



SUBJECT-LESS PHOTOGRAPHY

Uta Barth was at the Alison Jacques Gallery, London, 28 April – 27 May

Uta Barth is a prominent German artist who has lived in California for most of her adult life; yet despite her chosen place of residence, she fully ignores the cornucopia of photographic subjects available to the citizen of such a vast metropolis. Instead she concentrates on the unnoticed spaces of domestic experience. She prefers the peripheries of visual perception and the unseen aspects of everyday existence and, since 1998, Barth has only photographed in and around her Los Angeles home.

Picturing the everyday and making it seem new or surprising is a common photographic strategy, but Barth takes the photography of quotidian banality to an extreme; producing rich and beautiful images from almost nothing. Her pictures are often said to be 'subject-less' or 'refusing to address a central subject'. Such a claim seems an odd one to make of any photograph (photographs are necessarily of something) but in Barth's case it is not a ridiculous one. The central subjects of her images

are light, perception and the subjectivity of vision; she is not as concerned with the objects in front of the camera, as the ways in which we experience the world through vision and those aspects of the visual that are usually disregarded. Her photographs resemble the sorts of things we 'see' when staring absent-mindedly into the corner of a room whilst lost in thought, or the fleeting glimpse of light or movement, out of focus in our peripheral vision. Ordinarily, we instantly forget these images, but Barth preserves, or rather, reconstructs them and presents them in careful, sumptuous photos, inviting us to think again about how we look, not what we look at.

Barth's new series of untitled sets of two to five photographs, recently shown at Alison Jacques Gallery in London, represents something of a shift in her work, as it is the first to feature a central subject in fifteen years. As such it cannot be described as subject-less, but we should not be too

Opposite: *Untitled (06.8)*, 2006

Above: *Untitled (06.3)*, 2006
Courtesy of the artist and
Alison Jacques Gallery, London

distracted by the objects in the images – mostly a table or counter top, often with a glass jar containing flowers: vision and perception are still the subjects here. The table and flowers suggest that these are still life images, but they steadfastly refuse such a classification. Firstly, the solitary vase of flowers is such a common visual trope; a cliché from the world of mass produced poster prints, that, given the context of contemporary art and a familiarity with the artist's work, we immediately assume that something else is being addressed here. Secondly, several of the images clearly represent perceptual effects or are designed to mimic them or induce them in the viewer. Those images that come close to still life pictures seem glimpsed or barely seen, and are made from odd angles and with back lighting, which is hardly indicative of the meticulously ordered world of still life. We are not being invited to look at flowers and meditate on their transient beauty; these are not vanitas images.



Barth has said recently that she 'carefully removes autobiographical information' from her images, suggesting that she disregards pictures which feature 'stuff' that might provoke a speculation from the viewer as to a scenario or story. In this context the flowers represent a careful reintroduction of a central subject, but one whose associations are reduced almost entirely to the visual and aesthetic – there is not really any information here, autobiographical, botanical or otherwise. Instead the associations are visual and perceptual. Afterimages are immediately suggested by sequences containing both 'straight' colour photos and beautifully abstract 'negative' or 'solarised' looking images of the same things. There are also some blood red monochrome panels, on which we may see the image of the previous picture, if we have looked long enough. These panels represent the luminous red (actually the blood in our eyelid) that we see when we close our eyes after staring at

a bright light. When viewed within the sets of pictures which enveloped the gallery, the monochromes are metaphors for the collapsing of the physical world of things we see and the physiological conditions upon which that seeing is based. Photography and physiology were contemporaneous ideas, and despite its mechanical basis and the presumption of objectivity that comes with it, photography is intertwined with the notion that vision is subjective. Photography's supposed objectivity is a modern incarnation of the classical model of vision based on a camera obscura, which clearly separates interior and exterior. But in Uta Barth's photography, the separation between exterior world and interior perception collapses.

These distinctions give way to aesthetic experience. In common with other recent abstract or 'subject-less' photographic work, such as that by Thomas Ruff, James Welling, Gary Fabian Miller, and others, the emphasis in Barth's work is shifted from

subject to process and aesthetics. Accordingly, the photographs in this show were exquisitely printed and presented, with rich and beautiful colouration and are almost overwhelmingly saturated. They radiate light and colour and remind us of the complexities and pleasures of looking that are absent from the majority of our day-to-day encounters with photographs.

Mark Bolland