

Interview

Against Narrative: Uta Barth on Photography, Experience, and Perception Cameron Turner



"white blind (bright red) (02.9)"

In "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," essayist Annie Dillard luminously describes how "there is another kind of seeing that involves letting go." She adds, "When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied." The acclaimed photography of Uta Barth evokes this other "kind of seeing." Striking records of the slow unspooling of light and of time, Barth's images invite the viewer not only to carefully consider the ostensible subject of a photograph but also to redraw the boundaries of his or her own perception. These images query. They quiet. They empty. They both invite and resist the viewer's subjectivity. And, ultimately, they transform.

Barth lives and works in Los Angeles. Her work has been featured in many prominent exhibitions, including a well-received show last year commissioned by the Art Institute of Chicago. Additional venues that have spotlighted her work include the Tate Modern, London; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Lannan Foundation; and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. She has also been honored with two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

CAMERON TURNER: Is there a typical way in which you begin a new work? Is it through natural observation or from technical experimentation?

UTA BARTH: Even after all these years of many solo shows, I still walk out of every exhibition with the total conviction that I will never have another idea again. Luckily, the aftermath of a show is full of studio busywork, during which I feel "off the spot," and slowly the wheels start turning again. It's sort of like sharpening all your pencils and arranging your desk while the white of the page stares back at the writer.

For me, I want visual art to be about visual experience. All of my work has the same central ideas: to make perception the central subject of the work; to capture the ambient, the peripheral, and the everyday information that catches my eyes' attention; and to trace the movement of light as it renders the passage of time. The aim of everything I have made is to make you aware of your perceptual engagement, first through my work and the gallery space and then as you leave and go on with your life. Each project takes a different stab at the same central ambitions and tries to hit at them from every imaginable angle. The questions are the same but become more articulate over the years; yet, when I start a new body of work, I find myself spending much time sitting around and staring into space. I try to find a new

and different way to phrase the question or some aspect I have, as yet, overlooked.

Often there are aspects in the last project that never got finished, or there was no room or time to open up yet another door. So I may find the starting place in something I see missing in the last body of work. When I walked through the seven rooms of a survey exhibition in 2000, I realized that each room contained one work that was a bit different and then was the lead for the following series. This was a discovery after the fact; and, no matter how I try to do it intentionally when I feel stuck, it does not work out that way.

So I stare into space, not even clear that I am "thinking about work." I guess I am just silently sitting with the question of what I want to see, what the possibilities are, how to let go of perceived limitations of materials or imagery, how to broaden the quandary or further refine it. This goes on for a long time; and, somehow around then, I notice things around me, make observations, see something in my everyday environment I had always overlooked or seen in a limited way. In some book about physics or mathematics, I read that, in the very act of formulating a question, one already has touched on the answer itself. It may take years of hard and frustrating work, but the seed for the answer exists in the ability of asking, of not taking something for granted as is. I think there is much truth in this.



"Composition #8" from: "Compositions of Light on White"; 2011; inkjet print in lacquered wooden frames; 41 1/8 x 48 inches; 104.5 x 121.9 cm (framed) Edition of 6; 2 APs Courtesy the artist; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; 1301PE, Los Angeles

TURNER: How has your approach to composition changed over the trajectory of your career, especially in how you approach the manipulation and cropping of your images?

BARTH: Choices of composition, format, and scale I make specifically for each project. For the "Ground" work, I looked at compositional conventions of portrait photography: from the vernacular to Hollywood portraits from the '20s and '30s, to headshots, book cover jackets, ID images, you name it. I was interested in what the choice of background (or backdrop) tells us about the sitter, and I was interested in the composition. The images I made were all different formats and sizes, and they were carefully cropped to give a formal image that felt slightly off-center.

The "Fields" were made in reference to film, so the information bleeds off the edge and washes across the image, giving the impression of a subject and camera, that both were in motion. The following series was about "a visual double take" and peripheral vision, so the composition was ordinary, but the scale of the images often varied in these first sequences I made.

After that I started to photograph exclusively in my home, as the act of perception in no way necessitated going out to seek out a subject. I shot mostly without a tripod, at odd angles, attempting to render the glance in passing as I was walking through a room. These images from "nowhere near" simply point at the window whenever I would notice it and are skewed and not composed at all. A curator in Germany was all excited, as he felt they were the first

composition-less pictures he had seen (he felt that all the attempts artists had made by tripping the shutter with eyes closed or tossing a camera to someone else always failed, as the artist would pick the most interesting and unexpected off the roll of film).

But I quickly observed that we never see “crooked” in life. When I lie on my bed, with my head sideways, my mind does not see a sideways image of my room. My eye may. (I have no way of knowing, as my brain perfectly transforms the view into normal straight-on vision for me; and, as I get up, it makes the transition a seamless act, no matter how much I may tilt my head.) Psychedelics may be the only things that alter the way we perceive what the eye records. So I went on to make images that are mostly “straight forward,” yet I do indicate the height of my eyes in relation to the scene, in order to locate the viewer into the image a bit.

TURNER: So much of our vernacular surrounding memory is rife with photographic (and cinematographic) metaphor, which is unsurprising considering that the art form often serves as a crutch for reminiscence. And many critics have commented on how your work tests and invites the viewer’s memory. Yet the art critic Marita Sturken writes that “All memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting: to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed by memory,” and thus, “forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory.” How has your work concerned itself with acts of forgetting and erasure—either willed or unwilling?

BARTH: When I was a student at the University, I became interested in neurobiology and have kept up with scientific readings on the workings of our brain. It is true that the current understanding of memory is that we actually remember little and “recreate” old memories from central fragments that remain stored. We do not have the capacity to remember everything we think we do. We rebuild events from the many core memories we have and just fill in the spaces. We do this every time we retell a particular event; and, each time, things shift and change just a bit. This knowledge is used in therapy to help people with posttraumatic stress disorder to adapt to the past. It does not change the facts of what is remembered, but it can change the emotional tone associated with it and create some distance or a calmer objectivity. I think this “re-creation of remembered events” may be one of the reasons why people like to think about my early work (“Ground” in 1982-87 and “Field” in 1986-89) in terms of memory.

I do not think about memory at all when making the work and have had hours of conversation denying its play in my work with curators and writers of survey texts for various exhibitions. I know for a fact that I do not intend to include this association, nor do I want my work to be read that way. (I have no interest in narrative, metaphor, or symbolism; and I fight hard to remove the possible readings of these from my work.) Rather, I want the work to draw you into the moment of experience with hope that my being “present” invites you to be present in the act of seeing what hangs on the wall (then the wall, the room, on and on); but all the countless questions and comments that have been written about memory must mean that, somehow, it is in play, with or without intent. My guess is that this association happens because the early images are so devoid of specificity of location that everyone fills in the blanks. I can’t count the number of times people have told me that some image from the “Field” series was photographed near their own house or in a town they had grown up in. When I ask where they are from, it never turns out to be true, and the viewers walk away confused and holding on to the possibility that I may be wrong.



"Untitled (nw 11)" from "nowhere near"

These works are usually referred to as “the out of focus” or “blurry” images. I always counter that they are perfectly focused, but focused on a point in space that is not occupied by any subject. What we are left with to look at is the blurry container, the background to this empty plane in space. These images attempt to render the volume of a space and not the walls that contain it. Lack of sharpness of walls, nature, and cityscapes erases the particular details that identify a location and leaves us a wash of light and color onto which people project the details of their own memory.

I did not want nostalgia or the history of romantic photo-pictorials to become a referent for the work; so, in order to undermine this connotation, I would include a perfectly sharp yet also empty image into each installation of the “Ground” work. In the late “Field” series, photographed outdoors, my intent for the images was for the photogtraphs to

become so overtly reduced in the attempt to point towards air, wind, weather, and light, instead of the cityscape on which these elements fall.

So, I do not think about memory. It seems to invite the narrative nature I try to escape. I suppose, forgetting is what we need, to see things as new, to be in the moment, and to see for its own sake. The title of Robert Irwin's biography is "Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees"; and, before that, it was a line from a Zen text. So if that is what you mean about "forgetting" in my work, I would deeply embrace it.

TURNER: Where did you grow up, and how does your early background as an artist inform your current work?

BARTH: I grew up in Berlin until the age of twelve, when my father, a scientist, moved the family to the States in order to pursue a career in research at Stanford University. This move had a huge impact on me, as it was a hard age for being an outsider. I was happy to leave many dark memories of Berlin behind and embraced American culture quickly, much to the disapproval of my father.

At this point in my life, I miss Europe very much and have thoughts about returning, not to Germany, but perhaps the UK at some time. For a long time, I lived with a man who was born and raised in Los Angeles, and he had no interest in leaving here. I was continually aware that, no matter how close we were, we had fundamentally different worldviews; and, when we split up, I found myself living in a city I had not chosen and cannot call home. So, I still feel a bit like an outsider here yet have been gone so long that I am a lost tourist in Europe whenever I am there. I am honestly not sure how, or even if, my European roots affect the work I make.

I know that my location in Los Angeles and the climate here certainly play out in my work. There are obvious reasons that the Light and Space movement took place here, and it has had a huge influence on me. The light is visceral here; it is a very harsh and severe light that renders crisp shadows unlike the softly lit, filtered landscapes of the German countryside. I could not make the work I do here in New York or Berlin.

My memories of postwar Berlin are of a dark city: high-ceilinged rooms darkened with drawn, heavy curtains. The city has changed much, but the memories remain. I don't see the impact they have on my work; but I am certainly influenced by the light in different parts of the world; and I think I learned the sensitivity to the color of light from living in a place where, often, the light is so forceful, blinding, and visceral that it became subject itself.

TURNER: What artists working in other forms—especially literature and painting—have cross-pollinated with or influenced your current practice, especially how you investigate place and space in your work?

BARTH: I love the intensely atmospheric writings of Joan Didion and included excerpts of one of her novels in the "Artist Choice" section of my Phaidon "Contemporary Artists" monograph. Most artists choose sections of theory relevant to their own work, but I could not pass up Didion's descriptions of light, color, and air.... As I mentioned, Robert Irwin and much of the Light and Space movement are touchstones for much of my thought. I came out of graduate school at the height of postmodern theory and nothing could be farther from what was in vogue. "What about beauty?" was a hostile (and always asked of me) question in those days, but hold on to something you love for long enough in the art world and things will swing back around.

I love that John Cage wanted to talk about silence and understood that in order to do so, you must bracket it with gesture or sound, and I never tire of the silent "screen tests" by Andy Warhol or "Empire," which I watched for four or five hours (until the museum closed) when I was fifteen. I love Turner's late sky paintings, Monet's devotion to the color of light when he painted haystacks, and Brian Eno's ideas about ambient music are close to my heart; his "Apollo: Atmospheres & Soundtracks" album would keep me content on the imaginary desert island.

TURNER: I'm curious about "white blind (bright red)," which depicts the landscape outside your home, yet also suggests larger, more general processes of perception. How, if at all, does your photograph deal with the specificity of place—like the particularity of the tree canopy outside your home—especially since your work is often discussed in terms of its abstraction and "lack of subject"?

BARTH: "Not at all" hopefully is the answer to your question. Working on perception, I chose my home as I saw no need to go out and look for a subject, and because it is the place I spend more time than anywhere else. It was the "choice of no choice." The tree in my yard just happens to be outside of the window I spent most time staring out of. I have been told many times and still cannot remember what kind of tree it is. I want you to engage in your own activity of looking when you stand in front of my work and to not lose your thoughts to "subject matter" you may be looking at.

But I do need to point my camera somewhere, so I point it at the place my eyes land when I am staring into space. But how to convey that? I have explained some strategies, the thinking for this one goes like this: If I see one picture of a tree, I will think about a tree, read it as metaphor or symbol or evaluate the pictures' formal qualities or any number of other interpretive possibilities. If I see a hundred pictures of a tree, the same tree at that, I am left to

wonder what else might be going on. All description and interpretation could be accomplished with the first image, so what is at play by use of redundancy of this sort?

The “nowhere near” series traces the change of the color of light: not only the light of the day, but also the color of light over about nine months. My hope is that due to this redundancy of image, the tree loses meaning and instead we are left looking at light and at time.

In “white blind (bright red),” I became interested in staring: staring at the brightly backlit, graphic, bare branches and the optical afterimages this produced when I closed my eyes and various other visual phenomena that occur when we overload our retinas. The project is installed in a loop around the gallery and has no beginning or end. The images are arranged in sequences ranging from two to seven, and each sequence starts out with a straight image of the tree and then traces what can happen when staring too long. There are sequences of blinding erasure, of optical carryover from one stare to the next, of the afterimages as they melt and dissolve and others of sheer optical fatigue.

I have always made photographs, as our eyes are so much like the camera's lens. We experience depth-of-field, or lack thereof, just as the lens does in my work; yet our eyes dart about so fast we have a hard time noticing it. In this series, the images go where the camera cannot and show us what our eyes see when they are shut, as vision does not stop at that point.

You also mention that my work is often talked about in terms of abstraction, which is a term that makes me very uncomfortable. I obviously can see why it comes up, but feel it is a confusion and therefore one of the reasons I seldom use shallow depth-of-field in recent work. My understanding of the word is something quite different than what I am after.

So no, I do not want any specificity in the work and have tried any way I can find to erase it. It is a never-ending struggle, as I remove the mail from a table, pick up the sweater from the floor by the chair, take the book off the table, repeat a banal image in hopes it will become blind to us. I do not want the choice of the house to read as autobiography or ideas about the domestic, about taste or about me at all. But we are curious creatures; and my attempts fail often, as viewers tell me that I must be so incredibly neat, a bad gardener, or Catholic (because I used a lot of red in two projects). Or they ask, “Where did you get that nice sofa?” My close friend and designer of the book told me that the “nowhere near” series was terribly sad, as if someone was longingly waiting, yet nothing ever changed. We are trained to want to read the “hand of the artist” in any way we can, so I guess I will make the next project after all, and maybe ask myself how else one can stop these questions and trade them in for experience instead.