

### Glenn Lowry/Uta Barth Interview

GL: Have you always wanted to be an artist?

UB: My interest in art dates back for as long as I can remember. This was much to the dismay of my father, a scientist, who sees no value in any of these concerns. Therefore art was not any active part of my upbringing. But growing up in Europe certainly exposed me to a history that remains distant here in the States. In trying to think of other interests I may have had early on I can only remember that at age seven, or eight I wanted to be a theatre stage set designer. In retrospect this seems curiously appropriate. Anyway, I studied art in high school, college and then in graduate school here in Los Angeles, with only one brief detour into neurophysiology.

GL: You have said that a certain kind of confusion or questioning is the starting place of confronting much of your work. What did you mean by this?

UB: While I have worked almost exclusively in photography for a long time, I think my work does not share much in the dominant uses of the medium. Most photographs exist to "point" at some thing, some one, or some event in the world, in order to present it as significant in one way or another. I am not interested in looking at any particular thing in the world, but instead am interested in the activity of looking in and of itself. I'm interested in vision, in visual perception and am trying to find ways to direct the viewers attention to that. So the work often does not easily surrender answers to what we expect of a photograph, like what is it a picture of, where was it taken, what are we to look at here, what is the camera focusing on, etc. The information is often so minimal and incidental, that one must find reasons other than the expected to engage with the work.

GL: You have been working on the ground and field series since the mid 1990s. What distinguishes each of these groups of images and what inspired or motivated you to initiate these series?

UB: When I started work on the Ground series, I was interested in looking at the conventions used in various types of portrait photography for framing the subject. I was interested in the choices of background information used to create a context and also in the compositional devices used to stage the subject. I was looking at the information in images that often goes unnoticed, and seems incidental to what the camera is trying to portray. So all the images from that body of work consist purely of background information, of that which surrounds, brackets and creates the container for the subject.

The Field series takes filmmaking as the point of departure. These images of blurred cityscapes mimic a more cinematic framing, in which information freely bleeds off the edge. Within this cinematic vocabulary, both the camera and the (imagined) subject are dynamic, in motion, implying narrative in the unoccupied foreground. The images record and shift the viewer's attention to the information of ones peripheral field of vision and that, which lies, to the side of ones attention.

GL: Many of your photographs recall both abstract paintings and minimalist works of art. Is that an intentional allusion?

UB: I certainly did not set out to make photographic works which in some way mimic or aspire to look like painting. I would see no point in that. I think there is an intersection that this work has with many of the concerns of minimalism both formally and conceptually. I'm not sure that this was consciously planned in the development of the project, but I have certainly embraced it as very relevant to what I think about.

GL: Your work—superficially—has been compared to that of Gerhard Richter. It seems to me, though, that if there is any artist whose work is related to yours it is Pierre Bonnard who explores similar questions of opticality and perception and is equally interested in the margins of space, those complex interstitial areas that we often overlook until jarred into recognizing their importance. Is Bonnard an artist who interests you and, if not, who are the artists or critics whose work you find of significance.

The comparison to Richter's work is made often, but I think it is based mostly on superficial similarities. We both use blur, but for very different reasons and to very different ends. I have to confess that I have not looked enough at Bonnard or his period of painting to see it as an influence.

I think much of my interests are related to the early installation works of Robert Irwin, to the films of Antonioni, in which the camera seems unmotivated by the action in a scene and frequently simply drifts through a visual field. And I continue to be fascinated by the duration films made by Andy Warhol even though they come out of a very different context.

GL: How did you become interested in film?

UB: My interest in film, in relation to my work, is actually very narrow. I am interested in duration, in some kind of sustained engagement over time that is not dictated by change. So, on one hand film makes sense, because it is a time based medium. But there are actually few examples I can think of, that render the type of detached and prolonged looking I am talking about.

GL: A number of your works have dealt with specific locations—your own home, for instance—and I wonder to what extent these locations are meant to be understood in personal terms?

UB: Not at all. The two most recent projects, "nowhere near" and "Sand of time," were both photographed in my home. I chose the location not out of any personal or autobiographical attachment, but because it was the most immediate, the most visually familiar thing I know. It was a conscious choice to "make no choice" about location, to not go out to photograph "something," but instead to record that which continuously surrounds me. To simply look at what had become almost invisible by complete familiarity. I have no investment in the view through my window being interesting or beautiful or of any significance. It is simply there.

GL: Over the years your images have moved from being primarily monochromatic to being suffused with color. What occasioned this shift?

UB: The color of the work is simply determined by the conceptual parameters of each series. The early Grounds deal with interior spaces and play off the architecture of the space they are exhibited in. Therefore that body of work consists of primarily white, monochromatic images. The field series consist of outdoor locations and the color is determined by the scene. The works from 1998 -99 are all predicated on an idea of tracking or paying attention to whatever occurs in ones peripheral field of vision as one passes through the world. I never predetermined or sought out any locations for that work, but carried a camera at all times, wherever I happened to be, to record any incidental, visual event that would catch my attention and cause me to look, and look back again.

So I can't say I think about color the way a painter might. I am sure that somewhere in the editing process of hundreds of negatives I do end up making subconscious choices about color. I have never articulated this much to myself, but I think especially in the Field series these choices would be based on trying to chase down some kind of atmospheric quality of light.

GL: What questions or problems are you currently exploring, and what direction or directions are you pursuing in your work.

UB: The project I am working on at the moment attempts to render the optical phenomenon of what happens as one looks (or stares) at one thing for a prolonged period of time. I'm interested in color fatigue and the shift of contrast that occurs and also in the optical afterimages that are produced and then carried on to the next view. The new works are single images of a type of optical overexposure. My interest in time and duration persists in a different way in this project.