

Field #20 and Field #21, 1997. Acrylic lacquer on canvas, each 132"x 204".

F u z z y L o g i c

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It has been ten years since Brian Wallis edited *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*. The book jacket, graced with a Richard Prince appropriated photograph of the lone Marlboro man on his white horse framed against snow covered peaks and a crisp blue sky, was, in the eighties, the virtual poster child for the postmodernist critique of authorship, uniqueness and subjectivity. *Blasted Allegories* set into motion the polyphonic discourse for critical exchange, thus becoming the perfect postmodern primer for all art school graduate students in the eighties.

That was ten years ago. Today the critique has shifted from the Marlboro man to the out of focus space behind him, from the subject to the visual field; formal issues are back in vogue and discussion once again includes color, figure ground relationships, and the edge. The

1998

Cakewalk





...in passing, 1995-1997. Waterless lithograph, 12 3/4" x 11 1/4".

work of Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Victor Burgin and many others using photography in the eighties have reset the stage for cultural representations. The confiscation of meaning and the resistance to formal analysis is no longer at the forefront of discussion. Their strategies worked: new models, new identities, and new options are in place.

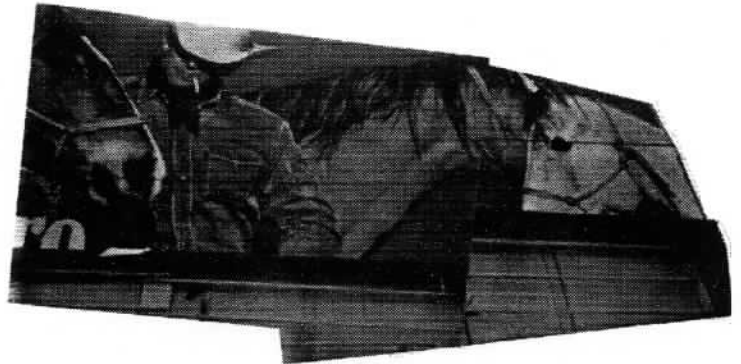
Uta Barth is an artist working within this new arena via the physiological act of seeing. Moving beyond the rhetoric of critical deconstruction, Barth has given us permission to experience (without the guilt of political insensitivity or modernist collusion) the visceral qualities of the photograph, changing the way we view photographs in everyday life. Even though we experience background phenomena all the time, we move through the day focusing on subjects and ideas. Barth allows us to shift the role of the subject back onto ourselves.

I attribute my recent fascination with the Marlboro billboards to Uta Barth. In the last year or two I caught myself seduced by numerous Marlboro billboard ads and realized, that like Barth's project, they too are about perception and seeing.

Some of the best ads have indistinguishable landscapes and backgrounds, brilliant flexible spaces, like Barth's work. Like Barth, Marlboro made their subject invisible. Profiling our highways and urban arteries, these commercial photographs, once meant to seduce us into purchasing their addictive product with cool signifiers, now lure us with saturated color, depth, and the fuzzy picturesque.

I honestly believe that these billboards are some of the most beautiful images being produced in our culture. I immensely enjoy discovering a new Marlboro image and debating its success in terms of its aesthetic qualities. I'm sure the context of the freeway has an enormous effect on their success, and this is why I have little interest in the same Marlboro ads in magazines. Driving along, the "background" is ever-present in our peripheral vision, racing past us as we race to a destination. The billboards freeze the beauty we strain hard not to see.

Blur, or out-of-focusness due to shallow depth of field, is an inherent photographic condition; actually it is an inherent optical condition that functions in the human eye in exactly the same way it does in a camera lens. It is part of everyday vision and perception, yet for the most part we are not very aware of it, as our eyes are constantly moving and shifting their point of scrutiny. We do not "see" it unless we make a conscious effort to observe the phenomenon. The camera can "lock in" this condition and give us a picture



Marlboro billboard. Photo by Mari Eastman.



20

Advertising and Human Motivation

- 1. Need for Sex.** Surprisingly, Fowles found that only 2 percent of the television ads he surveyed used this appeal. It may be too blatant, he concluded, and often distracts from the product. However, many billboards targeting women's cigarettes play up the promise of sex.
- 2. Need for affiliation.** The largest number of ads use this approach: You are looking for friendship. Advertisers can also use this negatively, to make you worry that you'll lose friends if you don't use certain products.
- 3. Need to nurture.** Every time you see a puppy or a kitten or a child, the appeal is to your material or paternal instincts.
- 4. Need for guidance.** A father or mother figure can appeal to your desire for someone to care for you, so you won't have to worry. Betty Crocker is a good example of this.
- 5. Need to aggress.** We all have desires to get even, and some ads give you this satisfaction.
- 6. Need to achieve.** The ability to accomplish something difficult and succeed identifies the product with winning. Sports figures as spokespersons project this image.
- 7. Need to dominate.** The power we lack is what we look for in a commercial: "Master the possibilities."
- 8. Need for prominence.** We want to be admired and respected, to have high social status. Tasteful china and classic diamonds offer this potential.

Photo by Mari Eastman.



which allows us to look at (and focus on) out-of-focusness. ¹

Where Richard Prince's Marlboro photographs invited us to reconsider the authority of the artist, corporate spectacles and the aesthetics of exploitation. Barth moves us away from these questions into a space ripe with personal discovery. "I keep trying to find ways to shift the viewer's attention away from the object they are looking at and toward their own perceptual process in relation to that object."²

Even more remarkable than the relocating of the subject onto the viewer, is the way Barth negates the implied subject altogether. In the same way, when viewing the Marlboro billboards, your responsibility to the social and economic ramifications involving tobacco consumption and the tobacco industry are absolved or at the very

least made to seem invisible. The cigarette and cowboy become incidental, upstaged by the saturated yellow background void of social politics and consumer manipulation.

I find Barth's interest in minimalist painting and conventions of picture making refreshing. Her engagement in framing, composition, surface, figure/ground relationships and the edge intersect a territory occupied by abstract painting. Overshadowing but not eliminating the postmodern devices of seriality, simulation, and appropriation, Barth's formal triggers underscore her interest in photographic ontology.

Ad designers have caught on. Our desire for brilliant visual spectacle has allowed ad designers to conflate the subject, hiding Joe Camel in a swirl of hypnotic color and pushing the cowboy to its compositional limits. This is a savvy move: drowning the politics surrounding

9. **Need for attention.** We want people to notice us; we want to be looked at. Cosmetics are a natural for this approach.

10. **Need for autonomy.** Within a crowded environment, we want to be singled out, to be "a breed apart". This can also be used negatively; you may be left out if you don't use a certain product.

11. **Need to escape.** Flight is very appealing; you can imagine adventures you cannot have. The idea of escape is pleasurable.

12. **Need to feel safe.** To be free from threats, to be secure is the appeal of many insurance and bank ads.

13. **Need for aesthetic sensations.** Beauty attracts us. It makes us feel creative, enhanced.

14. **Need to satisfy curiosity.** Facts support our belief that information is quantifiable and numbers and diagrams make our choices seem scientific.

15. **Physiological needs.** Fowles defines sex as a biological need, and so he categorizes our need to sleep, eat and drink in this category. Advertising for juicy pizzas are especially appealing late at night.

tobacco consumption in the phenomenological aspect of seeing. Beauty has always been part of advertising psychology, as can be seen in the inventory of human motives advertisers commonly use in their commercials (see sidebar).³

Our need for beauty is the only "safe" pitch for the tobacco industry. Past campaigns appealing to our "need for affiliation" got Camel in hot water for targeting kids with cartoon imagery. Beauty is a motive free of political backlash; the perfect strategy to sell dangerous goods. However, beauty is not inert. "An appreciation for beauty is simply an openness to the power of things to stir the soul. If we can be affected by beauty, then the soul is alive and well in us."⁴ Aesthetic sensations empower us. The tobacco industry knows this and is banking on the aesthetics of these ads to empower viewers in making a potentially risky choice.

As issues of beauty and visual perception bubble up from the politics of critical deconstruction, the advertising firms are keeping pace. Rooted in a need for human connection in an age of technology, optical experience, whether in the form of saturated blue Montana sky above a cowboy or psychedelic acid color swirls radiating from Joe Camel, is a welcome relief to the constant bombardment of representational imagery. These sites; blurry, dislocated, indeterminate and aesthetic, have potential for immediate, pleasurable escape. Barth's photographic projects give weight to these issues. In her work, "we are left in a wide-open space where place is undone and narrative is untangled."⁵ Most importantly, we carry her project with us to the everyday act of looking.

notes

¹ Conkelton, Sheryl, "Uta Barth," *The Journal of Contemporary Art*, Volume 8.1, (also <http://thing.net/jca>) Summer 1997, p.3.

² Knode, Marilu, "Uta Barth in conversation with Marilu Knode," *Artlies*, Issue no. 7 June/July 1995, p.30.

³ Biagi, Shirley, *Media/Impact*, (Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing) 1992, p.305.

⁴ Moore, Thomas, *Care of the soul*, (Harper Perennial) 1992, p.280.

⁵ Kim, Soo Jin, "Undoing Space," *Art & Design: Art and the Home*, Winter 1996, p.49.