



Light and Fog: The Paintings of Karen Barth

Tom Huhn

Barth's paintings likewise suspend the viewer between residual layers of image and process, and thereby bring to the fore an experience that alternates between restfulness and quickening, between stasis and dynamism.

It's important to understand and to appreciate how this last body of Karen Barth's work came into existence, as well as the precise form of existence it now takes. There is a surprising kinship between the process by which these works were made and the multiply-determined experiences of suspension that they prompt. The works began as small paintings, their dimensions varying from approximately 8" x 10" to 14" x 18". Barth began by painting a smaller version of each work that could then be expanded and (re)produced as a digital print in the size that she envisioned the original painting should have. Recalling the relationship in sculpture between a maquette and its intended destination as a fully realized object, I'm inclined to use the term maquette. Maquette is commonly used to describe the initial object in a sculptural process whereby the artist produces a reduced scale object to serve as the source for the fabrication of a larger realization of it. These smaller pieces by Barth, in addition to being paintings in their own right, serve as source and model for the larger objects which, though digitally produced, Barth insisted were also in fact paintings. Barth worked assiduously to produce the highest quality digital prints possible, often repeatedly color-correcting each print until she was satisfied that it matched the source painting. What we are viewing in the exhibition is the paintings in the scale and size and colors as Barth envisioned and produced them. What is so noteworthy and unusual is that these works arrive at their final state of existence as paintings in a procedure unlike any other paintings I am familiar with.

Spending time amidst Barth's final suite of 24 paintings is to find oneself deeply submerged in many of the most compelling issues in the practices of contemporary painting. Barth's paintings likewise suspend the viewer between

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White Light (detail)
2014
Archival pigment
on paper, mounted
on panel, 40" x 30"

residual layers of image and process, and thereby bring to the fore an experience that alternates between restfulness and quickening, between stasis and dynamism. The suspension of the viewer within and between these currents is precisely what allows each of us to tarry sensuously and provocatively within the folds and flows of Barth's paintings.

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A first powerful impression of this body of Barth's work signals the mobility and fleetingness of the imagery, complemented by the overall commitment to the quasi-figural elements within many of the paintings. These paintings appear of a piece with one another and so too point to a world utterly consistent in—and full of—colors and textures. The works point to and evoke a world; they stand as ciphers for a world beyond us while being at the same time oddly familiar. In this regard one imagines the paintings as a merger, the twinned products of conviction and hesitation. Their conviction seems to lie in the sheer confidence in the reality of the appearances they body forth while their hesitation resides in the very transitoriness of the imagery itself.

One visibly prominent suspension in the paintings is the alternation between abstraction and landscape. It seems Barth was well aware of the long tradition of landscape painting in which it came to express and embody a certain kind of yearning. The longing within landscape painting means that landscapes appear as a projection of what nature might look like were it wholly in accord with our feelings toward it. And yet, landscape painting is no simple projection of what we want nature to be, it is also, as yearning, an expression of a longing to be at one with nature, to be made whole by and within nature, and finally, to be reconciled with it rather than to continue as its adversary. That each of her paintings appears as a cohesive and dynamic unity—despite the dizzying variety that often spills across it—is a testament to the enduring classical goal that art is to create unity amidst variety. To put it mimetically, we might imagine that the legacy of landscape painting in Barth's work is a form of sympathetic magic, a desire to align ourselves with and in nature, to affirm at once both nature's and our own animated unities. Barth's work is no mere appropriation of what is other

than us, but rather an attempt to draw nearer to it, even to submit ourselves to it, and thus not only to transform it but more importantly to position ourselves in just the right place so that we might be transformed by it.

Barth's paintings suspend themselves between the materiality of paint and the ephemerality of the appearing image.

The productive tension in Barth's paintings, at once both visual and experiential, lies between two poles that might also be designated flow and image. We could similarly approach this tension by way of her overarching commitment to abstraction, to the process of making that actively suspends itself in a double movement: one direction is a movement away (abstraction) and the other a movement toward (image). And yet, I also suspect Barth would be somewhat dubious regarding this talk of image in paintings, and especially in reference to her paintings, since she was fiercely committed to the notion that paintings are not images, but rather things. And the particular kind of thing a painting is, includes, most obviously and straight-forwardly, that it is a material thing, which is to say that it is a thing that exists not only as matter, but more importantly as the residue of singular processes and events.

What it means not just to say but to emphasize that a painting is a material thing is to acknowledge the ways in which it resists being pulled entirely into the immaterial realm of the image, into that hovering appearance that floats above the surface of the painting. Barth's paintings suspend themselves between the materiality of paint and the ephemerality of the appearing image. I want to suggest that it is just here, in this peculiar suspension, that Barth's paintings thereby become models of human life. Here again we might note the strong presence of mimesis in Barth's practice: the digital extrapolation of these works from the original paintings mimetically parallels the practice of abstracting a painting from the experience of viewing—or of imagining—nature. By extension we might say that this artistic practice points to how we live, for to be alive is also to exist in two rather different realms, that of material embodied existence as well as that of immaterial, ephemeral thing. This ephemeral life of ours has been variously characterized as mind (in opposition to the material brain), consciousness (recall that for the Existentialists especially consciousness is not even



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Ground Fog (detail)
2014
Archival pigment
on paper, mounted
on panel, 48" x 36"

a thing but instead a mere motion; Sartre even likens it to a breeze blowing across a field), spirit, soul, etc.

Consider how this vacillating suspension between matter and evanescence occurs in the painting titled *Pond*. Imagine yourself in the position of a bird on a branch above the pond, looking down on its surface. Note first the ingenious production of a pictorial space between the base layer of the pond's surface and the layer of reflections suspended in an evanescent space floating somewhere a few feet above the pond. Consider how what I'm describing as the reflected tree branches themselves come to appear as things already melting into the texture and motion of the water below. Look too at how the selfsame branches nonetheless retain their materiality even as they deliquesce; this is a depiction and enactment of an ongoing transitional state between materiality and immateriality, between stasis and dynamism.

But so too do the branchings in many of the paintings also allude to the body, especially to its membranes and to its fluid inner coursings. It's as if Barth's paintings function both as microcosm and macrocosm, vacillating between the various allusions in which the paintings point away from us and toward, for example, the geological, while they function microcosmically in pointing toward us, indeed, inside us. This continuous dualism is one of the most sustained achievements of this body of Barth's work, that it so subtly maintains a balance between that which exceeds us and that out of which we are composed.

One way to appreciate this sustained and sustaining balance is to place the paintings *Ground Fog* and *White Light* alongside one another, and to observe how the former appears as a well of dark opacity and *White Light* its contrary. *White Light* promises nearly to efface itself in an increasing intensity of light while *Ground Fog* betokens a kind of enveloping darkness. And yet both paintings bring to light just how much there is to see within the mere ebb and flow of light. Both paintings give the impression of some rich and extensive percolating, though of what we cannot discern. They each promise to reveal something primordial about the world, to show us the origin of

things, however thick and porous, vibrant and full, it might prove to be. Note even how *Ground Fog's* congealing images complement the melting yellows of *White Light*.

One of the painters that this body of Karen's work most readily brings to mind is Charles Burchfield, whose dreamy land and skylscapes appear as precursors to Barth's more fluid evocations of field, pond, season, fog and night. And though Burchfield's fluidity is to be seen in both the visual forms themselves as well as in his famously deployed set of key allegorical motifs—in other words the fluidity also pours through the relation of icon to image—Barth's more fluid imagery and process point still more directly toward the fluid fact of being alive. Barth's subject—her activity we might say—was to depict and enact the condition of an active embodiment, of a motion and a flow unencumbered by the blockages of pain, or thought, or suffering. A painting that epitomizes this dynamic juxtaposition of rest and motion is *Spring Mist*. Consider how the title and even the hints of lavender at the top and center of the painting allude to Jackson Pollock's iconic 1950 work, *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)*—Barth was deeply moved by Pollock's achievements and so we must take these allusions seriously. It's interesting in this light to see the dark tendrils of *Spring Mist*, reaching centerward from the left and right edges of the painting, as complements to and extensions of the drips of *Lavender Mist*. "Drip" has never seemed a very accurate description of how *Lavender Mist* was made nor how it appears; this is true of *Spring Mist* as well. Better to think of Pollock and Barth both attempting to outmaneuver the constriction and conventions of the traditional line in painting. Pollock's pourings facilitated the paint to, if you will, compose its own line, to allow the paint to align itself; Barth's paintings likewise sidestep the whole problem of the drawn and painted line by giving the paint a compositional agency of its own. Where Jackson Pollock poured, Karen Barth instead allowed the paint to leak and to blossom, and thereby to flow and delineate an aliveness that inevitably exceeds us.

Spring Mist (detail)
2014
Archival pigment
on paper, mounted
on panel, 25" x 35"

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