

Sunday, July 2, 2000

# The world outside her windows

By ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star

Outside the rear windows of Los Angeles artist Uta Barth's house, a big sycamore tree stretches its mottled white branches against the sky. A telephone pole rises a few yards away, offering a geometric counterpoint to the tree's organic tracery. A dense mass of bushes fills in the horizon line; there also is a stumpy palm tree and the house of a neighbor.

The windows Barth looks through are gridded with muntins and covered with screens, which are particularly noticeable when they are laden with droplets of rain. Frequently the scene beyond

— the sycamore tree and Barth's own backyard lawn bordered with flowering shrubs — appears blurred. The room the windows look out from holds a modernist couch.

The source of these mundane domestic details is a series of large-scale photographs by the widely exhibited Berlin-born artist, which are now on view at the Johnson County Community College Gallery of Art in an exhibit titled "nowhere near."

Shot during a nine-month period and presented singly and in diptych and triptych groupings, the images in "nowhere near" register the view through Barth's lens as she looks through, at and in front of her windows— from

*Uta Barth's  
'nowhere near'  
is art from the  
inside out*

See BARTH, I-3

Continued from I-1

different angles, at different times and under different weather conditions.

"My primary project," Barth noted in a 1996 interview published in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, "has always been in finding ways to make the viewer aware of their own activity of looking at something ..."

Naturally one thinks of Monet, and his paintings of haystacks and Rouen Cathedral in different seasons and at different times of day. The fact that windows figure so prominently in this series also has historical import.

From the Renaissance to the 19th century, Western artists conceived of a painting as a view through a window. During the 19th century, that deep illusionistic space "behind" the surface of the picture became progressively shallower; with the development of modernist abstraction in the 20th century, it was flattened out entirely.

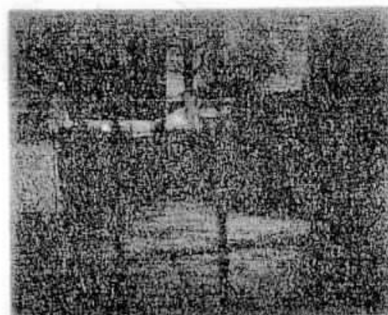
In Barth's photographs, the gridded windows invoke the grid of modernist geometric abstraction — as seen in the color block paintings of Piet Mondrian, for instance. Interestingly, the Dutch artist embarked on the path to abstraction by making paintings of trees.

One distinctive thing about Barth's work is her insertion of photography into the issues and history of abstract painting. This and the seductive painterly quality of her images made them natural for inclusion in the big "Abstract Painting, Once Removed" exhibition that traveled to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art last summer.

Much of the work in the JCCC show is not as aesthetically compelling as the evocative interiors seen at the Kemper — or the images Barth was recently commissioned to create for the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. (You can see them in Issue 15 of the semi-annual journal *Blind Spot*.) The window motif figures in the Getty photographs as well, but in the form of glimmering sunlit patches and shadows on Barth's carpet and walls.

What is distinctive about the 1999 "nowhere near" images is their concentrated intensity. Perusing this

# BARTH: The 'same' yard, the 'same' tree is not the same from one picture to the next



Photos by ROBERT WEDEMEYER/Courtesy of ACME, Los Angeles.

'Untitled (nw 20)' (1999)

exhibit, one senses that this was a body of work that Barth *had* to make.

And some of them are quite haunting, notably the night view of a rear neighbor's house, which carries overtones of a surveillance photograph. Barth has paired it with a nighttime, outside-looking-in view of a room in her own house. The slightly creepy voyeuristic air that also hangs about this picture reflects an abiding insight of Barth's images: that *what* one is looking for determines what one sees. (A burglar and a proud homeowner looking at the same house "see" different things.)

A closeup of rain on a screen highlights the dust that is trapped there. Barth regards it with detachment; a tidiness freak would see a task.

In another single shot, she captures the way droplets of rain on one side of a window function as a hoary scrim, pixillating the grass and bushes beyond, while the adjacent, drier panes allow a deeper view into the yard.

Throughout this series Barth plays with deep, shallow and flattened space; her diptychs and triptychs often offer different perspectives of the same scene. The grouped images have a filmic quality, although the tactic of portraying something from multiple angles also harks to cubism.

Repeatedly, Barth explores how distance affects perception: On the one hand, the way essential information contained in details can be lost in a long view, but on the other, how that long view can provide essential context.

Weather, distance and camera

angles are not the only factors affecting the look of these images. The artist manipulates the focus and exposure time so that many of these pictures are blurred.

Blur, or out-of-focusness, Barth has noted, is an "inherent photographic condition" and an "inherent optical condition." She is interested in the way "the camera can 'lock-in' this condition and give us a picture which allows us to look at (and focus on) out-of-focusness."

Although this is very much conceptual photography, its allure is not just in the puzzling out of Barth's ideas, but in her attunement to light and mood. Seen through Barth's lens, the light falling on the wood arm of a couch provides a Vermeer-like moment. In fact, the artist grew up with two small Vermeer reproductions in her home.

Her environment appears by turns peaceful, desolate and mysterious, while the familiarity one feels after a while for these surroundings drives home how fleeting are the

## ON EXHIBIT

■ The show: "Uta Barth: nowhere near"

■ Where: Gallery of Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park.

■ When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays; 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 1 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Closed Sundays during the summer months. The exhibit continues through July 12.

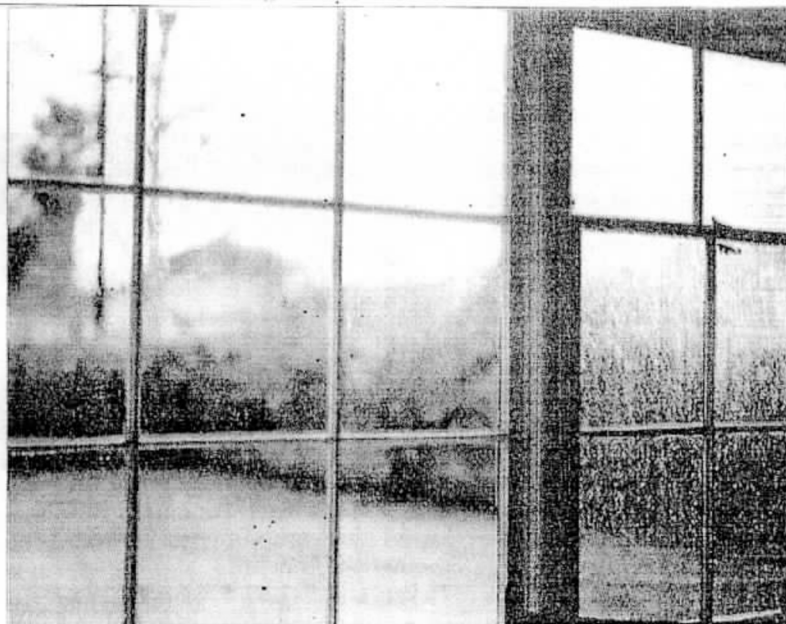
■ How much: Free.

moments they capture. The "same" yard, the "same" tree is not the same at all from one picture to the next.

Barth's photographs engender meditations, too, on the relationship between nature and architecture, and between nature and other manmade intrusions into the landscape.

Barth doesn't proselytize. Instead she gives us to understand that the window, the telephone pole, the very camera she holds, are accoutrements of consciousness and the human desire to know. There is an acceptance here that to try to know something is, in some measure, to interfere with it, and a realization that knowing is elusive, because nothing stays the same.

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Uta Barth's 'Untitled (nw 8)'

ROBERT WEDEMEYER; courtesy of ACME, Los Angeles.