

Uta Barth at Bonakdar

Color photography's recent ability to rival painting in scale and stylistic range seemed particularly well exemplified by Uta Barth's mid-'90s work from the "Ground" and "Field" series; in some images, she reinvented pointillism as dramatically as Chuck Close. Yet as Barth increasingly worked in diptychs and triptychs, as in the 1999 series "nowhere near . . .," it became clear that distinctions between related images were evincing uniquely photographic properties. "Nowhere near . . ." featured views of the artist's backyard shot through windowpanes and distinguished from one another by slight shifts in

angle; changes in atmosphere, light and time of day; variations in focal depth, shutter speed or camera motion. The series carried the phenomenological interests of an earlier generation of structuralist filmmakers and photographers to a new level of beauty and variety. Coming after other multipanel photographic works, "nowhere near . . ." nevertheless seemed unprecedented in its structuring of concise but intuitive, nonsystemic and very postminimalist variation.

Barth's latest untitled series (2002) isolates a single partial motif from "nowhere near . . ."—a clump of trees and telephone wire in the distance—and finds yet more worlds there. Sequences of two to six panels, each a 21¼-by-28½-inch archival pigment photograph mounted unframed on Plexiglas, are installed in a horizontal band around a room. (The series debuted simultaneously in New York and at ACME in L.A.) Through sensitive, irregular spacings, the sequences maintain their separateness but also join into a single composition punctuated by intervals. Most sequences contrast sharply detailed views of unremarkable bare branches against the blankness of a nearly white California winter sky. Sometimes the shift between panels is as subtle as fog rolling through, so that one looks closely to identify the change. Other times the shift seems total, from a "natural" tonality of dark umber branches on near-white sky, for example, to an apparently solid, intensely

cadmium red panel that only slowly reveals faintly darker ghosts of branches, perhaps in analogy to the afterimages of retinal exhaustion.

Far from being simply decorative, the interpanel variations suggest a conceptual nimbleness. The duotones which Barth pulls out of blurred contrasts of branches against sky, for example, in their jerky linear complexity remind one of Brice Marden's ink drawings. In one set of panels the branches disintegrate through camera movement into mere jittery dashes. In subsequent sequences, one is made to notice how birds, after they disappear, seem echoed by a few remaining unfallen leaves. With fuchsia buds and a blue blush in the clearing sky, a final panel blooms into an image of spring that sets all the other meditations on bare winter branches into newly emotional perspective.

—P.C. Smith

Uta Barth: *Untitled 02.5*, four archival pigment photographs in Plexiglas, 2002, each 21¼ by 28½ inches; at Bonakdar.

