

Uta Barth photos offer new angle on the world

Art review

"UTA BARTH: IN BETWEEN PLACES," at the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, through Jan. 21. Hours are Tuesdays through Sundays 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursdays until 8 p.m.

BY ROBIN UPDIKE
Special to The Seattle Times

Uta Barth makes her art by picking up a camera, looking through the lens, shooting the image and developing the film. But that is about all that her work has in common with conventional photography.

In the intellectually provocative, quietly seductive, 10-year mini-retrospective of Barth's work that opens today at the Henry Art Gallery, it is clear that Barth is not a photographer in the usual sense of the word, despite the fact that photographs are her chosen medium. Do not expect traditional landscapes, portraits, street scenes or any other easily discernible genres in the Henry's exhibition of 41 of Barth's photographs.

Barth, a German-born artist who lives in California, is in her early '40s. As a conceptual artist with strong leanings toward minimalism, she is interested in visual perception. She wants to push viewers into thinking about how they see. She also wants us to question some of the most sacrosanct traditions of Western art,

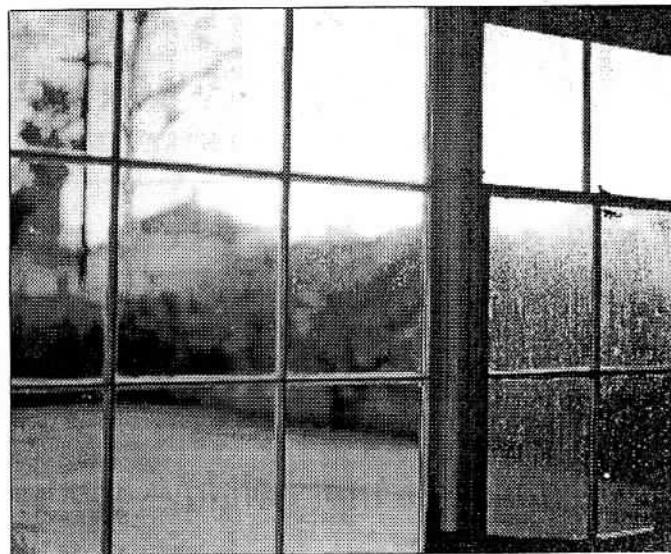
such as the point of including a primary visual subject in an image and the convention of "framing" a self-explanatory scene within the edges of an artwork.

Adjusting to Barth's optical experiments can throw you off kilter, which is the point. In one group of photographs from her 1994 series titled "Ground," which is shorthand for "background" and "foreground," blurry images show interior scenes from a house. There is a shelf of books; the edge of a white window frame against a white wall; a turquoise bedroom wall empty save for two small paintings in an upper corner. Look closely and the tiny paintings seem to be reproductions of a couple of famous domestic scenes by Jan Vermeer.

Like many photographs in this exhibition, these look out of focus and randomly shot, as if the photographer hadn't bothered to adjust the lens or frame the image.

In an untitled diptych from 1988, Barth has shot a close-up of two trees in a wilderness landscape. The leaves are a blur, suggesting the moment when a breeze has riffled through them. The second shot is a detail of one tree. A branch twitches and this time we see a reddish shrub off to one side. Did we fail to notice that red shrub before? Why are we seeing it now?

Barth, who is in Seattle this week for the opening, says describing her work as out of focus is "inaccurate." Instead, she says, the camera is "focused on something



Uta Barth's photos often defy conventions of perspective, composition and focus, such as this one from her "nowhere near" series.

outside of the eye." Viewers are supposed to imagine what the focus of the image is — it may even be themselves — and to mentally insert themselves into the environment she has created, whether it is the subtle domestic scene of the "Ground" series or the interior of her California home.

Barth's discussions about her work, and the catalog that accompanies the show, can sound dangerously close to the verbal sleight of hand that sometimes makes conceptual art seem little more than an exercise in mental gymnastics. But Barth's work also happens to be softly beautiful and mysterious, as though her lens has captured the elusive moment in a daydream when you catch yourself gazing at nothing in particular, and you are mesmerized. It is that moment of

heightened sensory perception that Barth tries to induce in viewers. And if you give the work enough time, she often succeeds.

"Uta Barth: In Between Places," was organized by the Henry and curated by Sheryl Conkelton, the Henry's former senior curator. Conkelton is a specialist in photography and minimalist art, so it is no wonder that she has been following the ascendant career of Barth, who teaches art at the University of California at Riverside and whose work has been acquired by such prestigious institutions as the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Museum in London. When the show ends at the Henry it travels to the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston.