

## CRITIC'S PICK

# How Uta Barth's Art Illuminates

In a 40-year retrospective at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, the photographer scrutinizes subtle shifts in light and reveals what we see and don't.

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Uta Barth's "...and of time (aot 4)," 2000, from her show at the Getty Center, Los Angeles. Usually, her lens is trained on the absent figure. Uta Barth; via The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

**By Arthur Lubow**

Feb. 9, 2023

LOS ANGELES — The photography of Uta Barth unites the conceptual rigor that is characteristic of Germany, where she was born, with the fascination with light and space of California, where she has lived for the last 40 years.

Countering the instantaneous shutter click of the camera, Barth, who is 65, frequently works in series to explore how shifts in light alter our perception of a scene. It is not the scene that she takes as her subject, but the act of perception. Indeed, she intentionally turns her camera on unremarkable rooms and landscapes, as if to demonstrate that if you look closely and slowly, anything can become fascinating. And, at least in Barth's images, beautiful.

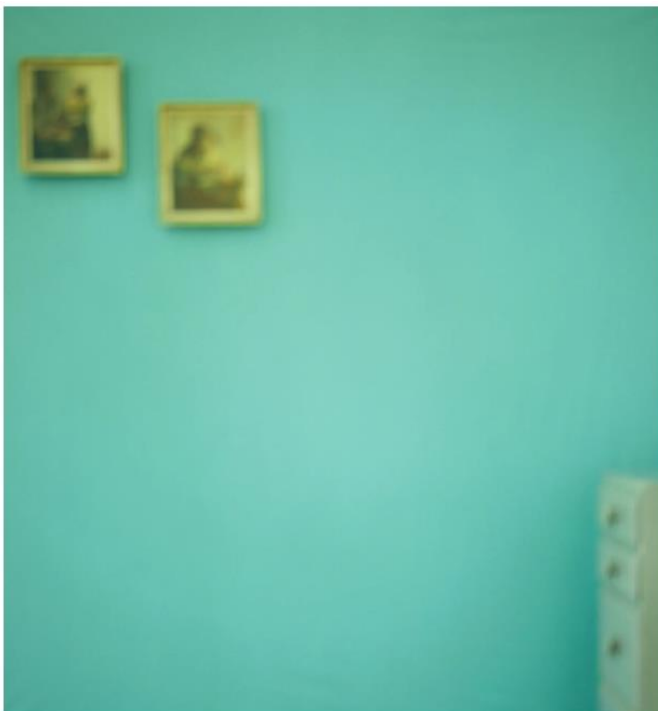
Photographers typically depict figures set in a background. "Uta Barth: Peripheral Vision," a retrospective at the Getty Center in Los Angeles organized by Arpad Kovacs,

an assistant curator, reveals how Barth eliminates the figure to contemplate the ground. It would be misleading, however, to say that she focuses on the ground. Usually, her lens is trained on the absent figure, leaving her picture blurred. She is bringing to our attention what we glimpse only briefly or completely overlook.

Barth moved to California from West Berlin with her parents at 12 and has lived there ever since. As a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles, she was making self-portraits in which she took on various identities. They dealt with the theme (much in the air at the time) of a woman being subjected to a scrutinizing gaze. But very quickly, she radically reduced the human presence — in one sequence to no more than a pair of feet — so that the floor, marked by changing shadows and stripes of light, takes center stage.

Rediscovering these student photos, dating from 1979 to 1982 and forgotten in a box, Barth marveled at how early she had instinctively landed on her subject matter: “images of nothing, just empty grounds, walls and fields and sky,” she wrote in 2010. She realized that “what I aim for in my work today was present long before I could name it.”

Barth nods appreciatively to artists she reveres. In “Ground #42” (1994), she aimed her camera at a wall painted robin’s egg blue and shimmering with light; in the upper left corner, indistinct but instantly recognizable, are two framed reproductions of Vermeer paintings, “The Lacemaker” and “The Milkmaid,” which she has possessed since childhood. Barth bears an understandable affinity with these depictions, by an unsurpassed connoisseur of light, of two women engaged in repetitive tasks.



Uta Barth, “Ground #42,” 1994. In the upper left corner are two framed reproductions of Vermeer paintings, “The Lacemaker” and “The Milkmaid,” with women doing repetitive tasks. Uta Barth; via The Eileen Harris Norton Collection

Pre-Minimalist artists who investigate subtle variations through the process of repetition also appeal to her. In 2011, she riffed on the geometric formalism of Mondrian by manipulating a window shade to catch the light in boxy patterns on the white closet doors in “Compositions of Light on White.”

She made another series, “In the Light and Shadow of Morandi” (2017), that adapted the Italian modernist’s practice of patiently observing humble arrangements of domestic objects. Depicting the dance of light on colored glass vases and bowls, she photographed from an oblique angle to prevent the

shadow of the camera from falling on them and then corrected digitally for distortion; acknowledging that the process of correction created an image that is not rectangular, she left the mounted prints as irregular shapes. (The intent was honesty, but it felt gimmicky to me.)



Uta Barth, "In the Light and Shadow of Morandi (17.03)," 2017. Uta Barth

Although Barth hasn't made an explicit homage to Rothko, the left two-thirds of "Ground #78" (1997), in which sunlight illuminates a sheer-curtained window, evokes his lozenge paintings. And her stunning diptych, "Untitled 98.2" (1998), which juxtaposes a blurry riverside cityscape, recalls in its watery pastels a Helen Frankenthaler soak-stain painting. Another view of the scene, taken from a neighboring vantage point, offers the missing in-focus foreground — revealed to be a red-painted vertical plank as bold as the central stripe in Barnett Newman's 16-foot-tall "Voice of Fire."



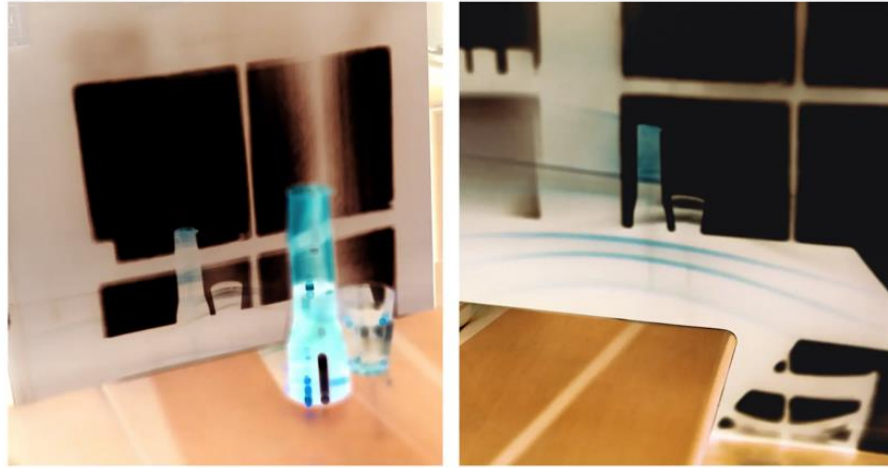
Uta Barth, "Untitled (98.2)," 1998, juxtaposes a blurry riverside cityscape, its watery pastels reminiscent of a Helen Frankenthaler soak-stain painting, with another view of the scene. Uta Barth; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Because painters have explored the magical qualities of light for centuries, it is easy to find painterly precedents for Barth's photographs. By face-mounting her prints on thick wood panels against matte acrylic, she provides them with a surface and heft that encourages the comparison to painting.

Yet her work could only have been done with a camera. The 2011 series, "and to draw a bright white line with light," is ravishing, as the rippling hem of a gauzy curtain catches a band of light that widens from her manipulation. (In "Untitled 11.2," like the wizard emerging from behind his drapery, she depicts her hand moving the fabric.) The ghostly images of "Sundial" (2007) capture the changing light and shadows in her Los Angeles home, usually taken at dusk. In these works, she recalls the purity of photography's earliest pioneers, such as William Henry Fox Talbot, who called his book of photographs (the first commercial publication of its kind) "The Pencil of Nature." Like Talbot, Barth reminds us that the Greek words that form "photography" mean "drawing with light."



Uta Barth's "... and to draw a bright white line with light (Untitled 11.2)," 2011. via Uta Barth and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles



Uta Barth, "Sundial (07.4)," 2007. She captures the changing light and shadows in her home, usually at dusk. Uta Barth; via Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame

For the 20th anniversary of the Getty, Barth received a commission to engage with the buildings on the campus, designed by Richard Meier. Her large-scale piece, “... from dawn to dusk” (2022), consists of 75 photographs and a video. To create it, she set up her camera at the entrance to the auditorium. On alternate weeks over the course of a year, she made an exposure every five minutes during daylight hours. The photographs are mounted on square panels and presented in a grid format that rhymes with the enameled aluminum panels of the building facade. Some images are distinct, some blurry. At times, she has digitally flipped the tonalities of lights and darks to approximate the effect of an afterimage, which might pulsate in your retina if you shut your eyes after staring for a while at the sun bouncing off the bright metal.

Barth’s photographs lodge in your mind that way. Distinctively indistinct, they make us think about what we see and don’t see when we look at the world around us. They raise to awareness what we overlook. And so, they require attention. The visitors I saw in the exhibition appeared to be grateful that, for a short time at least, they had to slow down.

**Uta Barth: Peripheral Vision.** Through Feb. 19 at the Getty Center, Los Angeles; 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles, 310-440-7300; 800 223-3431), [getty.edu](https://www.getty.edu).

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