue animals and decoupage flowers looking on. It's a perverse and colorful picture, but ultimately too sparse, too flat, too unembellished. Ditto a pair of canvases that tussle with Picasso's many depictions of women: witty, yes, but less weird and more tame than Bramson's other work — or Picasso's.

What they're missing is what Bramson's best work has in abundance. And it is: abundance. An artist who appropriates, who samples, who traffics in kitsch is an artist who flirts with the edge of bad art, and the way to be good with bad is to be extreme. A mashup of a snow globe and a fat buddha and plastic Christmas trees and little red mushrooms and shiny floral wallpaper and strange word bubbles is great. (Likewise a stark display of a snow globe on a modernist shelf, as the artist Haim Steinbach might have done in the 1980s.) A drawing of a snow globe, no matter the lewd jokiness of the interaction between the besotted women and the delighted snowman inside, is less so.

Bramson achieves lavishness not on a single picture plane but on multiple planes, in more than one dimension, ideally framed in a way that interrupts the neatness of a four-sided canvas. "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground," a painting from 2010 of a clown-nosed couple embracing under the night sky while a peacock dangles a globular Chinese landscape above them, goes unframed on two sides and bordered with shapely cut flowers on the other. "Rapunzel's Scenario," an early work dotted with floating eyeballs, is shaped like a squat I, features a frame-in-a-frame at its center, is edged in gilt braids, and has the very notion of a frame broken by the long golden hairpiece that dangles from one of its panels.

In the late '80s, Bramson began cutting up store-bought paintings and fashioning them into frames for paintings-within-paintings, like "Spring," with its grab bag of spring-time blossoms and a springy couple, too. Back then, as now, she was on to the pleasure of making art from art, from life, and from all the shiny stuff in between.

"Phyllis Bramson: Under the Pleasure Dome" runs through Aug. 28 at the Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., 312-744-6630, www.chicagoculturalcenter.org.

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