

FRANCES BARTH: Scale, Economy and Unnamable Color

by Joan Waltemath

SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY, JANUARY 7 – FEBRUARY 6, 2010



wide brown expanse, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 96 inches

One of the most striking things about Frances Barth's acrylic paintings is how clearly straightforward they are. Having stated as much, the complexity of her dialectical approach slowly starts to unfold. Barth lives in New Jersey, commutes from there to Baltimore, where she teaches, and her paintings seem to show manifold aspects of this journey. Each time a different angle is revealed as her views are framed through different dimensions and disciplines. It's as if Barth has taken on a philosophical view and shows us not only what is out there, but also what we know about what is out there.

The landscape focus of Barth's abstraction is obvious in the seven large format pieces in the show that all favor the horizontal by a factor of at least five. But Barth's concerns are not limited to a landscape view. She digs beneath, beyond, and beside the visible in order to present alternative views of what comprises our daily experience. For example, one of the first paintings in Barth's show is "Jacob's ruler" (2009), 18 x 96 inches, whose imagery could be read as a view of the river. Its shoreline consists of a series of rectangles including one that looks like a geological map revealing strata and other topological information. At the left the rectangles are inclined toward a sectional view and so spatially the painting torques sending us way up in the air to negotiate the overview. As Barth brings forward what is known as well as what is seen she enables a reflection on how the tools of scientific research have changed the way we see the world around us.

In "Tangent Bouquet" (2009), 16 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches, a plan view of what seems like it could be the archeological ruins of some early American settlement spans a stretch along the near side of a shore. The view of the ruins we are seeing seems like something that should actually be buried deep underneath the foreground space, yet Barth unearths it to sit on top like a billboard announcing new rentals. The effect is to give the perceiver a bird's eye view and from here we look at the horizon across a brown/green middle ground that feels again like the river. While two divergent perspectives are melded here, what is interesting about these paintings is how they set the outer world in relation to their own world, privileging neither, but questioning how much of what we see is a construct of our own minds and whether there is an objective reality.

"Putnam Grey Screen" (2009), 18 x 96 inches, hanging at the end of the gallery and visible as you enter the space has all the components that are familiar to this body of work—the river, the shore, the buildings. Barth's lines have a kind of cartoony feel, not unsophisticated but rather rooted in an eastern calligraphic tradition. It's beautiful here how the water's edge ends in a ruler straight line. Then on the remaining quarter or less of the

canvas there is a screen-like window revealing what appears to be technologically derived data that relates to the kind of information we all have about places that effects how we see them. While her work starts to mimic what we remember or how we store memories, Barth makes us aware that there is always a selection process going on in what we remember or register.

The drawings in her recently completed animation, also included in the exhibition at the back of the gallery, are like snapshots of what we see everyday but don't usually notice Barth finds fertile ground in the banality of the built environment, the details in architecture that repeatedly come before our view, but constitute things which are not necessarily memorable as images. Her animation gives a sense of the core of her focus in the way she looks at these non-images and the spaces they create. There is an awareness that penetrates her work reminding us that the key to life is in its smallest and most insignificant details. It's the kind of hard won position that allows the painter to execute her work with the right balance of detachment and care.

Barth is capable of taking the commonplace and rendering it into a composition of striking graphic intensity. "Palermo" (2009), is a small painting, 16 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches, yet its high contrast dark blues and black, light blues, and tan and white forms bounce around within a limitless overview. Here the usual horizontals are broken up with stronger diagonals, setting this piece apart. In "grid box y" (2009), 16 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches, a small sliver of two greys, one warm, one cool, sits like a wedge in a field of yellow, which opens from below into a bottomless abyss. Or there is "Melonice" (2008), 16 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches, where an open field of vertical stripes that should, by all formal accounts, flatten out the lower half of the picture, instead expands causing a warm gray form resembling a diving board to hover above.

You can feel the experience of living next to the water in "grey edi" (2008) a 24 x 78 inch painting—the going back and forth to Manhattan, the presence of the river both as a barrier and as an open space. The white textured upper part of the painting is composed of a series of rapidly executed calligraphic strokes that contribute to a sense of flow as they demarcate a space beyond the shore. The overall thinness of Barth's paintings stands in remarkable contrast to the luminosity and intensity of her color. Here orange, blue, turquoise, lime green, and violet in small doses set off a large expanse of blue and bits of white and black.

"Green plane" (2008), 18 x 96 inches, hanging midway down the long narrow gallery space, has something of the feel of a Guston painting coming through in the offhanded directness of Barth's gesture. Most of these paintings shift or torque in some way that destabilizes the perception of space. In this one the left side of the painting comes forward and the right goes back along a diagonal line cut to reveal strata on the left. The destabilization forces the viewer to secure their own position, a challenge that comes unexpectedly from what are basically horizontally oriented paintings that exert a calming presence.

Barth's work is disarmingly simple, but when the underlying agenda finally reveals itself we feel the presence of a vast and competent eye looking at the world around us.