

Art in America

Uta Barth: *Field #23*, 1998, acrylic lacquer on canvas, 90 by 132 inches; at Bonakdar Jancou.



Uta Barth at Bonakdar Jancou

Among contemporary photographers, blur is in, and its use plays with the distinction between photography and painting. Uta Barth goes even further, using a computerized sprayer to "paint" her digitized images onto oversize canvases with tiny colorful pointillist-like drops of acrylic lacquer. In this exhibition, the L.A. artist's second solo show in New York, two such images were included of street scenes greatly magnified and out-of-focus, with areas of bright light that coalesce into abstract forms. Barth's careful cropping makes these pieces formal in every sense; their fuzziness is reminiscent of what painters see when they squint at their canvases to check their composition. In the hands of an actual painter, however, these clouds of light and shadow could be rendered impossibly romantic; the distance afforded by photography is what gives them their necessary edge.

The other pieces in the exhibition were also exterior scenes, color photographs laminated onto wood panels, all untitled. Looking at so many unfocused photographs is initially disorienting, like seeing the world through someone else's eyeglasses. But after a few minutes the experience becomes less literal, and the zone the work occupies between image and abstraction becomes a playground for the imagination. While Barth's subjects seem mundane at first—a white house on a corner, city buildings along a river, fields and trees viewed through a rain-covered plate-glass window—there is something comfortingly familiar about them, like sights recalled through the dim haze of memory. Barth sets up her panels in pairs or triplicate, with only slight differences between them. The

two river vistas, for example, are identical except that the one on the right is bisected by a wide, bright red vertical stripe. At first it appears to be an anomaly, like an errant Barnett Newman zip that has wandered onto the picture plane. Only when you get up close can you see that it is not painted on top but actually part of the photo, a red metal standard possibly for a fire-alarm box. Here, Barth contrasts sharp focus to blur; we can see every blob and scratch on the red surface.

Barth is exploring ways to overcome photography's natural emphasis on subject in order to concentrate on color, light and form. It's interesting to compare her work with that of Gerhard Richter, who chooses similar images for their neutrality of content; but where Richter blurs painting to make it look like photography, Barth blurs photography to make it look like painting.

—Carol Diehl

October 98