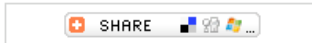


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On Sofas and Sublimity

by [Adam Minte](#)

posted on Sep. 25, 2006 - 12:00am



I first encountered an Uta Barth photograph six years ago, wandering through a group exhibition of eleven artists at the prestigious Getty Center in Los Angeles. The works were high-concept, low-execution, clearly the product of expensive art school educations, and, like pretentious dinner guests,

unjustifiably boring.

Then, turning a corner, I stopped dead in front of a massive photo of a white couch, delicately brushed by the shadows cast from a window frame. The photo next to it showed little more than the feet of the same white couch and a slice of impeccably clean gray carpet. With perfectly balanced lines and angles, these exquisite compositions seemed to serve no other purpose than to highlight the exceedingly good taste of the owner of this living room. I had never before so carefully examined the feet of a couch, and for some reason, as I wandered through the otherwise insipid show, I found myself repeatedly circling back to these images. After a half-hour of this, I realized it wasn't just the composition that attracted me, but also a sharp sense of the deficiencies of my own living room. Try as I might, I just couldn't get that languid, well-designed, luxurious feeling from the shadows cast by my window frames. The untitled photos, part of a landmark series named ... and of time, were created by Uta Barth, a German-born artist who has spent the last two decades revolutionizing photography from her perch as a studio art professor at the University of California, Riverside. Since that first encounter with her work, I have spent countless hours fixated on Barth's exhibition catalogs, filled with gorgeous photos of easily overlooked everyday subjects from her life: that sofa, an empty backyard, the power lines above her house. They are riveting because they are unexpectedly beautiful, particularly for the majority of us who find little in the way of unexpected beauty in and around our domiciles. This month, Barth's newest works, forty-eight untitled images, are on view at Franklin Art Works in Minneapolis (1021 E. Franklin Ave.; Minneapolis, through November 4)—their first-ever U.S. showing. Measuring roughly two feet by two feet each, the mounted images wrap around the gallery in a single line. The images are grouped into sets of two to five, each of which examines still lifes on Barth's window ledge.

For example, one grouping features an exquisitely composed image of a water glass and vase, both holding flowers, framed against hot white sunlight coming through the window. The first image in the group has an easy elegance and beauty, and if it were framed just a bit downward and to the right, the Martha Stewart Living magazine logo would be right at home in the left windowpane. Next to this image is a polarized version of the same scene, rendered in blood-red, highly saturated ink—an art student's mere trick of the light. Finally, on the opposite end, the still life becomes a totally unfocused wash that resembles nothing so much as blood in water. It is a stark, menacing contrast to the flowers it complements, yet in its echo there is something familiar.

Moving from left to right—from the elegant flowers to their final, bloody exposition—Barth seems to be embracing and then repudiating her attachment to the still lifes that have defined her work. According to her, however, the new images are actually about “what happens with your eyes closed.” She is literally representing the process of getting over an image. As she was quoted in *db artmag*:

“Those images are pretty much blood red and reenact optical after-images seen after staring into the light. At first, you’re still registering the blood through your eyelids and everything is a flash of red. After a few moments, the after-image becomes the opposite color of what you’ve looked at.”

Barth’s is a hard, domineering vision. Not content to just show you a picture, she’s determined to demonstrate how you will experience it when you blink or after you look away. Nothing is left to the imagination, to the sense that one’s personal experience can define the photo in an individual way. The images are about seeing, and the flowers are just a means of exploring that topic. Barth said she chose flowers as the subject for her new series because “they are completely invisible” to her. Over the course of several months, she photographed them at odd angles, imitating how a passerby might briefly notice them, then not notice them at all. In time, as viewers linger on the images, she hopes they will see “that something else might be happening other than describing my home.” The images are not, she insists, “a reverie about flowers.”

Of course, that’s a highly esteemed professor of art talking. As a fan of the artist (not the professor), I unabashedly admit that I find the flower photos awfully pretty, and I’ve spent enough time reveling in them to have had my own epiphany of sorts. It is this: Professor Barth keeps fresh flowers around the house, and I don’t. It may be the case that she buys so many flowers that they’ve finally become invisible to her, but I can’t remember the last time I had a vase of fresh flowers perched on my window ledge. Whether she recognizes it or not, I (the audience) have a connection to the flowers that Barth doesn’t. For me, her work is aspirational, the fine-art equivalent of the Room & Board catalog. Like Barth, I once lived with a white couch (purchased from Room & Board, no less). Sure, sunlight used to fall across it, but I swear it never looked quite as timeless as Barth’s.

In the introduction to Barth’s 2004 catalog of photos, which includes images from ...and of time, one critic declares her work “the visual equivalent of silence,” and another comments that they are a “study in sameness that attempts to reduce all activity and purpose to pure observation.” In interviews, Barth says similar, deeply philosophical things. But for me, the real draw of the ... and of time couch photos is the way in which they induce an almost visceral desire for a living room just like Barth’s. The artist and her admirers, however, are insistent in their denials that object lust might have anything to do with her work’s appeal (or, dare I say, its beauty). “It is hard to imagine subject matter that is less compelling than a living room floor,” is how the Albright-Knox Art Gallery explained its decision to purchase images of Barth’s living room carpet. Never mind that the average American bookstore is bursting with shelter magazines and decorating books that detail why living room floors are compelling; the lush images in most of them could have served as poor concept studies for Barth’s living room artworks.

To my eye, what makes this artist's images so compelling, so utterly hypnotic, is how they take the conventions of object-lust publications—magazines like Metropolitan Home and Dwell—and recast them as fine, minimalist art. Instead of photographing her couch straight on, in blinding Mediterranean light (see: Architectural Digest), Barth allows us a view of just the top few inches of the cushions and a shadow of window frame across the wall. In effect she is saying—to me, at least—“here are the object and the feeling you'd have if you were lucky enough to have my time and the means to enjoy it.” Or more directly: “Enjoy my couch.”

To the best of my knowledge, Barth has never said anything of the kind, and who knows, maybe she's never so much as flipped through an issue of Dwell. I doubt it, though. In fact, in the same way she insists that her new untitled series of flower images is not about flowers, she declares that her photos have nothing to do with her at all, and that, to the contrary, she strives for anonymity in creating them. “I don't want to become the subject I've tried so hard to erase,” she says. “Shoes on the floor, clothes, letters, and objects on my desk immediately construct a narrative and identity of the person, and there you have it: I'm the subject.” But how can Barth spend months photographing her surroundings—her couch, her electrical cord, her carpet, her windows, her backyard, the telephone poles above her house, her flower arrangements, and her window ledge—and somehow believe that her audience will automatically erase any readings into the personality of the owner of these objects?

For me, these photos are far from anonymous. It is precisely Uta Barth and no other who emerges from them. Intended as patient studies of the nature of time, they also serve as patient studies of a character or personality who not only owns nice things but knows how to look at (and photograph) them in unique and exquisite ways. It is those barely revealed quirks, quirks that hint at a personality, that endear Uta Barth to me. The intentions and theories that she and her critics generate about her work are interesting and occasionally relevant, and I'm pretty sure I'll start paying more attention to the blood-red retinal aftereffects of looking at photos in Architectural Digest. But really, in the end, it's the lovely simplicity of her images that moves me. For whose couch, in the history of art, is more sublime than Uta Barth's?
