

Uta Barth focuses on changing perceptions

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In the second half of the 19th century, when photography was a fresh medium, many of its practitioners adopted painting's principles in the hope of refuting the perception that the camera was merely a mechanical tool.

Ironically, photographs by pictorialists like Eugene Durieu simultaneously became the springboard for painters such as Eugene Delacroix.

This double legacy informs the work of Uta Barth. Her photographs have the look and sometimes the feel of 20th-century paintings, while exploiting the commercial applications of photography. Sometimes her work reveals the techniques that produce it and nearly always it suggests painting's precedents, from the chromatic spaces of Mark Rothko to the subtly textured surfaces of a Brice Marden encaustic.

Barth, born in Berlin in 1958 and now a resident of Los Angeles, looks at the corners of rooms and the edges of objects, things that are all around and thus not seen at all. Through her photographs -- mostly blurred snapshots taken from oblique points of view -- she changes that invisibility and, on occasion, transforms the unremarkable into something mysterious, even poetic.

Her exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Museum concentrates on five recent series. The lyrical, luminous Backgrounds is about interiors -- carefully composed, unfocused images of things like a sheer curtain over a window in a cream-colored room or of pictures hanging squarely on an aqua wall. One, Ground #78, is a creamy image of barely discernible shadows. It is like a huge blow-up of a corner in a Vermeer painting, all diffused light and diaphanous textures.

The Fields series looks outside. Dated 1995-97, these pictures are segments of a city street. Fields 9, for instance, is dominated by two amber circles floating near the center, tonalities behind them suggesting buildings and sky, though none is defined. The assumption is, the orbs are headlights.

Two major works in this group, Field 20 and Field 21, are mural-size. Printed on canvas with billboard techniques, they are cinematic backdrops of a city street, one anchored by red stoplights and one by a person silhouetted in black against a red building. Diffused and disorienting, they envelop the viewer.

The untitled series that follows (1998-99) is easier on the eyes as Barth sharpens her focus. The scenes are landscapes, lush with green vegetation and grassy terrain, viewed through rain-soaked windows.

The two newest series, and of time and nowhere near, synthesize her prior approaches. Barth returns to interiors and adds outdoor scenes viewed from inside, but the focus is sharp. These pictures, the artist says, are about peripheral vision, the casual glance that is not composed. Her camera is just "there," ready to capture the fleeting impression. Painting's precedents help us understand approach. The carpeted floor of Untitled (aot 20), with its angled shadows and modulated monotones, recalls painter Sylvia Plimack Mangold's 1970s rooms, empty of everything except sunlight. It also harks back to a subject explored by Gustave Caillebotte in his 1875 Workers Planing the Floor.

A different body of work is on view at Lawing Gallery. These are earlier, multipanel works that combine photographs and painting. Barth limits her palette to OSHA yellow, black and white. The images are few, including a painted illustration of an arm pulling open a curtain, sharp geometric patterns and photographs of fragments of nature, like a piece of sky filled with puffy clouds -- fuzzy focus, of course -- and all as flat as the paper they are printed or painted on.

Barth's images force us to take note of sights we take for granted. Often, the results appear to be nothing much, but because she does photograph them, and they are exhibited in art spaces, we look. Sometimes they are interesting. A few are even beautiful.