

ACME.

Artweek

JANUARY 2000
VOLUME 31
ISSUE 1

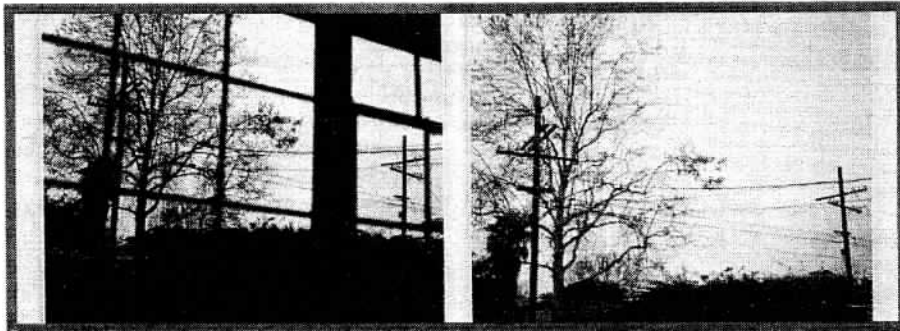
Uta Barth at ACME

Los Angeles is famous for its embrace of the new, so it seems natural that conceptual art, young by art-historical standards, has flourished here. The environment seems to encourage an avant-garde spirit, and lacking the deep roots of tradition ensconced in New York, Chicago and Europe, Angelenos have been on the forefront of breaking new ground in visual and conceptual art. In the early 1960s, Wallace Berman, Ed Ruscha and Robert Heinecken used photography in ways that other artists had not considered and forged a new understanding of the photograph. Heinecken's famous edict in 1965, "the photograph is not a picture of something but is an object about something," continues to resonate with artists today.

Uta Barth continues this line of thought. Her work has been addressing perception through photographic vision and human sight since the early 1990s, and her latest exhibition, *Nowhere Near* continues this investigation. The exhibition is accompanied by a beautiful 56-page catalog, an important and affordable (\$20) addition to any Barth enthusiast's library.

Aptly titled, her large color photographs are very nondescript. They run directly against the photographic tradition of visual inspiration that extends from Daguerre to Sally Mann. Seemingly, Barth's pictures could have been taken anywhere, which is an important point. Barth directs our thoughts away from a sense of place and toward an

Uta Barth, *untitled (nw2)*, 1999, color photograph diptych, 35" x 90", at ACME, Los Angeles.



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examination of how we view the world, highlighting the subjectivity of our vision and running directly against the notion of photographic objectivity and the picturesque.

The photographs on view were shot through a modest home's window into the backyard. We see a telephone pole and tree reoccurring in some of the pictures and the window frame and panes of glass play a constant role. These are scenes that the homeowner (supposedly the artist) must see everyday, and, like repetitive, banal scenery, nuance of many minor details takes on added significance. As with Barth's earlier work, the point of focus, both photographic and human, is sometimes placed at an "in-between" point—not on any visible object, and so suggests something that has moved or is unseen. In these images, one is reminded of how our perceptions shift from what may actually be present to things that may be absent, suggesting both the fleeting nature of life and the subjectivity that we bring to it.

Photographically, the artist's process and images bring to mind the camera obscura. As early as 5 B.C., Greek philosophers described the optical principles of the darkened room with a small portal. From this small hole, an image was projected onto the room's opposite wall. Barth's reoccurring window and room are just such a device in which a more sophisticated camera records the scene and adds to the sense that what we are shown is steeped in optical and philosophical inspiration. The window is the constant—always present and through which the scene is perceived. Recurring elements include the aforementioned tree and telephone pole, which become our geographical markers and act as a point of entry into the work. In a few photographs, there sits an unoccupied chair, wryly pointing to Barth's presence in both the domestic and constructed environments.

Presented as single images, diptychs and a triptych, the photographs take us into the artist's private world of perception and challenge us to transcend our material fixation on person, place or thing. But the work is not without its human involvement and humor. From the window frame, a tiny toy airplane dangles, reminding the viewer that no matter how intellectually and visually challenging art can be, we all like to play.

—Thomas McGovern

Uta Barth—*Nowhere Near* closed in November at ACME, Los Angeles.