

# Context in question

Exhibit asks viewers to consider what they see and what they don't



A view of Stephen Prina's installation "The Way He Always Wanted It" at the Barbara Krakow Gallery.

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**Stephen Prina**

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,  
10 Newbury St.,  
through May 28th.  
617-262-4490,  
[barbarakrakowgallery.com](http://barbarakrakowgallery.com)

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By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

I'd read about the setup of conceptual artist Stephen Prina's exhibit at Barbara Krakow Gallery before I got there. I thought I knew what to look for, at least when it came to the most dramatic part of the installation: five 15-foot window blinds suspended from the ceiling, each painted only part-way up with a field of color.

Even so, it took me a few minutes to realize that I was completely ignoring a portion of the installation. All of the blinds are painted only on one side; two of them faced away from me, and I didn't even notice them. I had gotten absorbed in the color, marks, and positioning of the work facing me. It was like walking into a party, and having three people greet me with smiles, and two turn away. Without a thought, I gravitated toward the welcome.

That's Prina's intent: He asks the viewer to experience inclusion or exclusion by questioning and challenging context. His blinds make brilliant use of

the gallery's odd architecture: One drops to the front desk and cuts the gallery staff off from view. Others catch the light of the clerestory windows shining through fields of paint. Prina activates each work with a repeated swoop of a sponge; they're quite painterly and beautiful.

Nearby hang diptychs from the series "Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet, begun January 1, 1988." Each features a lithograph dotted with beige rectangles signifying the 556 paintings identified in a 1960s-era catalogue raisonné of Edouard Manet's works. Since 1988, Prina has been systematically painting his own version of each Manet canvas. His don't look at all like Manet's: They are ivory monochrome ink washes on paper. The only thing that is the same is the size. All three of these images are titled "Bal Masque a l'Opera et Polichinelle (Masked Ball at the Opera With Punchinello)."

The catalogue raisonné of an artist's work is supposed to be the ultimate

authority, but one made in the 1960s can no longer be counted as reliable. An exquisite corpse is a Surrealist game in which you draw one part of a picture (or write one part of a poem or story) without seeing the rest. Prina's exquisite corpse might witness one moment in time: a vision of Manet, circa the 1960s. Or perhaps it's his own focus on a fragment of the Impressionist's oeuvre, one work at a time. Either way, he points to how our perception is limited by the information we're given. If we're given the title and the dimensions of a Manet work, but not the image, where does that focus our understanding?

There are several more works in this sly, challenging, formally stringent show, all of which ask viewers to consider what we're blind to. I am left with my moment of unsettling apprehension that there was a work of art behind me with its back toward me, and that I'd better turn and contend with it.

BARBARA

KRAKOW GALLERY