View of "Uta Barth," 2023. Foreground, left wall: . . . *and of time (AOT 2)*, 2000. Foreground, right wall: *Untitled (and of time . . . 5)*, 2000.

LOS ANGELES

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Uta Barth

THE GETTY CENTER

"Peripheral Vision," a forty-year retrospective of photographer Uta Barth's work at the Getty Center, included selections from thirteen phases of the artist's career, beginning with her early experimentations as a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and concluding with ". . . from dawn to dusk," 2022, a yearlong study of the Getty's facade, commissioned by the museum, to commemorate its twentieth anniversary. The exhibition's title underlines Barth's enduring interest in the act of looking and refers us to the mechanics of human vision: We have a relatively small focal area—the point of fixation—surrounded by a large, blurred peripheral field. (Objects and surroundings in this nebulous zone tend to be familiar, nonthreatening—no need to examine them too closely.) Barth's lifelong project seems to be all about the point of fixation: what we choose to focus on, what we don't, and why. The intensity of gaze in some of her self-portraits from the 1980s operates like an interrogator's spotlight: a violent force by which Barth, who has described herself as "incredibly photo-phobic," is trapped, pinned, or blinded.

Yet in the series "Ground," 1994–97, and "Field," 1995–96, Barth aimed her camera at "an unoccupied plane in space," according to the exhibition text, to create blurred photographs of architectural interiors and urban landscapes. Especially when taken in context with the stark,

graphic focus of her early work, Barth's decisions here suggest a desire to subvert or frustrate the intensity of looking—to deny the gaze its power. In photographing her subjects peripherally, as it were, Barth foregrounds the view we take for granted, forcing one into the potentially uncomfortable or unfamiliar position of scrutinizing an image that refuses to become clear.

The quality of light—its texture, its transformative potential, the way it moves and changes depending on the time of day or year—is another essential element of Barth's work and figured prominently in most, if not all, of the photographs on display. In ". . . and to draw a bright white line with light," 2011—a series of color pigment prints in which the artist manipulated a set of curtains to create a searing ray of sunlight that widens and changes as the day progresses—Barth continued her investigation of the hot, rippled "drawing" made by sun and fabric explored in "One Day," 1979–82, a group of eleven small, square, black-and-white photos. In these and other works, light is the medium by which the passage of time is made visible.

In interviews, Barth has bristled at the use of the word *painterly* to describe her fogged atmospheric images: "It assumes that a photograph would secretly—or overtly—aspire to the attributes of painting in order to justify itself as an artwork." Yet her longtime fascination with the medium, particularly as deployed by artists who repeatedly return to specific subject matter or themes (Mondrian, Monet, Morandi, Vermeer) was apparent (and acknowledged) in many of the works on view. In her 2017 "Untitled" series, she made large-scale photographs capturing the stucco exterior of her Southern California studio. These images examine the endlessly changing tonal and textural qualities of a white surface, calling to mind not only the art of Robert Ryman, but also the Minimalist abstract compositions that can be found everywhere in Los Angeles, where the ravages of sun, wind, and rain act on the painted human-built landscape.

Discussions of Barth's work frequently describe her subject matter as "small," "ordinary," "banal," or "mundane"; this critical tendency extends to other forms and artists who explore dailiness. The compulsion to describe them thus implies the existence of large, extraordinary, important subjects. But what are those, and who decides? Aren't the so-called little details—the shifting light in a sunny room, the same view from a window day after day, year after year—what our lives are primarily composed of? Barth has said that her pictures eschew narrative. A traditional conservative understanding of narrative implies a coherent or overriding story—a strong plot propelled by noteworthy events. But in Barth's work we find an alternate version: one that's fragmentary, ambiguous, and truer to the slowness, stillness, and durational texture of human existence.

— *Kathryn Scanlan*

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