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AT THE GALLERIES IN WINTER

Karen Wilkin

Mirrors of a very different sort were the protagonists of Jeannette Montgomery Barron's exhibition at Clamart, in Chelsea. A modest dressing table mirror, upright on its expedient pedestal, like a head on a slender neck, is the subject of Barron's "portraits" or perhaps it would be more accurate to call them self-portraits. No easily identifiable reflections interrupt the surfaces of the poised ovals, but they refract very different qualities of light, so that the centralized shapes punctuate each rectangle in surprisingly varied ways. The subtle orchestrations of tones of the all-but blank mirror face and its surroundings makes these deceptively simple black and white images pulse back and forth between straightforward still life and potent abstraction. Wordlessly, Barron compels us to consider the relationship between reality and reflection, fact and fiction, perception and depiction, as well as the camera's role in perpetuating the transitory. A compressed-time video of one of Barron's "characters" under the subtly changing light of a day in Rome, where the photographer has been living recently, was a nice addition to the solemn, hieratic stills, its sound track richly evocative of the quotidian in the heart of the old city – at least for those of us who have lived there for extended periods and, I suspect, for those who haven't. Barron's photos are uncanny. They appear to be of almost nothing, and yet they are unforgettable.