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Uta Barth

*Peripheral Vision*

Perception and the Act of Looking

Getty Center

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by Jody Zellen



Uta Barth has been exploring the way light interacts with walls, surfaces and spaces throughout her career. The work is often minimal, showing empty areas or flattened planes and it relies on repetition and difference, sometimes subtle, other times drastic or dramatic. *Peripheral Vision*, an exhibition organized by the Getty Center that traces the highlights of her career includes examples of her graduate student works created at UCLA in the mid 1990s (black and white photographs made in the darkroom) as well as a recent commission that combines color digital photography with a subtle slow-moving video, in celebration of the Getty Center's 20th anniversary. What is unusual about the way the show is installed is that many of her series are recreated and presented in full as they might have appeared in previous exhibitions. Rather than choose just a few representational photographs, viewers can experience the works as Barth conceived of them— as extended sequences rather than as individual images.

The exhibition opens with the new multi-panel piece titled *...from dawn to dusk* (2022), which was shot on site at the Getty over a year's duration. Twice a month, she would photograph the entrance to the Harold A. Williams Auditorium every five minutes from dawn to dusk. This archive of images, now printed in different colors and tones, at a range of scales and with a variety of croppings, extends across the room, allowing viewers to meditate on the way light and architecture interact and play off each other in this particular location. While some of these images simply record the way light falls on the building, others have been digitally enhanced— colorized, inverted, solarized and/or blurred. The installation spans three walls and is presented in an uneven grid of different sized square photographs, formally paralleling the square blocks of Richard Meier's architecture. It becomes a study of difference, absence, presence and the power of light and its opposite — shadow.

Jumping from the present to the past, many of Barth's early images, while still concerned with architecture, depict more ambiguous spaces. Photographs from series like *Ground* (1984) and *Field* (1995-6) are purposely soft and extremely blurry. *Ground #41* depicts an out-of-focus bookshelf and *Ground #42* features two blurry framed artworks on an aqua-colored wall. Both these images call attention to the periphery and even the space beyond the edges— what might be outside the frame becomes part of the focus, albeit out of focus. For the series *Field*, Barth photographed distant landscapes and cityscapes to appear like those in the background of films that allude to unspecified locations behind the actors. *white blind (bright red)* is a suite of works from 2002 in which Barth documented trees and power lines seen through her window. These images are exhibited as a long row that transitions from detailed views to monochrome colored panels — interspersing photographs that are both abstract and representational. Similarly, and

*to draw a bright white line with light* (2011) is made up of photographs that extend horizontally across the gallery space, illustrating the undulations of light and its transition to wavy lines as it passes through drapes covering Barth's bedroom window.

Two very different series from 2017 are examples of more recent work, whereas the commission *...from dawn to dusk* is her most current project. The photographs in *Untitled* (2017) focus on a large blank stucco wall filled with an array of subtle shadows and textures defined by subtly evolving qualities of sunlight. Each mostly "white" or "blank" image is bordered by a strip of gravel at the bottom and a patch of sky, seen through a band of windows or spaces separated by two-by-fours at the top. The shape and large scale of these photographs pays homage to canvases made by colorfield painters as Barth is interested in mood and the emotions elicited by the play of light. The works in *In the Light and Shadow of Morandi* take their point of departure from the still lives of Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). Here, Barth assembled differently colored glass vessels horizontally along a table (or desk) and a long shelf, turning them into stunning dark silhouettes with magical flares and highlights. These objects were carefully lit to emphasize their volume as well as their flatness simultaneously. Barth accentuated the distortion by presenting them as trapezoids within rectangular frames rather than simply as rectangles.

Barth's photographs are never straightforward and, while seemingly minimal, they are carefully constructed and conceptualized. Though many of the works feel more empty than full, the emptiness contains patterns of light and shadow or reference distant spaces or are about foreground background relationships. At its core, Barth's work is about perception and the act of looking. Her pictures frame what is seen as well as what is absent and this duality and ambiguity is what makes her work unique.

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