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Uta Barth is interested in what the eye chooses to filter out. In "Ground No. 41," above, the colors of the book bindings bleed into each other, as if seen in passing in a quick turn of the head. In "Field No. 20," top, red lights flare, buildings blur and grounds sway. That's what happens as soon as we turn away: each peripheral scene dissolves into atmosphere.

BY REGINA HACKETT
P-I art critic

In "Batman Returns," Michelle Pfeiffer unintentionally put her shapely finger on the zeitgeist of contemporary photography. Asked what she remembered about her near-fatal fall from a high-rise, she narrowed her eyes into a catlike squint and lied to Michael Keaton: "It's all a blur," she told him.

More and more, photographers are giving clarity a pass. Telling detail is out, and foggy effects are in. If it's a movement, it's led by Uta Barth, the Berlin-born photographer in her early 40s who lives in Los Angeles and is more influential than she wants to be.

Following her lead, scores of photographers are exploring the romance of inexactitude. While Barth is not against this kind of romance in the work of others, she rigorously roots it out of her own. It doesn't interest her, and that goes double for cloudy mixtures of memory, the poetics of uncertainty and the dead air of existential despair.

Like Vermeer and Georges Seurat before her, she's interested in the act of seeing, or in her case, the limits of seeing. She focuses on what the eye chooses to filter out. In doing so, she has more in common with perceptual minimalists such as Robert Irwin than with other photographers. Photography is almost always committed to finding a focus, and she is committed to losing it.

Although Barth is a major figure in contemporary photography, "Uta Barth: In Between Places" at the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery is the first in-depth museum examination of her work.

Former Henry curator Sheryl Conkelton organized the exhibit, offering the intellectually exacting and frequently misunderstood Barth the only context in which she can be entirely comfortable, one created by herself.

"In Between Places" examines Barth's work from 1990 to the present, offering selections from seven bodies of work that flow, logically, one to the other.

Considering that she rejects the notion of painterly pho-

SEE BARTH, E3

BARTH: Photographer explores what the eye does not see

FROM E1

tography, her opening gambit in Henry galleries designed specifically for her comes as a bit of a surprise: three tiny, out-of-time photographs of interiors set into large fields of black and white, horizontal stripes of acrylics. The photos are overwhelmed by their context, the way a tiny jewel might be overwhelmed by a big, brutal setting.

Context is key here, not the medium of painting and not the image.

Color photos mounted on panels follow, first in a series titled "Ground" from 1994 to 1997. The ground that attracts her is not solid ground. It is shifting, porous and variable, frozen in a fleeting form and potently expressive of the perceptually marginal.

Part of a gossamer white curtain hangs against a slice of window in the right-hand corner of "Ground No. 78" (41 inches high by 39 inches wide). The rest of the print is devoted to a wall, which is dissolving into a yellowing light.

"Ground No. 41" (11¼ inches high by 10½ inches wide) features a portion of a bookcase that is leading the unexamined life. The colors of the book bindings are bleeding into each other, as if seen in passing in a quick turn of the head.

If these books were in a room painted by Vermeer, they would be in the passage intended to occupy the outer edge of seeing. They represent the most fluid form of reality, easily overlooked and seldom recalled.

In a series titled "Field" from 1995-1997, she offers landscapes too anonymous to hold a place in anyone's memory. Her gift is to turn them into haunting emblems of the world itself. That world streams by as habit and inclination forces us to focus on particulars.

Take a street, any street. "Field No. 20" and "Field No. 21" from 1997 are photographic images of city streets translated by means of billboard technology into acrylic dot paintings, each 132 inches high by 165 inches wide. Red lights flare, buildings blur and grounds sway. That's what happens as soon as we turn away, each peripheral scene dissolving into atmosphere.

If these two paintings seem familiar, it's partly because they are a thoroughly contemporary tribute to an artist born a century before Barth;

ART REVIEW

UTA BARTH: IN BETWEEN PLACES

WHERE: University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery, 15th Avenue Northeast at Northeast 41st Street

WHEN: Through Jan. 21. Hours: Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., till 8 p.m. on Thursdays. Closed Mondays and holidays.

ADMISSION: \$5 general, \$3.50 seniors, free for students and members, pay-what-you-want on Thursdays, 5 to 8 p.m.

INFORMATION: 206-543-2280; www.henryart.org

the rigorously conceptual Seurat, who broke down the process of seeing into dot-like masses of colored form.

Seurat devised his system without the aid of advertising, which can't be said of Barth. She acknowledges this debt in a series titled, "in passing" from 1997. A portfolio of 10 small lithographs, they are based on images Barth cut out of fashion magazines. The fashion shots concentrate on the model partly by leaving the background a blur. Barth crops the model and concentrates on the blur.

An untitled set of three photos from 1998 (No. 98.5, collectively 38 inches high by 197 inches wide) reveal Barth at her most deft. In the first, rain collects on a window pane, obscuring the field beyond it. In the second, the glass disappears as the focus passes through it yet fails to provide firm edges for the field. In the third, whatever fragment of focus the field enjoyed in the second print has receded from its grasp.

In a catalog essay accompanying the "In Between Places," Russell Ferguson wrote that Barth has trouble staying engaged with the plots of movies. "She tends to drift away from the story toward the background: the walls, windows and landscapes that fill the space between the actors."

Plots are containers. Barth has staked her all on what cannot be contained. In her hands, the slight, vague and passed over acquire intellectual substance and emotional weight.

P-I art critic Regina Hackett can be reached at 206-448-8332 or reginahackett@seattlepi.com