

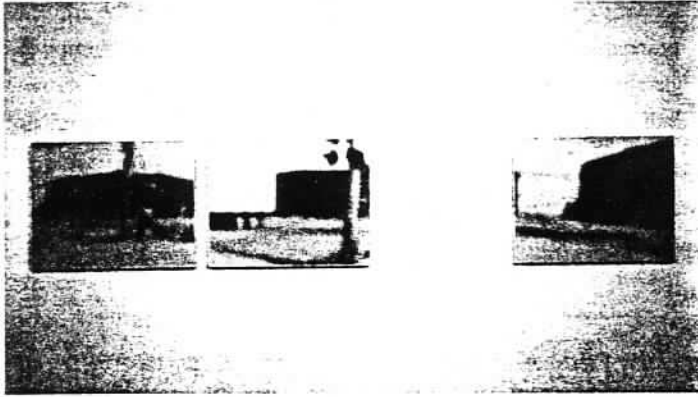
Uta Barth, UNTITLED

these works; her challenge to photographic norms poses important questions about our relationship to the photographic image.

Barth's photographs levitate, out of focus, above and beyond the realm of the figurative, the documentary; instead, they champion the incidental, the peripheral, with figure and ground merging into an equivocal haze in a way that sets up a perceptual tension, thwarting the observer's tendency to zero in on the "punctum" of the image, and thereby shifting the paradigms. It's a case of bliss out or get out. Barth desensitizes the viewer, as she transforms a brash and uncomfortable world into a Thomas Demandesque fantasy which here turns out to be reality creating its own simulacrum.

The viewer is pulled into that no man's land reminiscent of the hypnagogic state where, on the fringes of sleep, we are witness to a cavalcade of imagery without meaning and, in which, although we are taunted by its traces, meaning never quite touches base, while imagery takes its place. In the same way, Barth's photographs constantly defy our analytical urges and shrug off our attempts to affix meaning. While narrative is denied, its potential is magnified. Where the old war cry of psychedelia's guru-in-chief, "turn on, tune in, drop out", might provide us with the ticket to this show, the trip is somewhat cooler than its stereotype. These frozen images urge us to warm them up, they exude a sensuous aura which could easily be locked into frigid impotence by their proximity to aesthetic preciosity. They could easily drift into that territory of the abstract so ably explored, but quickly exhausted, by Barbara Kasten and the Dutch photographer Winfred Evers. They could readily assume the easy mantle of the painterly, but their contextuality—an examination of the perceptual processes—shuns all these handles.

Uta Barth's diptychs and triptychs, all UNTITLED, explore, transform, and erase their locations in equal measure by switching viewpoint and perspective, cajoling the analyst in us, while the elusive textuality of her statements keep one step ahead of any diagnostic coup we might attempt. In one triptych, the dark but diffuse mass of an industrial building metamorphoses across the sequence, not only through a changed viewpoint, but by its changing juxtapositions with the life that flows through its scene. In the first panel, street furniture looking like a collection of totems imported from cyberspace, steals the scene. In the next, the indistinct but unmistakable tail-end of a white truck blends with the street bleached by the sun; however, its ghostly trace is enough to shunt the building's dark hulk to the rear of the viewer's gaze. Meanwhile, in the third panel, the ghosts



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of pedestrians melt holes in its black carapace, but are still shut out by its menacing walls—an alter ego to one of James Casebere's prisons, which are white and detain whereas this building is black and repels, but still somehow shares their pristine presence. In one of the diptychs shown at London Projects, two large color photographs of the same street in downtown LA, caught at sunset, also transmute the scene. But here the viewpoint undergoes vertical shift, the street in the first panel giving way to the sky in the second, where the street lights flood and blanch the scene, as if a blinding light has descended from heaven, diluting the sumptuous pinks of a sunset sky and dissolv-

ing the street scene below in a vague marshmallow haze. There is something filmic about this pair of images, as the prospect moves on and out to make way for the ensuing scene, but without whose existence the viewer is left suspended, cast into limbo. Beauty's taboo quietly pervades this diptych, its nuances distract us from the conundrums that Barth has set us here, while its caresses protract the viewing process. This beauty surprises, offering a change of paradigm for the understanding of the work, but ultimately it turns out to be as incidental as the scenarios that traverse the show, a mere garnish, adding an extra, if extraneous, dimension to this optical fare.

My reference here to filmic quality is not throwaway, but touches on something which is symptomatic of much of Barth's recent work, for her images emulate film stills with the characters erased, scenes without the narrative, grounds without the figures, the hype of the image and the speed of the action halted and then ghosted away. McLuhan's proto-Postmodernist dictum of "The Medium is the Message" is trashed and stepped over in Barth's work. She merely questions why and how we look through the image, its message non-existent and its medium simply a vehicle. Her images are addictive and you don't quite know why, so you become wary, not skeptical or apprehensive, just careful, but then these works crave care and attention anyway; they require the viewer to work hard, so, unlike those addictive substances which offer a shortcut, you have to work hard to find and get caught on their hooks, but when you do, their post-narrative visuality brings you back again and again.

Each of Barth's wayward photographs, whose anarchy subverts a whole array of photographic assumptions, is inhabited by a dual personality: one offering the call of the real, and the other the seduction of the phantasm once the perceptual challenges have been met we are faced with the emotive ones.

A pair of diminutive photographs show divergent views of a fruit-laden cherry tree. One, just to prove that there is a focusing ring on her camera, offers us a glorious, close-up view of the fruit, ripe and near bursting with sweet temptation, the tang almost tangible. The other obscures the fruit—almost—in a tangle of blurred branches where, now in the background and out of focus, it is barely discernible, hanging forlornly like some lost red necklace, not forbidden but forgotten fruit, and summoned only by its effulgent presence in the neighboring image. Here, Barth seems to offer us a cameo, as touchstone, for the whole show: it is only through absences, or counterpoints, by inferences or connotations that we can gain a real insight, a real understanding of this enigmatic but compelling suite of works.

Freud wrote that it is through our relationship to the other that we situate ourselves and find our identity. Absence is one of the access points to the other, and it is in the absences so vividly summoned by her images that Uta Barth brings us face to face with the other, questioning not only our perceptual habits but also the consequent stereotypes through which we forge our connections with the world. But maybe it is the misted-up mirror of Freud's heir, Jacques Lacan, through which we belat-

edly confront the other here. What to the cursory glance appear to be photographs whose existences are merely the arbitrary result of some dreadful mistake, turn out to be extremely poignant and incisive indicators of the futility of those assumptions which, fed by habit, readily fall prey to the other, which will always creep in and tear them apart. Barth offers us a fast-track into those subliminal spaces where the other is the rule rather than the exception, and we gladly accept her invitation not exactly knowing why—our relationship to the periphery may never be quite the same again.

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