

UTA BARTH

Domestic
bliss

Her exploration of the visual experience may be exhaustive, but the LA-based photographer rarely strays beyond the garden gate

words HOLLY MYERS
portraits TIERNEY GEARON

FOR SOMEONE WHO WORKS PRIMARILY WITH IMAGES, Uta Barth is very particular about words. When asked whether she agrees with a recent reviewer's characterisation of her photographs as 'meditative', she debates the term at some length, then pulls out a dictionary.

"People have talked about my work as meditative from the very beginning", she says via email, "and I have always shied away from it, or outright refused it, but not because it doesn't fit in the pure sense of the word. I am afraid of all the misinterpretations and wrong connotations and associations that so easily accompany it. (Some new age mush...) The available misreadings are countless, so I find myself saying things like 'contemplative', which may actually not be as accurate, as it might refer to something more cognitive. But I just looked it up and here is what *Webster's* gives us as a definition:

meditative to view or consider with continued attention: meditate on <*contemplate* the vastness of the universe>

So maybe 'contemplative' is the safer word, and also includes the possibility of meditative."

Our interview is taking place over email at Barth's request, which I initially interpret – erroneously – as a sign of reluctance or lack of interest, but which comes to seem entirely appropriate, lending our dialogue a degree of conscientiousness and precision very much in keeping with the character of her work. Having spent the past ten years photographing solely in the vicinity of her own West Los Angeles home – photographing the gridded sashes of windows and the tree branches and power lines outside those windows, sunlight travelling across the walls and the floors – she is accustomed to sustained reflection, and markedly wary of quick judgements and misreadings. "I want the chance to sleep on a question", she writes when I ask her about the email preference, "to not just reply with the first thing that comes to mind."

It is this element of contemplative vigilance that most distinguishes Barth's work in the globetrotting, attention-hungry climate of art today. Her project, over the past two decades, has been one of rigorous evacuation, driven by a sustained interest in penetrating the essence of sensory experience. The history of photography is, in many ways, a history of outward propulsion, the





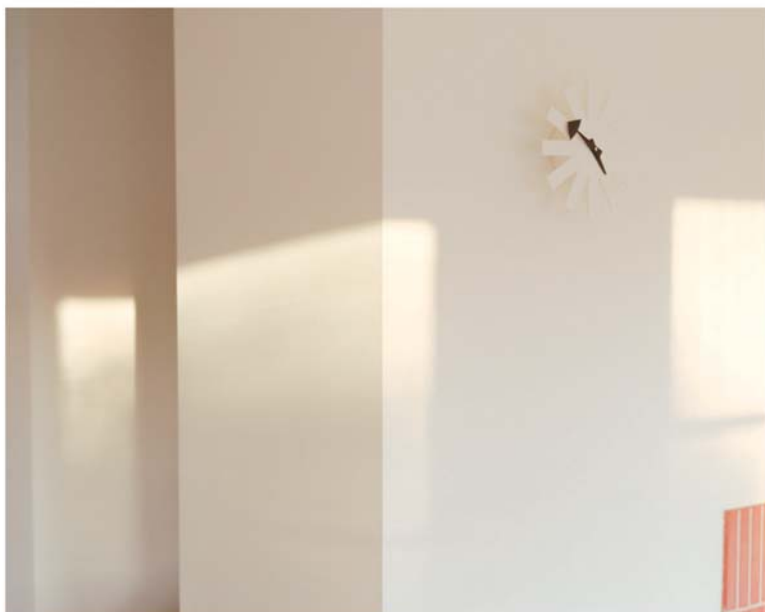
camera a tool of exploration, expedition and confrontation with the other. Barth reverses this trajectory, focusing exclusively on the space of her own home – and more specifically, one might say, on the air within that space. (The fact that it is her home is largely incidental – “the choice of no choice”, as she puts it, which is to say, the choice “to not seek out a location, but to photograph where I happen to be most of the time”.) If the expeditionary camera is a collector of things – faces, landscapes, objects, events – then Barth’s camera tends to recoil from things. In two early series, *Ground* (1994–7) and *Field* (1995–7), she focused her lens at a point in the vacant mid-ground of a room or landscape, as if enamoured of the emptiness itself. In recent years, she’s employed digital techniques to draw this focus even deeper, exploring the inner experience of the eye by stimulating the effect of the afterimage – by repeating the image of a tree branch, for instance, in positive and negative incarnations, or in gradually fading impressions. Her most recent series, *Sundial* (2007), explores the layered quality of visual memory, juxtaposing patches of light and

shadow in a spatially confusing manner. Her subject, ultimately, is not her home, the objects it contains or even the light that floods its windows, but the sensation of vision itself.

And when Barth speaks of this sensation, it is with a sense of philosophical, even spiritual conviction (though she would likely dispute that term).

“For me”, she writes, “an immersion in visual perception leads to a visceral awareness of all of the senses, of the body and of the mind. It leads to a full awareness and way of being truly present and attentive in the moment. It means to be present in the moment and it also asks for the possibility of breaking down the boundary between who is seeing and what is being seen, inside and outside, positive and negative space and the possibilities of turning these orientations inside out. For me it leads to a sort of being one with what is seen, but I am cautious to say something like that for fear of misinterpretations.”

I’d asked Barth about her understanding of the relationship between the visual and psychological, in part because I’d been



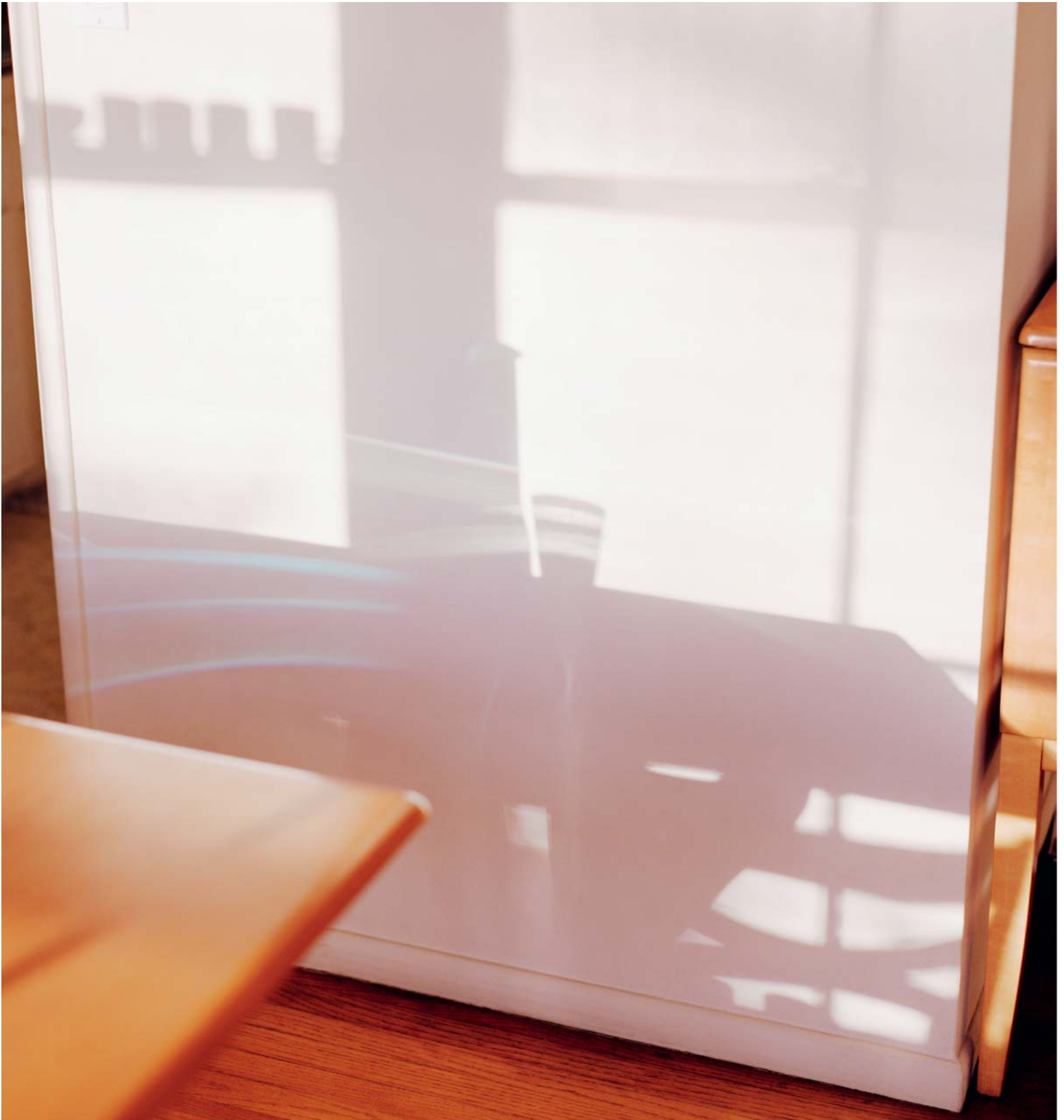


*“Lately I am hyperaware
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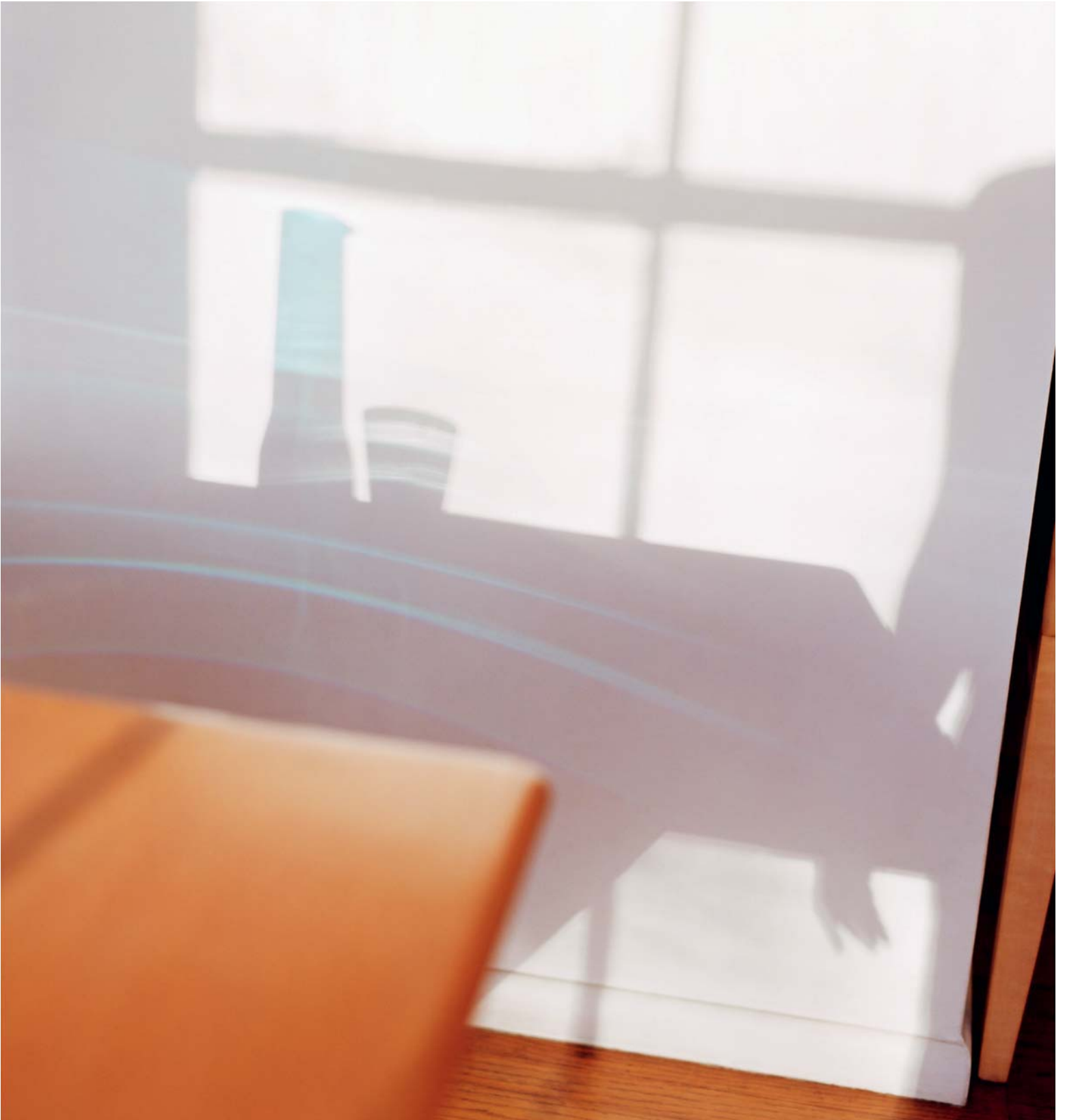
frustrated, myself, with the limitations of the academic language in which her work has often been couched in grappling with its deeply experiential nature.

Reading through her various catalogues, one is struck by a sense of the essays fitting only loosely to the images – skimming across their surfaces without quite penetrating their substance or capturing the qualities that make their presence so riveting. (Sheryl Conkelton, for instance, writes in the catalogue from Barth’s midcareer survey, *In Between Places*, 2000, that the artist’s works ‘are couched in an awareness of conceptual practices but evolve a discourse with methods and concepts that have been seen as operating outside of most Conceptual art strategies – pure perception and depictive modes among them’, which is entirely true but fails to account for the particular deliciousness of ‘pure perception’ and the subversive nature of its effect on any preconceived notion of ‘strategy’.) The flip side of this tendency towards linguistic distancing, however, as Barth is well aware, would be a journey into the boggy descriptive realm of feeling >





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and emotion – an equally suspect proposition. Barth’s own exacting, if cautious, language strikes an eloquent balance between the two.

“I kept talking about vision and perception” when discussing the early work, she writes, “because I did not want the viewer to become lost in interpretation of what was being looked at. I was not and am still not interested in seeing, or should I say reading, these images in terms of metaphor or narrative or symbolisms of any kind. But this is how we are trained to approach most art, especially photography, and I also think the mind naturally wanders in these directions out of a desire to understand, rather than to experience (much like museumgoers who read the title card before looking at the painting). So I was very insistent on making things and saying things that pointed toward the perceptual and away from the cognitive or emotive. I think that when the engagement in the visual experience truly happens, the other things you talk about tumble along, but that it can’t work the other way around.”

Barth was drawn to the camera, she has often said, because of the close relationship between the lens and the human eye. Her adoption, in recent years, of digital methods reflects a shift in her attention from the eye to the visual functions of the mind, with the computer serving as a tool “to follow where the lens cannot go”. The first series in this vein was *white blind (bright red)*, completed in 2002, which involved repeated images of tree branches after their leaves had fallen, silhouetted in dense, graphic patterns against the flat white Southern California sky. “I have spent countless hours staring out these windows”, she writes, “and became so fascinated by the vivid afterimages these scenes produced once I would close and rest my eyes. So there it was, this other visual world we seldom spend time with. I became fascinated watching it, as it would glow brightly, then drift and fade and slowly dissolve. I am interested in the fact that the object ‘outside’ has imprinted itself on my retina and now lives on inside me as I sit with eyes closed. The ‘gate’ has been shut, yet the image persists. It is another one of those moments that unites what is inside with what is outside in a most curious way.”

In the *Sundial* works, a selection of which are on show in London this month, Barth stimulates the effect of visual memory, charting beams of light across the walls of her home in such a way that the walls come to feel like an extension of the retina itself.





“Lately I am hyperaware of the fact that I am living inside my work”, she writes, “sitting in one of my images, that whole projects spin around me as I turn my head while talking on the phone or moving through the room. *Sundial* is in part a response to that experience. It traces the last light of the day as it sweeps around walls of the room I am sitting and working in. And in the process of photographing, I am frequently trapped in the image. The show includes one image that has my shadow cast onto a wall, a moment where I literally and figuratively can’t get out of the way of the image. Normally I would edit out autobiographical information like this, but it was such a constant experience of making this show that I wanted to leave it in.”

However problematic ‘meditative’ may be, as an adjective, in characterising the tone of Barth’s images, there are clear parallels between her process and the act of meditation. In narrowing her attention to such a small geographical sphere – just as one narrows one’s attention, in meditation, to the sphere of one’s own mind and body – she uncovers layers of sensation and experience typically buried in the din of worldly life. •

Work by Uta Barth will be on view at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, 30 May – 28 June. See listings for further details

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Sundial, 2007, mounted colour photographs, 5 panels, each panel 76 x 96 cm, overall dimensions 76 x 487 cm, edition of 6 + 2APs

Sundial, 2007, mounted colour photographs, 4 panels, each panel 76 x 96 cm, overall dimensions 76 x 389 cm, edition of 6 + 2APs

Sundial, 2007, mounted colour photographs, 2 panels, each panel 76 x 72 cm, overall dimensions 76 x 146 cm, edition of 6 + 2APs

Sundial, 2007, mounted colour photographs, 4 panels, each panel 76 x 96 cm, overall dimensions 76 x 389 cm, edition of 6 + 2APs

Sundial, 2007, mounted colour photographs, 3 panels, each panel 76 x 72 cm, overall dimensions 76 x 221 cm, edition of 6 + 2APs

All works

Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

