

Los Angeles Times

Art in All the Right Spaces

Art review: Uta Barth's works 'focus' on emptiness filled with an ephemeral plenitude of light.

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SEPT. 21, 1995 12 AM PT
TIMES ART CRITIC

Imagine you're taking a picture of a friend. You've got him leaning casually against a wall by a doorway, with the light coming from behind and across your shoulder to illuminate the scene in front of your camera. He's in sharp focus, all crisply articulated detail, while everything in front of and behind him in the picture falls off into fuzzed obscurity. *Click!* The picture is taken.

Now, imagine exactly the same scenario, only this time your friend leaves the scene just before the shutter clicks. The foreground and background remain blurred and out of focus, while the focal plane in the middle ground is no longer occupied by flesh and blood. Space, whose emptiness is filled only with an ephemeral plenitude of light, becomes the strangely enigmatic subject of the photograph.

Uta Barth began to imagine this unusual, second scheme in 1992. The richly evocative results have been explored by the 37-year-old, Los Angeles-based artist ever since. Seventeen of her photographs are now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in a lovely exhibition organized by Elizabeth A. T. Smith that is--ironically enough--part of the Focus Series at the museum.

Barth's softly colored photographs range in size from less than a foot square to about 3 feet by 4 feet. Each is laminated to a board, which stands out from the wall on wooden supports an inch or two thick. Unframed, the pictures have a physical presence in the room that's more akin to painting than to traditional photography. In this way, they subtly assert the primacy of photographic ways of seeing in contemporary life.

The pictures are initially disconcerting, their out-of-focus blurriness a seeming contradiction to typical photographic aims. Blurred pictures, especially blurred photographs, have in fact formed a pretty large subset of art made in the past 15 years or more. For photographers, fuzziness can be meant to connote a distinct break from the rigid artistic tradition of so-called straight photography, where sharp focus was for so long Rule No. 1; it also strays from the vocational requirements of commercial art, where photographs today are most commonly found.

An artist's purposefully blurred images can therefore suggest an attempt to redeem that which is normally considered a failure. It is here that Barth's work finds its core of interest.

A catalogue of the images in her photographs at MOCA would include the following: the empty corner of a room, the wall next to a brightly curtained window or above a black leather couch, a French window (or possibly door), the top rim of a lampshade and the edge of a doorway with a fireplace glimpsed in the next room beyond. Almost always, the walls of the rooms are white, although close inspection reveals a wide array of pastel washes of color, presumably created by the play of light across them.

The chief exceptions to the stripped-down, Minimalist quality of Barth's work are two adjacent pictures, one of which shows a wooden bookshelf lined with texts and the other a bit of bedroom dresser in a greenish room, whose walls hold two framed reproductions of paintings by the great Dutch painter Jan Vermeer. The bookshelf picture rather flatfootedly implies the importance of contemporary photographic theory to Barth's enterprise ("images are text," they say, in the exhausted jargon that passes for critical discourse these days). The Vermeers suggest a pointed artistic legacy, since the 17th-Century painter, born into an age when microscopic and telescopic lenses were transforming human perception, made the poignant processes of seeing itself the radical subject of his art.

The decorative placement of these two Barth photographs on MOCA's gallery wall--side by side, one slightly higher than the other--mimics the hanging of the Vermeer reproductions shown in one of the pictures. In fact, many of Barth's photographs have been installed at MOCA to physically echo the image pictured inside the frame.

Pictures of a room's empty corner are hung next to the actual corner of the gallery, while the picture of the edge of a doorway opening onto another room is installed next to the gallery entrance, which opens onto the museum's lobby. The whiteness of the walls--both the museum's real ones and the pictures' depicted ones--locate the perceptual activity within the standard modern environment for such exploration. And the soaring, light-filled space of MOCA's sky-lighted, pyramid-roofed gallery puts the

viewer physically inside a place analogous to the ones seen in the photographs. As a result, the viewer's actual body fills in for the absent body in the pictures.

In addition to Vermeer, I'd suggest a few other, more recent traditions as a platform for Barth's beguiling work. First, she could be called a Light-and-Space photographer, the way John M. Miller is today a Light-and-Space painter for a genre that originated in the 1970s as an environmental art. Second, her work plainly recalls the great German contemporary painter Gerhard Richter, whose hypnotically fuzzy paintings are based on photographic images of landscapes, flowers, candles and crime scenes and are among the most powerful works of our time.

Uniquely, Barth's pictures of light-filled space can also be seen as smartly remaking one of the oddest, most eccentric episodes in photographic history. Especially in the 19th Century, but occasionally in our own, photographers made portraits that purported to document the existence of ghosts, or that sometimes showed supposed poltergeists with ectoplasm streaming from their nostrils. These strange pictures, in which cloudy and ethereal figures can barely be discerned as they move unacknowledged through the world, meant to use the camera as a revelatory tool, piercing the surface of experience.

These ghost pictures are a vernacular equivalent to a basic principle of Modern art, which asserts that true artistic insight perceives a hitherto unseen universe hidden behind the surface illusions of daily life. Barth's demure but trenchant photographs slyly turn that old-fashioned legacy on its ear. Instead, she shows us the typically unseen, usually unacknowledged processes of ordinary perceptual reality.

The photographs can be hauntingly beautiful.

** Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 621-1750, through Nov. 12. Closed Mondays.*



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Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the 2020 [Pulitzer Prize for criticism](#) (he was a finalist for the prize in 1991, 2001 and 2007). In 2020, he also received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Art Journalism from the Rabkin Foundation.

Published: Los Angeles Times, 1995-09-21

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-09-21-ca-48193-story.html>