

Art in America

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Hannelore Baron: *Untitled*, 1980, cloth, paper, ink, hinged metal box, 6 1/4 by 6 by 2 1/2 inches; at the Neuberger Museum.

PURCHASE AND NEW YORK

Hannelore Baron at the Neuberger Museum and Senior & Shopmaker

"I have had what I must call a rather difficult time of it during my life," wrote Hannelore Baron in something of an understatement. Having escaped with her family from Nazi Germany as a teenager, she acquired some terrible memories that she was never really able to shake. As these two shows of several scores of her collages and collaged boxes demonstrated, however, Baron was able to put aside the depression, claustrophobia and illness that beset her and fashion, over a period of just 18 years before her death at 60 in 1987, a discrete and compelling body of work.

Baron used what was at hand—bits of wood, string, fabric—expressly wishing not to waste anything. She cut up copper sheets, inked them and printed from them onto found papers. Her imagery includes fragile stick figures, birds and writing: reversed letters, numbers, parts of words. She was always interested in diaries and letters, and she incorporated their sense of transmitted secrets into her work.

Formally, Baron's works are closest to the collages of Kurt Schwitters, with fragmentary materials, including found texts, arranged in roughly rectilinear grids. Her distinctive space is shallow and airless, with figures and objects pressed into a narrow plane, either physical or pictorial. Elements are only very occasionally brightly colored, and more consistently dark and somber. It is especially unnerving to view her collaged boxes, which feel like mementos preserved by a grieving parent—for example, a construction from 1980 in which she placed a childlike stick figure on musical notation paper stitched to swaths of stained cloth. Components seem carefully selected for pieces of essential information they have rather mournfully encrypted.

Each work urgently presses its particular, mysterious communiqué. In a 1979 collage, a row of blood-red stick figures is juxtaposed to blood-red, off-angle squares resembling a pavement hastily laid. The figures and the squares are set side

by side in the top third of an ocher sheet, as if they have been excavated from the earth and are waiting to be identified. In the works' frontality and the way their arrangement resembles the open pages of a book, they seem to imply coded texts even where none are present. In a 1978 work, just one of five dark little heads is circled in red, inscrutably singled out. In another from 1982, tiny images, including a red bird and a man in a hat, appear in rectangular outlines like postage stamps and are smudged and overwritten with illegible text as if in cancellation. Everywhere, letters and word-fragments stutter and fail. Yet this was an artist who had found her voice against all odds, producing these elliptical works in abundance for her own personal fulfillment (she was little shown during her lifetime).

The 40 collages on display at the Neuberger Museum, which have stopped at a half-dozen venues over the past two years, were selected by curator Ingrid Schaffner, who wrote an accompanying catalogue, for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. They will be on view this summer (June 26-Aug. 1) at the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach.

—Faye Hirsch