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Aura Rosenberg: *What is Psychedelic*

By [Joanna Seifter](#)



Installation view: *Aura Rosenberg: What Is Psychedelic*, Mishkin Gallery, 2023. Photo: Isabel Asha Penzlien.

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In *Cabinets*, a chapter of theorist Walter Benjamin's stylized autobiography *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, the author recounts his parents' practice of sequestering new toys, books, and even laundry from their children in the name of preservation. Contemporary artist Aura Rosenberg's untitled photograph of the Palais-Ephraim's exhibition *From a Good Home: The World of Children Around 1900* (1998) features perfectly preserved dolls and toys, imbued with what Rosenberg designates as "traces of living history." The dolls, posed with outstretched arms as if awaiting playtime from the confines of their display cases, approximate the habitual stockpiling Benjamin describes and mirror the writer's curiosity piqued by these objects, held tantalizingly out of reach. The gallery's spectral attendee stares raptly at one of the dolls, a chilling nod to Benjamin's childhood and the dispossession of Jewish Holocaust victims. In her 2002 publication *A Berlin Childhood*, Rosenberg pairs this image with another photograph of a cabinet in the bedroom of her daughter Carmen's friend in Berlin (2001), filled with and surrounded by contemporary toys, games, and books—all of which, unlike the museum's objects, show signs of continuous, loving use.

Both images brilliantly invoke contemporary issues of museum ethics and repatriation while representing Jewish resilience in the face of World War II's pervasive antisemitic legacy. They are from Rosenberg's "Berlin Childhood" (1996–ongoing) series of photographs, highlighting parallels between Benjamin's life and her own as the daughter of a German Jewish refugee. Dualities of past and future merge with progress and completion, signifier and signified in Rosenberg's excellent two-part survey, *What is Psychedelic*, at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn and Mishkin Gallery in Manhattan. Spanning five decades of myriad mediums and compelling overarching themes, both within and beyond the "Berlin Childhood"

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series, the exhibition is also supported by a comprehensive catalogue. Although the exhibition's title might typically elicit responses of "magic mushrooms," "rainbows," or "Pink Floyd," Rosenberg roots the term in history's malleable, cyclically destructive path and its subsequent, haunting impact on individual and collective memory. The true psychedelics, Rosenberg argues, are not merely *substances*—they are the *subjective*.



Installation view: *Aura Rosenberg: What Is Psychedelic*, Pioneer Works, curated by Alaina Claire Feldman, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo: Dan Bradica.

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Le Bonheur de Vivre (Matisse and the World Trade Center) (ca. 1970) aptly demonstrates Rosenberg's process-based implementation and analysis of Benjamin's historical methodology. The painting intersperses fragments of Henri Matisse's paradisiacal bacchanalia of the same name with a smoggy Manhattan twilight skyline. Because Rosenberg completed this painting over thirty years before 9/11, her inclusion of the Twin Towers was incidental beyond their symbolism as a cornerstone of New York City. Allowing time to unfold afforded the painting a second, commemorative, meaning—a portentous ode to cities come and gone that is only communicated by Rosenberg's juxtaposition of a terroristic site with celebratory mirth. Here Rosenberg organically fulfills Benjamin's understanding of history as a series of distant, distinct events aggregated by the passage of time. Rosenberg would inadvertently revisit this effect years later in her "Berlin Childhood" film *A Christmas Angel* (2015), which was shot at Breitscheidplatz, the target of a 2016 terrorist attack.



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Recollections distorted by hindsight are also a thematic thread in Rosenberg's "Angel of History" photographs (2013–present), which superimpose images of angels on front-page spreads of the *New York Times* highlighting contemporary sociopolitical issues, including the coronavirus pandemic, police killings of unarmed Black men, migrant crises, and the opioid epidemic. Like Paul Klee's monotype *Angelus Novus* (1920), which Benjamin analyzes in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Rosenberg's angels are turned *towards* the havoc wreaked by escalating events of the present and *away* from the progress of the future. The tragic irony of these occurrences is emphasized by the headlines, which, while reinforcing their subjects as historically significant, simultaneously reveal a larger response of opportunistic, glib apathy, as they compete for attention with perfume ads and fluff pieces about gummy candies.

The Sewing Basket (2002/2022), another entry in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, details Benjamin's mother's disorganized assemblage of needles, threads, scissors, and projects at various stages of completion. Instead of relegating her tapestry to the confines of a container, Rosenberg's iteration is suspended in midair. One side is shown to be meticulous and fully-realized, while the other is a scattered array of stitches, extended threads and knots, conveying the incremental and contemplative nature of creative exploration.

In true psychedelic fashion, a work of art is the artist or viewer's reflection, but without the reassurance of instantaneous recognition. The thousands upon thousands of individual threads making up *The Sewing Basket* resemble the separate elements of Rosenberg's body of work that converge to form the greater themes her art has examined and reevaluated in the philosophical, challenging, and endlessly fascinating *What is Psychedelic*. As per curator Alaina Claire

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Feldman's recommendation, both incarnations at Pioneer Works and Mishkin Gallery are necessary to understand the extent and depth of Rosenberg's body of work. Like each side of Rosenberg's tapestry, the Pioneer Works and Mishkin installations are fiercely, artfully intertwined.

Contributor

Joanna Seifter

Joanna Seifter is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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