

UTA BARTH

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In Uta Barth's *Ground* series (1992-97), the investigation of the photographic subject was mounted through a paradoxical absence. Literally removing the foreground element and leaving only the blurred backgrounds, these images were both enigmatic and beautiful, open-ended and impenetrable. Pinpointing a relationship between the photographic subject and the subjective self, the work opened up a dialogue about the interaction of optical phenomena and ontology. Barth's newest series of photographs, collectively titled *Nowhere Near* (1999), brings these two arenas into closer proximity, distilling the artist's concerns into an even headier brew.

Where Barth's past work often felt cool and distant, the images in *Nowhere Near* possess an unusual warmth and intimacy. Presented individually, as diptychs or triptychs, the series offers views of windows or views through windows from within Barth's own modest home. Shot over what was significantly a nine-month span, stretching from autumn to spring, the images are grounded in the daily habit of staring off into space. Perhaps for this very reason they are infused with poignancy, a sense of reverie reminiscent, for me, of the best of Marguerite Duras. They speak of long days at home alone, and of hours lost to memories. Barth's own presence in these images is tangible. One can sense the patience with which she works. Brewing a cup of tea and setting up the camera. Waiting for the right confluence of light and

weather. Perhaps waiting a very long time.

Moving like a slow zoom back into the house the series is comprised of three types of shots: those that capture the ordinary landscape of Barth's suburban backyard (telephone poles, a lone palm tree, bougainvillea, and the rooftops of neighboring homes) as seen through a window; other, tightly cropped shots of the window frames themselves (the blurred exterior visible beyond); and, finally, wider shots of the interiors in which the window is nonetheless dominant. A variety of optical effects—focus shifts, overexposures, camera movements, and sunlight flares—inform, to one degree or another, almost all of the images. While calling attention to the medium, these visual disturbances also enhance the work's day-dreamy quality.

Serving as a metaphor for the relationship of the self to the outside world, the window also echoes the manner in which perception filters into memory. In one 1999 diptych, *Untitled (nw 20)*, Barth's theme of self-reflection is literalized. Shot at night, the first panel looks through a window to a darkened backyard and a distant house beyond. In the second panel, a light has been turned on in Barth's home, transforming the window into a mirror and the moment into an epiphany worthy of Joyce, the single light glowing like a beacon in the darkened room.

Consistent with her work of the past five years, the subject of *Nowhere Near* is an indeterminate point, an area where nothing seems to be, a mid-ground whose significance lies in its in-betweenness. It is in this non-space, this no man's land where looking out and looking in overlap, that the essence of Barth's project becomes clear.

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