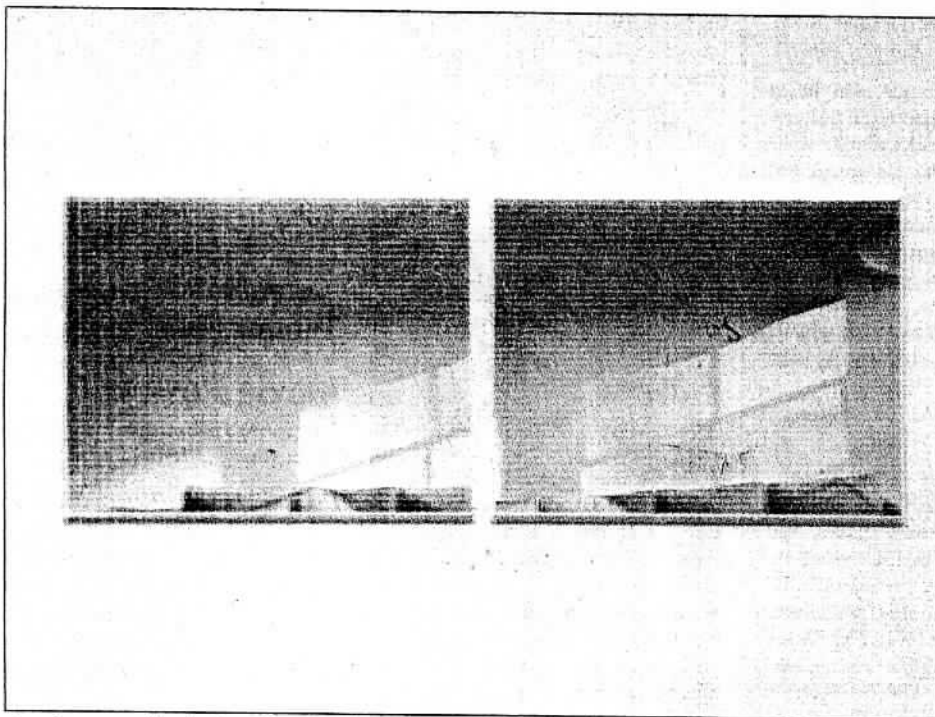




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Fuzzy Images, Focused Ideas

Artist Uta Barth employs blurry visuals in her camera work to make ordinary background settings the center of attention in the 'In Between Places' exhibition at University of Washington.



Another untitled Uta Barth diptych (2000), from the "... and of time" series.

Art Review

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

SEATTLE—Pick up a magazine and look at just about any photograph in it, whether advertisement or editorial. The subject of the picture—what it is the advertiser or editor wants to register directly in your eye—will probably be right out front in the foreground (or middle ground) and will almost certainly be in sharp focus. Everything else in the picture will tend to fall away, dissolving into a soft blur of background colors and shapes. The environment or context in which the subject moves, breathes or exists may not even be recognizable.

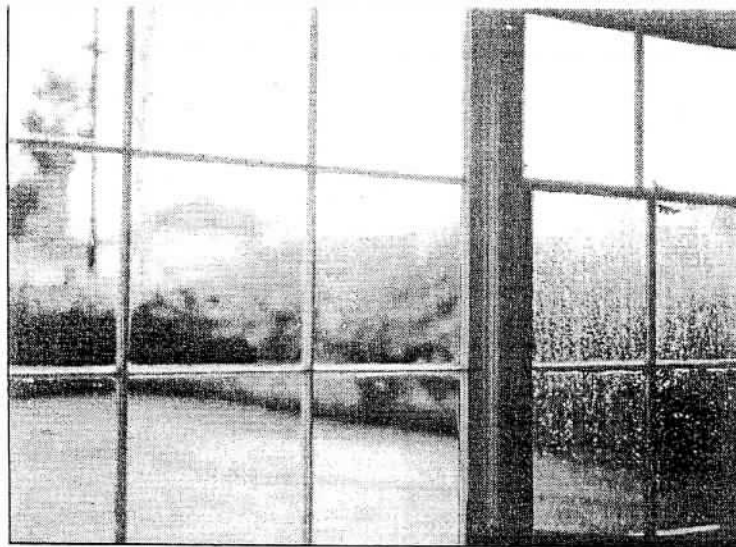
Uta Barth is an artist who, for the better part of the past decade, has been paying close attention to these visually fuzzed, conceptually marginalized backgrounds. Born in Germany but based in Los Angeles, where she went to graduate school (at UCLA in 1985), she has produced a compelling body of idiosyncratic photographs in which the absence of clear focus results in a paradoxical sense of gentle clarity.

The blurred images in her pictures immediately recall precedents from painting of the 1960s and 1970s, including the celebrated work of Germany's Gerhard Richter and L.A.'s Vija Celmins. The work's commitment to a philosophical study of visual phenomena stripped of metaphysical claims puts it in league with Light and Space art, which has never before seen a practice based entirely on camera work.

Meanwhile, the relationship of Barth's work to photography's commercial vernacular, rather than to traditions of art photography, is clear. (Look again at that magazine.) At 42, Barth is a leading figure among the second generation of artists who use common cameras to make art that cannot be ghettoized in the separate-but-equal realm of photography.

"Uta Barth: In Between Places" is a lovely and illuminating survey of 41 works on view at the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery. (The show travels to Houston next year.) It starts with

Please see 'Barth,' F33



Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington

Untitled 1999 work, from "nowhere near" series, in "In Between Places."

'Barth'

Continued from F1

four odd, rarely seen 1990 works that mix painting and photography, and it concludes with four exquisite, two- and three-panel works commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum and seen there last spring as part of the exhibition "Departures."

In between, Barth's growing command of her idiom and the increasing complexity of her deceptively simple work unfolds. The show, organized by curator Sheryl Conkelton and accompanied by an excellent catalog, also conveys a subtle, almost subliminal narrative.

As laid out in the galleries, the sequence of subjects in Barth's mature work begins with uncluttered domestic interiors—a George Nelson lamp suspended before a white wall, a neat shelf of books, the corner where a curtained window meets a blank wall, etc. Then, it moves outdoors, to the modern urban landscape and further afield, to a pastoral countryside. Finally, the camera comes back indoors, but still its gaze is fixed on ordinary views that can be glimpsed through domestic windows. In the last room, the Getty commission completes the circular journey, training our eyes on nothing more than daylight streaming across a living room's walls and floor.

Walking through the show is a bit like being taken on a trip out into the world and discovering how to see. The eye-popping experience continues to resonate when you get back home, and you're idly watching gorgeous sunlight pass across an ordinary wall.

The prospects for a successful journey don't seem especially good at the start. At the center of

each of four 4-foot-square panels painted in narrow, horizontal stripes of black and white, Barth pasted a small photograph of a domestic environment at night. The small photographs pull you in close to peer, voyeuristically, at the intimate scene, but the close horizontal stripes strobe and flash in your eye and push you away, making it impossible to visually penetrate the pictured home. The impenetrable domestic subject matter signals alienation.

These 1990 hybrid works are most notable for their surprisingly visceral qualities. They employ aggressive optical means to grab you by the lapels and manipulate your body in space. An eccentric variation on Hans Hofmann's old push-pull theory of painting, the work wrestles against the familiar tendency of photographs to disappear into a passive realm of illusion.

In a clunky and finally unsatisfying manner, these works nonetheless set forth the terms that Barth would successfully negotiate soon after: The once-alienated viewer is now a material body sharing conscious space in the room with a photographic object. She did it in a most unusual way.

In a series of single-panel pictures collectively titled the "Ground series," Barth photographed the exact location of an immaterial plane of light in space. It sounds more complicated than it is: Imagine setting up a camera to photograph a person standing in front of a bookshelf and, at the last moment before the shutter clicks, removing that person. The picture records the focal plane where the now-absent body was. The photograph might casually appear to be out of focus, with all those fuzzy books—but the more

Please see 'Barth,' F34



Photos courtesy of Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington

An untitled diptych (1998) offers a Cézanne-esque experience in "Uta Barth: In Between Places" at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

'Barth'

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you look, the more it seems exactly, remarkably right.

Barth mounted these unframed color photographs on thick wood panels, which emphasizes their qualities as a physical object. The evanescent image is between your body and the palpable world represented in the picture—and it draws power from both. In the same way that the absent photographic subject stands between your eye and the blurred background, Barth's present photographic object stands between you and the actual gallery wall. The uncanny effect is bracing.

Working first with depth of field, Barth eventually began to spread things laterally. Since 1998 her single-panel works have been joined by diptychs and triptychs. The perceptual movement now goes forward and backward and from side to side. Memory, implied in the earlier work, piles up and becomes actively engaged.

One untitled diptych juxtaposes a shot of two saplings, their leaves tossed by an unseen breeze, with a second, larger image that turns out to be a close-up shot of the branch-filled space between the two saplings. (As your vantage point has moved in closer, the background has changed dramatically.) Your eye scans back and forth, forward and back, accumulating perceptual information to locate yourself in space. Time, captured in a breeze-tossed picture of nature, gets released into the richly abundant phenomenon of active looking. The preternatural experience is positively Cézanne-esque.

The only misstep in the show is a pair of large, mural-size images of urban streets, photographically reproduced with sprayed acrylic lacquer on canvas (a technique used for commercial billboards). No longer pictures—each is 11 feet high and nearly 14 feet wide—these works are enormous environmental fields. But they seem inert.

Ironically, they're only brought

to life when other flesh-and-blood people enter the museum gallery and walk between you and them, suddenly filling in for the absent subjects of the original photographs. The murals would probably look smashing at a party or gallery opening, where the diffusion of vision amid sociality makes looking at art so difficult. But the concentration required of a museum setting jams the circuits.

That's a small quibble, though, in an otherwise beautifully orchestrated show of acutely considered art. Barth's photographs resonate against a wide variety of other work—often paintings, from Vermeer's on—yet they remain wholly original in their means. At their best, the physicality of visual experience becomes a luminous territory for contemplation.

• "Uta Barth: In Between Places," Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 15th Avenue NE at NE 41st Street, Seattle, (206) 543-2280, www.henryart.org, through Jan. 21. Closed Mondays.