

# BOMBLOG

## ART

### Light, Looking: Uta Barth

by Sabine Mirlesse Mar 22, 2012

**Uta Barth brings a new meaning to close looking.**



Uta Barth, ... and to draw a bright white line with light. (Untitled 11.2), 2011. All images Courtesy of the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and 1301PE, Los Angeles.

Painting with light and chasing the ephemeral, Uta Barth brings us again into her Los Angeles home with new photographs that remind us not only of both the infinite and finite capacities of an eye's perception, but of one's bodily relationship with the background as well. In previous work Barth directs one's awareness inward to the subconscious engagement one has with the act of looking. What feels so different about these new images however is the presence of the artist's brushstroke—drawing attention instead to the way one can outwardly activate or interrupt a composition of space. Barth's hands sweep back her curtains as a type of performance, an introduction to one's own reflection, even. The narratives of light and its presence in life is the focal point of Barth's photographs more than ever before in these images most recently exhibited at [Tanya Bonakdar](#) gallery this winter. Here the artist opens up about her beginnings and inspirations and why she might only be able to make her artwork in Los Angeles.

**SABINE MIRLESSE** How did you begin taking photographs?

**UTA BARTH** I was taking a painting class in undergraduate school and wanted to render certain spatial configurations and to study the light of these imagined scenes. I did not have the skill to paint the images directly, so I started to make photographs to work from. But repeatedly I found the photographs that I thought to be the disposable source materials much more interesting and more engaging than the paintings and drawings I made from them. I also found that the process of making photographs forced me to learn how to truly see, to see the light, to study how things in an image relate to the edge, how to crop and frame the most mundane and incidental subject matter into a compelling image. I remember a teacher talking about the difference of making an engaging photograph of an ordinary thing versus making an ordinary photograph of an engaging thing. So early on I started pointing my camera at the incidental, the ordinary and the insignificant information that surrounds us but that we pass by without noticing everyday.

But that was my start with the medium; later on I began looking more to sculpture, installation work and film, and the real influences of my work came out of those disciplines . . . Robert Irwin, On Kawara, Robert Ryman—artists whose work dealt with duration like Andy Warhol (*Empire* and his screen tests made in

the mid '60s) and John Cage (who understood that, in order to talk about silence, you need to bracket it with sound). I was deeply engaged by the ideas of minimalism and much of the work from the Light and Space movement. So, while my influences are not really found within the history of photography, I still continued to work with a camera. I wanted to make work about *looking*, about visual perception as content in and of itself. As the camera lens functions much like the human eye, photography seemed the most appropriate medium for those interests.



Ground #42, 1994.

**SM** Were you always interested in making images about images themselves?

**UB** I think my very early work was much about that. I wanted to rethink what we take for granted in an image, to examine how images make meaning and how to break out of the traditional way of making a photograph. Mostly the camera is used as a sort of pointing device. One goes out into the world and points it at something of beauty, something of importance, a spectacle of some sort . . . always at something, so in most images the subject of the photograph and the meaning are one and the same. I wanted to challenge that by removing the central subject and to look at and think about the background, which ascribes meaning to the subject in an almost subliminal way.

**SM** Do you have a favorite piece of music?

**UB** In 1983 Brian Eno made an album titled *Apollo: Atmospheres & Soundtracks*. It has the sweetest liner notes, written by him about his memory of watching the Apollo space mission on TV when he was young. He was captivated by the imagery and the idea of what he was witnessing, yet found the experience undermined by the reporter's narration and bad resolution on a small TV screen. Therefore he wanted to create an ambient soundtrack that might match up to what he imagined the experience of floating weightlessly through space might be. The album has no lyrics and is incredibly beautiful, and the very idea of ambient music relates so much to things I think about in my own work.

**SM** What is something you love about living in Los Angeles? Something you detest? What about Europe?

**UB** I find Los Angeles to be the most alienating city I have ever been to. I assume it is because of the endless sprawl, the distances one needs to cover to see a friend, the relentless traffic and the complete lack of pedestrian space.

When I land in New York, within an hour or two, I have run into several people I know on the sidewalk. In LA we plan and re-plan to meet up on some distant day. I live here because the man I was with is from here, and he never wanted to leave. I did not mind it here, but when we separated I realized that I live in a place I never chose and now I constantly plot to move away. I miss Europe very much, as I still feel like a foreigner here. Yet when I am in Europe I feel like a tourist.

There is a freedom in LA that is essential to making art. The place has such a short history compared to New York, London, or Berlin. So as an artist I am not weighed down by the past that I feel so viscerally in New York or London for example. This place still has the sense of being the last frontier; there are few ghosts to contend with. The discourse here is generated around the many excellent art schools, and it is challenging. Most every serious artist here teaches, not just for a job, but to be engaged.

I honestly do miss Europe terribly, and this feeling is getting stronger as I get older. So I did spend much time plotting to move to London or other parts of the UK, but it is hard to uproot your life at some stage. In my twenties I moved to Los Angeles without knowing a single person here and never gave it a second thought, but now it is more difficult to pull up my roots for something unknown. And most importantly, I cannot picture myself making work somewhere else; there is a reason that the Light and Space movement happened in LA. The light is visceral and blinding here. The wide open sprawl of one city turning into the next is so vast, so seemingly endless . . . and all that is bordered by the ocean on one side and the wide, incredibly beautiful desert on the other. I do deeply like the vastness of it all.



Ground #38, 1994.

**SM** In a 1996 [interview](#) for the Journal of Contemporary Art, you state that a priority of yours is "to make the viewer aware of his or her own activity of looking at something." You've elaborated upon this idea here by stating visual perception to be the actual content of your photographs. Why is the act of looking so important to you?

**UB** When I got out of graduate school, I did a lot of soul-searching about what I wanted my work to be. It was the height of postmodernism, and much work around me seemed to be illustrating the theory we were all reading then. Much work dealt with political ideas, examined media, addressed gender and identity politics, and sought to deconstruct the politics of the gaze. I do have deep political and sociopolitical convictions, but I do not find the art world to be the best place to exercise them. I am much more politically effective when I act in the political arena. The gallery and museum certainly also can be an arena for these ideas, but it's a place in which we most likely find ourselves preaching to the choir. Since political change is so hard to affect and slow to take hold, I feel that I should find the most expedient way to do this, and artwork for me is not the most effective language for this. So I came to the conviction that art, for me, needed to address its most essential attributes and that is its ability to deeply engage the visual.

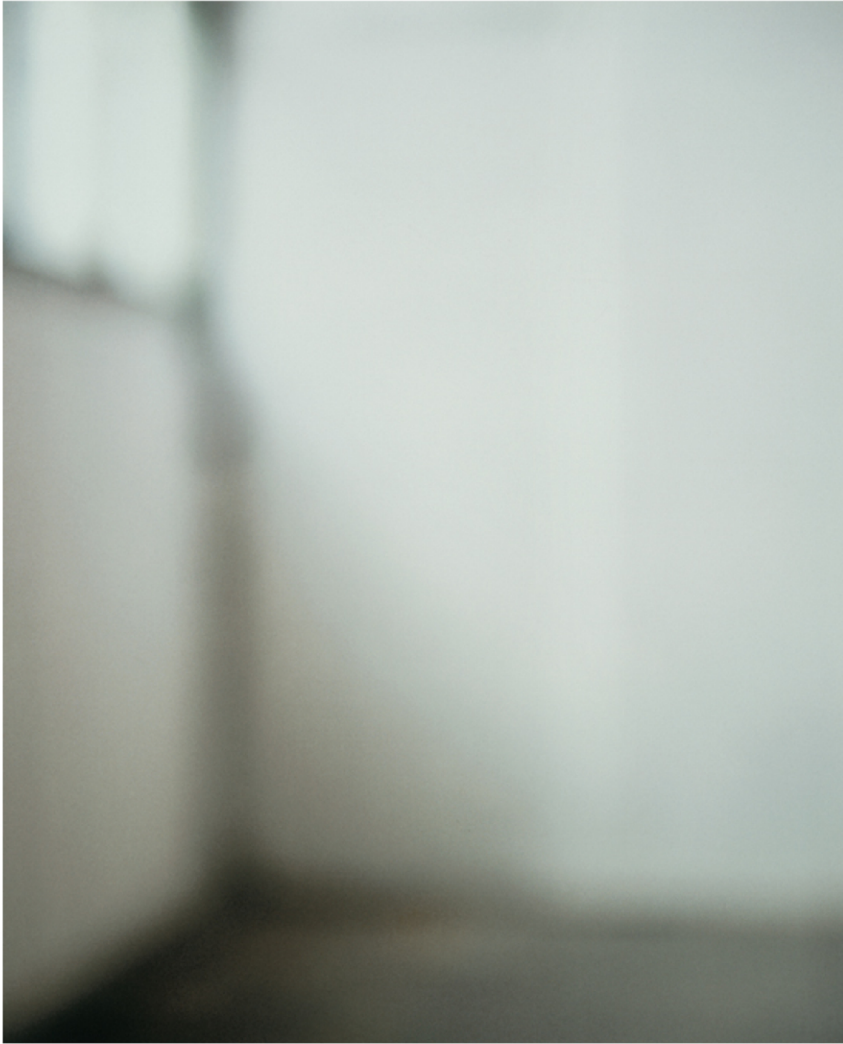
For my whole career, I wanted to think about not only what we see, but also how we see and thereby make visual perception the central focus of my investigation. Every project I have made has taken a different stab at the same question. I want the viewer to become immersed in looking and self-conscious of looking for its own sake. The title of Robert Irwin's biography is *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. Before it became this perfect title for his ideas, it was a line in a



Zen text. Much like Heidegger, Zen asks us to engage deeply in every moment and in what we experience to the point that we lose track of the story or the narrative that the mind wants to generate about any particular thing. My hope is that my work engages the ephemeral, the ambient, and the most subliminal information of everyday life. I make images that trace light and they render duration, trace time, and give you no central subject that will distract you. My ultimate hope is that you as the viewer become self-conscious of your activity of looking at the work and that once you leave the museum space this is something that you can carry with you into your world. Every project I have made has a different strategy for doing this, but the intention is always the same.

**SM** You mentioned that every project you've made takes a different stab at the same question of how one engages in the act of looking for its own sake and visual perception of time and space. Do you think that most artists work that way, whether they realize it or not? Is it important to dedicate oneself to the exploration of a single idea and come at it from various angles to further open it and unpack it?

**UB** Yes. I think every Dostoevsky novel, every Hemingway book, or Joan Didion piece is about the same central ideas throughout their careers. I think serious artists repeatedly engage the same central questions, but this should not be confused with a *consistent style*. I am always excited when a change of *signature style* opens new doors for exploring a core idea.



Ground #30, 1994.

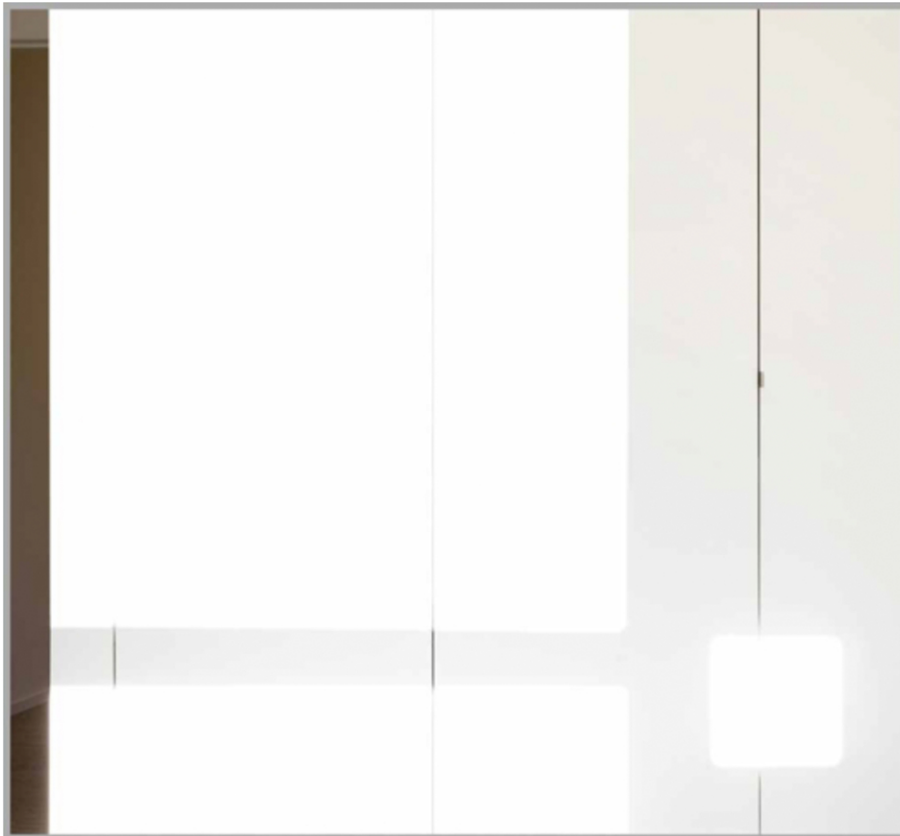
**SM** In that same interview [in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*], you explain how the use of blur in your images, like in Gerhard Richter's, exists as a device to remove specificity of place and time. You also talk about how it is used to try to imply the information not depicted, the gaze of the camera being elsewhere outside of the plane of focus—could you speak a bit more about where this gaze might otherwise lie?

**UB** People often refer to my work as “out of focus” and I always counter that it is perfectly in focus, the camera just happens to be focused on an unoccupied point in space. So I am photographing the volume of a room instead of its walls, the atmosphere of a rainstorm instead of the landscape the rain falls on. The visual residue of making images this way is the unfocused walls and blurred street scenes. What we end up looking at is the ground of the figure/ground relationship, the background, the envelope of information that might provide the context for who or whatever could occupy the point of focus. In my early work, I was interested in thinking about how this envelope of information would create the context and meaning for what we see. This lack of focus happens in the human

eye much the way it does for the camera, but our eyes are always darting about and constructing a seamless scene. If you try hard to hold the focus on one point and pay attention to the background of that, you will see it falls out of focus, just like my images do. The photograph just allows me to freeze looking into deep space.

**SM** Could you speak a little bit about these new photographs recently exhibited at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery?

**UB** The show consisted of two projects: . . . and *to draw a bright white line with light* and *Compositions of Light on White*. In each project I stop being just the observer of light, as it spills into the house and moves through it in the course of the day. Here I have become a participant in creating these images of light by drawing the curtain or drawing the shades in a different room. In the first project, I am moving the curtain to change the formation of a line of light that starts out being razor-thin and over the hours grows into a thick band of light. In the second series, I arrange the blinds to make Mondrian-like geometric abstractions out of light. This project can only be photographed for a few days each year, days in which the projecting sunlight is perfectly perpendicular to the geometry of lines of my closet doors. So I am literally drawing with light. Liz Siegel at the Art Institute of Chicago wrote a text for my exhibition there in which she points out that the translation, the literal meaning of the word *photography* is: "to write or draw with light." This is something I knew but had forgotten about. So these images are photographs in the most literal way.



Composition #2, from *Compositions of Light on White*, 2011.

**SM** You've been teaching at the University of California for a while now—is there

any particular point of view or philosophy that you try to encourage in your students?

**UB** I recently left my full-time University position to be in the studio more. But I instantly missed teaching and now spend a few days per term teaching graduate critique at Art Center. I think the most important thing I know about teaching, I learned from Robert Heineken when I was a graduate student at UCLA. He had a way of taking my work as serious or even more seriously than I could myself. He engaged in my ideas with great attention and thereby gave me the self-confidence to take my own work to be meaningful and to invest myself fully. It taught me to set the bar very high. After years of teaching, I know how to do that for students, and I also know how to teach them how to develop a dialog with their own work, to get the work to speak back to them and to build ideas from the last to the next instead of jumping around when they hit the block in the road. The last thing I learned from Joan Didion. In a passage about her own writing process she talks about writing a novel being like walking a tightrope and the trick is to never look down. Well, we always look down and that is when you need a safety net. For an artist that net is the continual act of keeping a notebook of images and ideas. This way, when you fall, and we all fall, all of the time, you have something to go to that gives you back the track of thought and the history and development of your own ideas.

**SM** That's crazy you should mention Joan Didion because I've often imagined your imagery when reading her and vice-versa—especially *Play It as It Lays*. Both of you are transplants from other cities that have lived with, loved, and struggled through Los Angeles and represented a certain quality of its vastness, its isolation, its oasis, its reverie, its alienation . . .

**UB** For the Phaidon Contemporary Artist monograph books, each artist is asked to choose a piece of writing that is meaningful to their work. Everyone before me had used various relevant theoretical texts, but I choose selections of edits I made from Joan Didion's novel *Democracy*. I have read her repeatedly for as long as I can remember and find her the most atmospheric writer I know.

**SM** Name one thing you know now that you wish you'd known as a young artist just starting out.

**UB** After each and every exhibition I have ever done, and there are very many by now, I feel totally convinced that I will never have another idea. This is true for me to this day, but I know now that it always passes and that most every artist and writer I know, who is not satisfied by repeating themselves, feels the same way.

**SM** What is next for you?

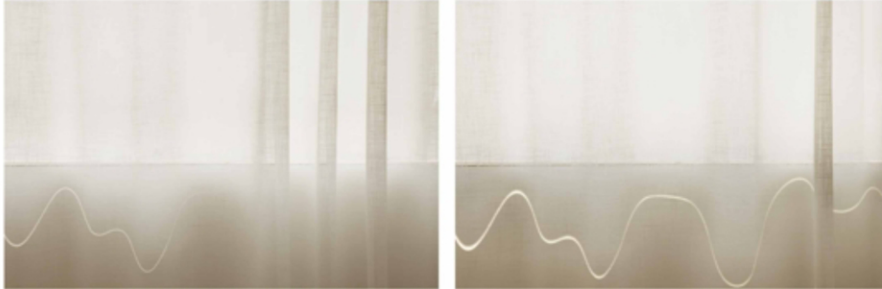
**UB** This spring I will do a solo show with Galeria Elvira González in Madrid. Aside from that I have started on a project titled *In the light and shadow of Morandi*. I am fascinated by his work, by his relentless repetition of the same subject matter, in order to talk about composition and painting itself. I share this fascination and this use of repetition in much of my own work. So I am playing around with these repetitive still lifes, but I am only photographing the shadows they cast. I want the image to be deferred, and as in the recent projects, I want to draw with light, the refraction of light as it moves through glass and liquids, to draw with shadow, and again, to use light as the subject in and of itself.

**SM** That makes me think of the series called *From My Window* by André Kertész . . . do you look at him at all?

**UB** I think more about a Robert Frank photograph I love. It is part of *The Americans* and is a view from a widow onto the rooftops of the town. He moved the camera back to include the curtains of the window he is looking out of and thereby moved the attention to himself as the onlooker, rather than just the scene



itself. It is a small move, yet it totally changes the reading of the image. I have used that same move in much of my work.



... and to draw a bright white line with light. (Untitled 11.1), 2011.

**Uta Barth's new work was recently exhibited for the first time at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York City from October 27th through December 22nd, 2011.**

**Sabine Mirlesse is a recent graduate of the MFA in Photography and Related Media program at Parsons the New School for Design. Just this past spring, she traveled to Iceland to work on a new series of photographs entitled As if it should have been a quarry at the invitation of Samband Íslenskra Myndlistarmanna / The Association for Icelandic Visual Artists. Sabine now lives and works in Paris.**